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## Agencies work to determine responsibility over Lake Martin cleanup



Written by

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Uncertainty about who is responsible for the stalled cleanup of Lake Martin has officials worried about both boater safety and the local economy based around the 44,000-acre body of water.

But they're hopeful that they'll have a plan of action -- soon.

"I'm waiting for confirmation from (the Federal Emergency Management Agency) that the state of Alabama can contract for the removal of debris from these waterways," Cooper Shattuck, legal adviser to Gov. Robert Bentley, said Thursday about Lake Martin and Lake Neely Henry in St. Clair County.

The April 27 tornado that killed six in Elmore County whipped over Lake Martin and dumped untold tons of debris into it. Automobiles and overturned boats and the contents and building materials of entire homes came to rest in the lake's sloughs

along the northern part of Elmore County and into Tallapoosa County.

Shattuck said he didn't know when cleanup might begin. Some are left hoping that the cleanup won't occur too late for some who use the lake.

"I don't know whose responsibility (removing the debris) is, but someone needs to take responsibility before someone gets killed on the lake," state Sen. Dick Brewbaker said Wednesday. His district covers portions of Montgomery and Elmore counties. His family has lake property, but he said he's put his personal watercrafts away until the debris, including floating lumber, has been removed.

"I've got my WaveRunners chained up to make sure my boys don't take them out without me knowing about it," he said.

The upcoming Memorial Day weekend -- a busy time on the lake -- has many concerned.

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Charles Borden, president of the Lake Martin Resource Association, said his organization will be putting up fliers at marinas and gas docks to warn boaters about debris that has moved into the lake's open water.

"I had reports from this past weekend that there was some debris in the big water and there was some damage to boats," Borden said.

But he's more concerned about possible injuries.

"If it'll tear up a prop and mess up the bottom of a boat, you can imagine what it'll do to a human," Borden said. "I am very concerned about (Memorial Day weekend)," he said. "Boaters seem not to be aware of the danger."

Rebekah Mason, a spokeswoman for the governor, said Thursday that FEMA is assessing what will be involved in cleaning up the lake.

She said the Alabama Emergency Management Agency sent a request to FEMA asking that the Army Corps of Engineers initiate the clean up on the lake that means big business for Elmore County.

"In the summertime, (Lake Martin) is the primary economic engine for our county, and we are serious about getting it cleaned up as soon as possible," said Elmore County Commissioner Joe Faulk.

The County Commission was one of the entities involved in the discussion about who's responsible for the clean up. Others include FEMA, the state Emergency Management Agency, county emergency management agencies, the Corps of Engineers and Alabama Power Co., which owns the land below the man-made lake and charges nearby water authorities for water.

Shattuck said that removing debris from the water is not the electric company's responsibility.

"There is a statute that expressly says that these waters are the state's, not Alabama Power's," he said.

He said he expects FEMA will pay about 90 percent of the Corps of Engineers' costs while the state would be responsible for the remaining 10 percent.

Faulk said that on dry land, disaster clean up is usually the responsibility of county emergency management agencies.

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Typically, FEMA reimburses for 75 percent of the cost, the state pays 15 percent and the county pays 10 percent, he said.

"But when it comes to the lake, there is a question mark as to whose responsibility is whose," he said earlier this week.

Those who have seen the debris in Lake Martin agree that it will be costly to remove.

"This is going to be a major, major undertaking," said Sen. Jerry Fielding, who also represents a portion of the voters around the lake. "I'm sure that's why people are a little nervous about taking on full responsibility. It's going to take vessels in the water, the Corps of Engineers is going to have to be a party to it."

Fielding said he's hopeful an agreement will be reached soon.

"It's one of those things that will work out because all of the people that are involved are good folk and want to do what's right," he said.

Alabama Power spokeswoman Janet Ellis said this week that the electric company has been working with county and state government to identify a possible funding source for the clean up.

"We are working with the agencies to try to get funding," she said. "We're trying to get funding through FEMA.

"It's just kind of a waiting game right now,"

she said.

But the longer the delay, the more the debris spreads.

Commissioner Faulk said that the county would be fine taking on the project that will involve contracting barges and other large equipment -- if it knew it would be reimbursed for it.

"If we had our druthers, we'd just clean the lake up while we're cleaning everything else up," he said. "But it's a matter of reimbursement. There is no indication that the county is responsible for the clean up, or we would have contracted to have it cleaned up by now."

## ECONOMIC IMPACT

Lake Martin guests and visitors account for about \$89 million per year in retail sales in Tallapoosa, Coosa and Elmore counties, according to a 2009 economic-impact study by the Lake Martin Area Economic Development Alliance.

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