

ALABAMA TORNADOES 2012



The Birmingham News/Joe Songer

Joel Ward of Jonathan's Way in Trussville searches for family belongings Monday in a pile of tornado debris.

Smaller cities struggle to clear tornado debris

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Crews from Jefferson County and neighboring cities should begin arriving as early as today to help Clay start cleaning up debris from last week's storms.

"We're gonna get out there and take care of these folks," Jefferson County Commissioner Joe Knight said.

Center Point also may take advantage of equipment and manpower offered by neighboring cities under a mutual aid agreement that kicks in after events such as the Jan. 23 tornado. But Center Point also is soliciting bids from private contractors and is still weighing its options, Mayor Tom Henderson said Monday.

In other jurisdictions with tornado damage, Trussville plans to hire a private contractor to haul off debris from the city's isolated areas of damage, said Mayor Gene Melton, estimating the expense will be under \$100,000.

Jefferson County is sending its own crews to clean up roadsides in



Debris piles line both sides of 23rd Terrace Northwest in northeastern Jefferson County. Tornado debris is piling up on street curbs in areas hit by the Jan. 23 tornadoes.



VIDEO AND MORE PHOTOS ONLINE

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unincorporated areas such as Oak Grove, said Wayne Sullivan, director of the county roads department. Because of the county's budget problems and staff reductions, the work is going to take "a little bit longer than it normally would," he said.

Some residents have begun to express frustration amid debris piles grown high thanks to the hard work of homeowners and volunteers. Glenn Zinder of Trussville understands why.

"It's like going through a mountain," said Zinder, whose Pilgrims Rest subdivision had serious damage but whose home was largely spared. "It's getting very depressing."

But neither Center Point nor Clay has the in-house manpower or equipment to tackle the curbside stacks of trees, construction material and other debris.

Center Point has only four public works employees, Henderson said.

And hard-hit Clay has only "a couple of dump trucks," City Councilman L.B. Feemster said.

"This thing would absolutely overwhelm us," he said. "It would take us a year or more to get this off the side of the roads."

Clay will have to reimburse other jurisdictions that send crews, but Mayor



The Birmingham News/Joel Songer

Damaged and destroyed houses in Clay's Georgebrook subdivision are surrounded by piles of tornado debris.

Ed McGuffie said that's the only real option he sees for his small city.

"I hate to ask for anything; I'd rather do it myself," he said Monday, after meeting with state and federal emergency management officials. "But we don't have the means to do this. ... We don't have a budget where we can have emergency agencies like this."

There's still hope that federal assistance may ultimately be available to help local governments cover the expenses of tornado cleanup. But there are no

guarantees, and Knight said

it is doubtful the Jan. 23 storm will qualify.

The state did request disaster assistance for families and individuals in Jefferson and two other counties. While they await word on that request, state officials worked Monday to try to find enough damages and expenses to justify federal help for local governments, too.

In Jefferson County, damage to government property and the cost of emergency response total \$2.3 million, said Allen Kniphifer, coordinator of the county's Emergency Management Agency.

That's close to what the county would need if the rest of the state qualified for government assistance, he said. But for that to happen, the statewide damages have to be at least \$6.5 million.

The idea that there has not been enough damage frustrates McGuffie. "Tell it to half my city that doesn't have homes," he said.

In case assistance for local governments does come through, local officials say they are planning to track expenses and monitor the cleanup in such a way that they could get any federal reimbursement that is made

available. "We're going to document every stick we pick up," Knight said.

But whether assistance comes or not, city leaders say they have to start cleaning up so residents and neighborhoods can start to rebuild and recover from the storm.

"It's important to get as much of it out as quickly as possible to get back to some kind of normalcy," Henderson said.

"Our citizens can't do anything until we get this junk out of the way," said Feemster.