

U.S.

Federal Aid Request to Repair Harvey Damage Expected to Top Katrina

Texas governor estimates federal funding needs ‘far in excess’ of \$125 billion



Floodwaters from Tropical Storm Harvey surround homes and businesses in Port Arthur, Texas, on Thursday. GERALD HERBERT/ASSOCIATED PRESS

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By Erin Ailworth, Ben Kesling and Jon Kamp

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Hurricane Harvey left a rising number of deaths and costly destruction in Texas, where Gov. Greg Abbott forecast federal funding needs are “far in excess” of \$125 billion, topping Hurricane Katrina.

Gov. Abbott said he expects the congressional appropriation needed for restoration will be larger than the roughly \$120 billion provided to New Orleans after Katrina.

“The worst is not yet over for Southeast Texas as far as the rain is concerned,” he said, referring to a region that includes the cities of Beaumont and Port Arthur, where more than 2 feet of rain fell in just 24 hours as Harvey neared land again.

Harvey-related payouts by private-sector insurers are expected to exceed \$10 billion and possibly hit \$20 billion, according to Wall Street analysts. The wide range reflects the many unprecedented aspects of the still-unfolding disaster. At the top end of that range, it would near the cost of superstorm Sandy in 2012, according to the trade group Insurance Information Institute, but trail Hurricane Andrew in 1992 and Hurricane Katrina in 2005, which cost the insurance industry \$49.79 billion in 2016 dollars.

Mr. Abbott said he expects “ongoing challenges” with flooding for the next four days to a week even though floodwaters are receding in the Houston area.

Thousands of residents continued to stream into temporary shelters during the first full day without rain since Friday, when Harvey unleashed severe flooding and wind damage along 250 miles of the Gulf Coast from Corpus Christi to Port Arthur.

The Houston metropolitan area remained an archipelago of neighborhoods with muddy-brown rivers and lakes where parking lots and streets were a week ago. More than 50 inches of rain have created a complex, chaotic and dangerous drainage system, with churning waters rising into neighborhoods that had been spared for days and where neighbors had hoped the worst was over.

“It’s been a trying experience,” said Curtis Brown, 65, who walked about two hours from his house in Houston’s Frenchtown neighborhood to the city’s convention center that is swelling with 10,000 evacuees. His house flooded three days ago with about a foot of water, but Wednesday was the first day he could get out. “It’s tough but those are the realities,” he said.

The death toll rose to at least 29 people including a mother who rescuers pulled out of a current alongside her surviving daughter and four children who died in a van with their great-grandparents. Harris County, which includes Houston, has now confirmed 18 fatalities linked to Hurricane Harvey, the medical examiner’s office announced Wednesday night.

There are more under investigation, including another eight deaths in Harris County that may be connected to the storm but are still awaiting autopsy, according to the Harris County Institute of Forensic Sciences. An exact death toll remained elusive and state officials weren’t releasing any figures.

While Harris County officials said flooding peaked, the receding waters uncovered tragedies. About 20 miles east of downtown, authorities found the van with the children, which had been swept off the road in floodwaters several days ago. “Our worst fears have been realized,” said Harris County Sheriff Ed Gonzalez.

More than 24,000 National Guard members are being mobilized into a region of destruction. State officials said they could remain activated for months and it would be the largest deployment in state history. More than 32,000 people were in emergency shelters on Wednesday morning, and another 5,000 people were staying at state parks in cabins, shelters and travel trailers, said state officials.

The USS Kearsarge will be somewhere off the coast of Texas and Louisiana, a U.S. defense official said. The length of deployment hasn’t been determined, but it will be there “as long as needed” the official said.

Residents posted videos of helicopters hovering over Port Arthur, a city wedged between Sabine Lake and a row of petrochemical facilities, lowering rescue workers to aid residents of the city.

The deluge triggered a call for boats in the badly flooded city of about 55,000. “Harvey was not playing,” Mayor Derrick Freeman said on Facebook. “I know one thing, though, it’s not going to defeat us. I know that for sure.”

On Capitol Hill, lawmakers have broadly signaled willingness to approve emergency Harvey relief funding, but aides said Wednesday it is too early to know exactly how much would be needed while the tropical storm is still inflicting damage. The first step is for the Trump administration to submit a request for the emergency funds.

One possibility is that Congress swiftly approves a smaller sum and then negotiates a larger package later, aides and lawmakers said Wednesday.

“There might be more than one Harvey relief package just because we don’t know the extent” of the storm’s damage, Rep. Tom Rooney (R., Fla.) said Wednesday. Mr. Rooney said it would have to be “carefully constructed so we don’t run into the same problems we did with the Sandy bill.”

Rep. Sheila Jackson Lee (D., Texas) has been conferring with other Texas lawmakers, her spokesman said Wednesday, in the hope of quickly bringing up an emergency-aid package when Congress returns to Washington next week. She has said \$150 billion in aid could be a good starting point, but that figure could change depending on the storm’s impact.

As the reality that parts of Houston would remain submerged for a prolonged period sunk in, questions arose over whether the city was prepared and should have done more to upgrade its drainage systems.

Houston Mayor Sylvester Turner said the city needs more financial support to make a real dent in lowering flooding risks.

HURRICANE HARVEY RELIEF EFFORTS

To make a financial donation to Hurricane Harvey relief efforts contact these charities:

- The United Way of Greater Houston: Visit www.unitedwayhouston.org/flood or text UWFLOOD to 41444.
 - American Red Cross: Visit www.redcross.org, call 1-800-RED-CROSS or text the word Harvey to 90999 to make a \$10 donation.
 - Salvation Army: Visit www.helpsalvationarmy.org, call 1-800-SAL-ARMY or text STORM to 51555.
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“You cannot significantly mitigate flooding and drainage on the cheap,” the

mayor said. “And a lot of people don’t want to pay, but you’re gonna pay sooner or later.”

Officials expected to continue releasing water from two reservoirs west of downtown to ease pressure on them and lower the risk of a catastrophic failure. Ed Russo with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers said officials planned to further open the gates at the reservoirs throughout the day, essentially choosing to flood some areas and homes to prevent further disaster.

In a strip mall tucked in between the Barker and Addicks reservoirs, a motley flotilla of civilian boats kept coming in, right up into the mall’s parking lot which was partially submerged, to drop off evacuees.

Some law-enforcement officials helped direct traffic, but it was mostly other civilians who ran the show including Kimberly Whitfield, who was there all day and had been there the day before, until 2 a.m. One of the people on site called her the “top sergeant” of the endeavor and she acted like it, hustling back and forth, giving orders, advice and bottles of water to anyone she came in contact with.

One of the evacuees, Leona Slaton said she and her husband, Gerald, stuck to their home until the power went out. Then they knew it was time to leave.

The 66-year-old has been here in Houston her whole life and said this storm has been like no other. “I’ve never seen anything like this,” she said. Gerald added: “Life’s going to stop not just for a day or two, but for months.”

—Russell Gold, Leslie Scism, Cameron McWhirter, Kristina Peterson and Nancy Youssef contributed to this article.

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