

Wisconsin Disaster Fund County Perspective

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Thank you for the opportunity to address this important issue. The Wisconsin Emergency Management Association (WEMA) supports the preservation and continued funding of the Wisconsin Disaster Fund. Today, as Secretary of the Association, I want to give you a snapshot of the communities across the state who have benefitted from the fund since its inception. In my presentation I will share with you the opinions of multiple county emergency management officials from across the state.

As Diane outlined, the Wisconsin Disaster Fund was created after the devastating tornados of August 18, 2005. The county emergency managers who coordinated the recovery to these storms adamantly support the continuation of the Wisconsin Disaster Fund.

Dave Janda, Dane County Interim Emergency Management Director says that The Stoughton area tornado on August 18, 2005 was devastating--a F3 tornado, with a 17 mile track, crossing 5 townships and the City of Stoughton. As a result, 69 homes were destroyed, 84 homes had major damage and 220 received minor damage. Private sector losses totaled more than \$31 million and public sector costs for county and local government response and recovery totaled more than \$1.9 million.

The storm was part of a larger tornado outbreak, with 27 tornadoes touching down across the state on that day. Even so, there was not a federal disaster declaration issued. There was some federal aid made available to individual home owners through the SBA and other programs, but no Public Assistance funds were available. This was because even though the affected counties would have met the county PA per capita threshold, the total damages across the state did not reach the state-level threshold. This meant that the costs for county and local governments to respond and recover from the storm would have to be borne locally.

Janda says that "It was rural townships that were most severely affected by this storm and in some cases, the debris removal costs alone exceeded their annual road maintenance budgets. Factoring in the state-imposed limitations on local tax increases, this event really put hardest hit townships in a bind. Access to the state disaster fund, which was actually created after the August 18, 2005 event, but made effective retroactive to this date, was extremely beneficial in assisting these local governments to recover without significant long-term repercussions. We certainly hope that this fund will be extended."

As with most natural disasters, the tornado did not respect county boundaries. Other communities were affected. Richland County had immense damage in Viola caused by the tornadoes of August 18, 2005.

Richland County Emergency Management Director Darin Gudgeon says that the fund must continue to be fully funded. He says that during the storm,

"Richland County had two active tornadoes on the ground that afternoon causing nearly 2 million in residential damage and 1.5 million dollars damage in public infrastructure in Viola alone, which was double the annual operating budget for the Village of Viola. We did not receive a presidential declaration for this disaster and without the Wisconsin disaster fund and CDBG-EAP funding the recovery process would not have been a successful one. "

Windstorms and localized flooding are also examples of other disasters where the Wisconsin Disaster Fund has come to the rescue. Rural Barron County was hit by both of these during 2005. Randy Books, Barron County Emergency Management Director says that the storms that year in his jurisdiction illustrate the need to fully fund the Wisconsin Disaster Fund. He says that

" The impact of storm damage and clean up would devastate the small communities limited budgets, clean up still needs to be done, bridges and culverts still need to be replaced, with- out the Wisconsin disaster fund help offset these projects the communities would not be able to operate."

The spreadsheets on the slides show how one storm event can have significant economic consequences.

Up in the Northwoods where I reside, locals know that disasters are not limited to wind and rain. Forest Fires are also an enormous risk. Just ask Jane Grabarski, Director of Adams County Emergency Management. In 2005 her county had a devastating forest fire, and again, the Wisconsin Disaster Fund provided much needed aid. Jane says that

"The 3500 acre Cottonville Wildfire in Adams County was devastating for our community. Being a very rural county these monies were a crucial partial reimbursement to law enforcement for overtime that was incurred over the four days of this event. Even though 30 homes and 60 out-buildings were lost, we did not qualify as a federally declared disaster because only nine homes were permanent residences, so the Wisconsin Disaster Fund was our only available option."

When I spoke with them, other counties in the Northwoods also came out in strong support of continued flooding of the Wisconsin Disaster fund. Dorothy Tank, Director of Ashland County Emergency Management says that she is

"a strong advocate for this fund because it has been my experience that Towns get hit with multiple "small" storms which individually do not meet the criteria for Presidential assistance but can come with a huge cumulative price tag. This is the only fund available which aids the Towns for debris

clean up costs (non Presidential) and protective measure costs associated with these "small" storms."

Jan Victorson, Bayfield County Emergency Management Coordinator says

"The Wisconsin Disaster Fund has assisted communities in Bayfield County when damage occurred in both flash flooding and wind/blowdown events. The fund assisted with costs associated with required expenditures including immediate protective measures, replacement of culverts, repair and replacement of road beds, and debris removal. These isolated events may not impact a large area but still multiply a small community's repair and maintenance budget making it impossible to make the repairs appropriately without assistance."

Because we are a large state geographically, disasters from other states can spill over into Wisconsin says Steve Braun, Director of Grant County Emergency Management. He encourages the Legislature to continue funding the Wisconsin Disaster Fund.

He says and I quote.

"One issue that we face is that the counties that lie at the edge of the state, "border counties" are sometimes affected by events that primarily impact neighboring states. When only one or two Wisconsin counties sustain damage, no matter how severe it is, Wisconsin is generally unable to reach FEMA's state 'per capita' thresholds for public assistance. The Wisconsin Disaster Fund serves as a 'safety net' for communities that are devastated by major disasters, when the statewide damage is not sufficient to trigger federal aid.

In July 2007, the Village of Bagley and surrounding rural townships were devastated by unprecedented flash flooding. The damages to roads and public infrastructure, as well as the substantial costs of debris clearance, were far more than municipal budgets could manage. In the case of Wyalusing Township, costs for flood recovery were more than twice the annual township budget."

Tornados are not limited to the summer. The devastating tornado in January of 2008 in Kenosha County shows that the fund is needed year-around. Ben Schlieshman, Kenosha County Emergency Management and Homeland Security Director says and I quote.

"I believe that the fund should operate like FEMA does, when a disaster occurs, Counties and Municipalities know that they can count on the WI Disaster Fund if FEMA funding/reimbursement is not available."

In closing, you saw in my presentation that there have been several disasters recently where counties have applied for and received awards from the fund. Although these events were not significant enough to receive federal aid, they definitely had a substantial financial impact on the local governments.

According to Wisconsin Emergency Management Information and Guidance Memo 11-01-06, the fund was to “consist of a \$3 million annual appropriation from the PECFA fund”. This has not occurred since Act 269 was passed into law.

Without legislation to add additional funds to the account, there may not be funds available to local jurisdictions affected by disasters in the next biennial budget. As a result, local jurisdictions affected by disasters that do not meet the federal criteria could bear the entire cost of the disaster – this would be devastating to most jurisdictions in the state.

This fund offers municipalities and counties a safety net for devastating storms. The record number of disasters in the state over recent years illustrates the need for the fund to be fully replenished with each budget cycle.

I am urging you to introduce/support legislation or do the necessary budgeting to add additional funds to the WI Disaster Fund. Thank you very much for your attention to this most important issue!