

New disaster plan means a flood of federal money for Washington

Amount of disaster relief would triple under the plan

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The next time the Skagit River floods, more federal disaster aid will be available, Gov. Gary Locke announced Wednesday.

Washington state could get three times as much federal money as it would have received otherwise, according to Marty Best, a mitigation officer for the state Emergency Management Department.

That increase comes because the state's offi-

cial disaster relief plan has been approved by the Federal Emergency Management Agency.

The money goes into a hazard mitigation fund, which is then distributed to local governments that apply for it.

After a major disaster, such as the Skagit River flood of 2003 or the Nisqually earthquake of 2001, the state hazard mitigation fund used to receive a bonus payment of 7.5 percent of what the federal government spent on disaster relief. Now, when a disaster happens, the same thing

will happen, but the state fund will receive a 20 percent bonus of what the federal government spent.

For the 2003 floods, the state received about \$600,000, Best said. If the same floods happened now, the state would receive \$1.8 million, he said.

The money received after a disaster doesn't have to be spent on anything to do with that disaster, or even preventing other disasters like it. Best said some of the money spent after a flood in 1996 was used to earthquake-proof some

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A8 Thursday, July 8, 2004

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Gov. Gary Locke said Wednesday he supports efforts to move Hamilton out of the Skagit River floodplain, to avoid repeats of this scene from October 2003.

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water towers in the Seattle area.

The federal agency also awards grants to fund preventative measures. Gov. Locke pointed to Mount Vernon's Edgewater Park as an example of what those grants can do.

The city used a \$2.3 million grant to remove 34 homes from the Skagit River floodplain at Mount Vernon and turn the area into Edgewater Park, the governor said.

"Then in October 2003, a flood covered the park with more than four feet of water ... but because the homes had been moved, no structures or dwellings were damaged," he said. "We're now looking at the same mitigation type for other towns, like Hamilton that some of us visited during that flood."

Locke endorsed moving Hamilton out of the floodplain, saying it would be "far better to move homes out of the area now."

"It doesn't make sense to have the homes and the businesses in the same exact spot and every four or five years be flooded out," he said.

"It makes sense to move a town out of the way, out of the obvious floodplain, so that we can avoid these heartaches," he added.

Almost every home in Hamilton's town limits was hit by the October 2003 flood.

John Pennington, the federal agency's regional director, said money already has been allocated to moving buildings threatened by flooding in Hamilton. He said, however, that the small size of the town's government has made funding the move difficult.

"One of the problems we have is that in some of the smaller towns and smaller governments, is that they don't have full-time personnel to administer the programs through which you can move a home or elevate a home," Pennington said.

Locke said he's hopeful that progress will be made and that there are "a lot of discussions going on between the county commissioners and the people of Hamilton."

Best, of the state Emergency Management Department, said he has been working with Hamilton Mayor Tim Bates for about 14 years.

"It's just a challenge," Best said. "I give them credit for persevering through this."

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