



Saying No to FEMA: Should Gov. Robert Bentley, state officials wait for city and county storm assessments?

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on February 07, 2014 at 4:12 PM, updated February 07, 2014 at 4:13 PM

MOBILE, Alabama – Some public officials first learned that **Alabama Gov. Robert Bentley was not going to seek federal assistance** to cover the public costs during **Winter Storm Leon** while they watched local TV news.

For some, the timing might be viewed as peculiar since many local governments have not completed their final tally.

"I saw on the six o'clock news that we'd not be eligible for FEMA reimbursements," Mobile County Commissioner Connie Hudson said. "Here, locally, the governor was making the pronouncements before any of the figures were turned in."

More than a week after Bentley's announcement, cities and counties throughout Alabama – including Birmingham and Jefferson County – have not gathered final assessments on how much overtime, equipment and fuel costs affected their budgets.

"We're all just trying to catch up on the loss from last week," Jefferson County Manager Tony Petelos said.

Bentley's announcement was made on Jan. 31, less than three days after a winter storm paralyzed much of the southern portion of the state and caused considerable traffic hassles in Birmingham. The storm would not meet the federal threshold – for Alabama, that is \$6.6 million in public costs – to seek reimbursement from the Federal Emergency Management Agency, he said.

Bentley said that it will be up to the cities and counties to handle the costs associated with the rare winter storm that, in many cases, caused local governments, schools and businesses to close for three days.

Bentley spokeswoman Jennifer Ardis said last week that Bentley's announcement was based on information the state gets through the Emergency Management Information Tracking System (EMITS).

Art Faulkner, the state's EMA director, said the information was based more on historical data of winter storms in the past, as well as other disasters and emergencies. In previous winter storms, for instance, Faulkner said there were more instances of infrastructure-related repairs and power outages. That wasn't the case last week, he said.

Faulkner also said state emergency officials contacted local agencies in Birmingham and Mobile to learn what kind of costs they faced.

"What we found out was that we weren't anywhere close to meeting that (FEMA) threshold," Faulkner said.

On the same day of Bentley's announcement, a Mobile County EMA official said that he predicted the county would surpass their threshold of \$1.6 million. Eligible damage thresholds are determined by multiplying a state or county's population by \$1.39 (an amount based on the current federal fiscal year starting Oct. 1, 2013).

This week, however, the same Mobile County EMA official said he believes it's doubtful that the county will surpass \$1 million in public expenses even though the city and county estimated a combined \$1.2 million impact (the city's costs were \$650,000 while the county is around \$500,000). The Mobile Area Water and Sewer System reported an additional \$40,000 in costs.

A final costs from the Mobile County EMA hasn't been finalized.

In Mobile, Mayor Sandy Stimpson said the \$650,000 expense doesn't take into account the sizable amount of sales tax revenues – the largest component of money that helps fund city government – that was lost from city businesses essentially being closed for two days on Jan. 28 and 29. FEMA, however, does not provide reimbursements based on lost sales tax.

Other cities haven't submitted their expenses. Prichard, for instance, does not have figures prepared.

County EMA officials said they weren't concerned that the governor's early pronouncement that Alabama would not meet the FEMA threshold would dissuade cities from computing their public storm costs.

"There is plenty of incentive for local communities to document what has happened to their communities from a planning and budgetary stand point," John Kilcullen, director of plans and operations with Mobile County's EMA, said. "Its important people collect that information for future planning purposes."

In Birmingham, even less is known. Jefferson County did not have final figures earlier this week and the city of Birmingham did not respond to repeated requests for information.

"I know we used a lot of sand and had a lot of overtime for our roads and transportation department," Petelos said. "Of course, we shut down for 2-1/2 days. The courthouse was not open. The road and transportation crews spread 1,400 tons of sand."

Faulkner said there has been "no indication" that Alabama will even come close to the FEMA threshold, though the state does have several more weeks before Bentley can make a formal request to FEMA. The Alabama Department of Transportation also has not finalized its expenses.

The loss of revenue comes at a tough time for some cities especially Mobile, which is battling the effects of a budget deficit. The city's administration is expected to release a revised fiscal year 2014 budget in the coming weeks.

Hudson said that Mobile County will dip into its emergency reserve funds, which are at a healthy \$20 million.

"We built up reserves so we can handle (disasters)," Hudson said. "These events, we cannot predict. We have to be as prepared as we can when tapping into that funding."

Hudson said she isn't sure what the impact of the storm will be on budgets statewide.

Last week, **the mayor of Leeds told AL.com that the state would pay for towing and impound costs**, after the city directed towing companies to move abandoned cars from roadways there. Bentley responded that those costs would be the responsibility of local jurisdictions.

At least one long-time political observer believes more time should have been granted to the local agencies before Bentley determined that FEMA help would not be pursued.

"That's a pretty strange reaction from a state that has benefitted so much for the federal government in general," Brad Moody, a retired associate professor of political sciences at Auburn University in Montgomery, said. "Mobile and Jefferson don't know. If they don't know, how can you decide if you meet the threshold?"

Moody said the post-storm situation, on its surface, reflects the state's long history of having a tight reign over municipal and county governments.

"There is a long history of the state putting a lot of limits and restraints on cities and counties having autonomy and independence as far as their policy-making and decision making is concerned," Moody said. "Maybe this is another example of this history or tradition."

Alabama isn't the only state that will likely be left out. Lea Crager, a spokeswoman with FEMA Region IV's offices, said that Georgia - where Atlanta was scrutinized in its lack of preparation in advance to the storm that left thousands of motorists stranded on interstates -- is also not pursuing FEMA assistance.

Winter Storm Leon's impact in the Mobile area is the second time in slightly more than a year in which the effects of a storm did not trigger FEMA assistance.

But the public costs were almost double the amount expended during the tornado that struck Dec. 25, 2012. The city spent about \$300,000 in public costs to manage the Dec. 25, 2012, tornado through midtown Mobile and parts of Prichard.

City officials pushed to have that tornado packaged with one that struck a smaller portion of Mobile on Dec. 20, 2012. But state officials later ruled that the two storms could not be placed together for one FEMA declaration, and the **city ultimately received no federal reimbursements for the public costs it incurred during the storms.**

FEMA's last largest capital outlay to Alabama occurred in 2011, following the devastating tornado outbreaks in the northern portion of the state during the month of April. In Madison County alone, FEMA declared it eligible for \$2.5 million in reimbursements that covered the costs of overtime, equipment and debris removal.

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