

Democrats agree to no additional disaster aid in US budget dispute

Joseph Kishore
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The Democratic Party-controlled Senate passed a spending measure on Monday night that includes no additional emergency aid to victims of natural disasters. The move was a complete capitulation to Republican demands that additional spending be tied to cuts in other government programs.

The Senate and the Republican-controlled House had been split over legislation that would have added \$1 billion in funding for the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) for the current fiscal year, which concludes at the end of the month.

FEMA allocates relief funds for individuals and businesses affected by natural disasters. The agency is perilously close to running out of money, halting all emergency aid efforts. It is chronically under-funded and has already had to delay financing for tens of thousands of people affected by the many floods, tornadoes and other natural disasters that have hit the country this year.

Legislation passed by the House of Representatives last week included the \$1 billion, but this was offset by \$1.6 billion in cuts in programs supported by the Democrats, including to an electric-car program that gives direct loans to auto companies.

The additional funds were part of a short-term spending bill to fund the government through November 18. This included \$2.65 billion in regular FEMA funding to cover the next six weeks. Congress has to pass a stop-gap measure by the end of the week to avert a government shutdown.

After passing the bill Friday, the House went on recess, while the Senate began preparations to pass a similar bill with \$1 billion in additional spending, but without the cuts. This was already a concession to Republicans, as the Senate had passed an earlier measure including more than \$3 billion in additional

FEMA money.

If the Senate passed the bill, it would have created an impasse, requiring some form of resolution to prevent a shutdown of the government.

The Democrats were saved on Monday morning when FEMA unexpectedly announced it had “found” additional resources that would allow it to operate through Thursday or Friday. The extra money apparently will come from unused funds allocated to other projects.

Both Democrats and Republicans are now claiming that no additional funds are required. In fact, FEMA may well run out of money, for the first time in its history, before the next fiscal year. And if there are any additional disasters this week, FEMA will have no funds to respond.

The dispute over the stop-gap spending measure is only the latest in a series of deadlines exploited by both parties as an opportunity to slash trillions of dollars in social programs.

The temporary spending measure itself follows guidelines set out in the August agreement between Democrats and Republicans to cut \$1 trillion in government spending. The Obama administration seized on the debate over raising the debt ceiling to insist on the cuts.

At the time, Obama sought to reach an agreement with House Republican Speaker John Boehner for more than \$4 trillion in deficit reduction. The broader agreement failed, but the task of implementing the additional cuts has now been shifted to the bipartisan “super committee” set up at the same time.

Last week, Obama unveiled a proposal to cut \$4 trillion over the next decade, including sharp cuts in Medicare and Medicaid. One of the proposals was to cut \$4.2 billion from the National Flood Insurance

Program.

The committee is supposed to come up with a final proposal by November, which will be voted up or down by Congress. If the committee's proposals are not passed, there is an automatic trigger for \$1.2 trillion in cuts.

In his introduction to his budget-cutting proposals, Obama wrote, "Congress should seize the opportunity that this new committee presents to do much more so that we can put the country on a sustainable fiscal path, which is critical for our long-term growth and competitiveness."

The government is holding hostage millions of people affected by a series of disasters this year, including tornadoes that ravaged parts of the US South and Midwest, historic flooding in the upper Midwest, and Hurricane Irene in the Northeast.

Already, the efforts to deal with the impact of Hurricane Irene—which affected 12 states plus Puerto Rico—have delayed funding for projects in other parts of the country. This includes funding to rebuild roads and buildings in Joplin, Missouri, where a tornado in May killed more than 160 people.

According to the *Washington Post*, "In North Dakota, a state ravaged in recent years by blizzards and floods, the delays are tying up traffic. The state is waiting for at least \$13.3 million for 97 projects to elevate or repave roads, according to FEMA figures. Meanwhile, washed-out roads and impassable bridges are forcing drivers in rural communities to take hour-long detours during their commutes, according to Mary Singer, an emergency management official with Burleigh County, N.D., which encompasses Bismarck.

"FEMA's prolonged application and payment process means some rural areas are waiting months for disaster assessment teams to arrive, and then months longer for federal dollars, Singer said."

Meanwhile, Hurricane Irene has left thousands of homes damaged or destroyed by floods, with no significant improvement more than a month after it hit. In an article documenting the growing anger of residents, the *New York Times* reported on houses that were "upended, lifted off their foundations and carried a few hundred feet downstream. Huge piles of rubbish, furniture, mattresses, carpets and clothing line the streets."

"Darlene Swithers, a home health nurse in the Wilkes-

Barre area, said that she had received a few thousand dollars from FEMA, but that it would cost far more to repair structural damage done to her home by seven feet of water," the newspaper added. "For two weeks, Ms. Swithers had no electric power. She still has no furnace or hot water. When she wants to bathe, she fills her tub with water heated in her microwave oven."

Whether or not FEMA officially runs out of money, the perpetual starvation of emergency aid will ensure that the already drastically under-funded and inadequate assistance will dry up even further.



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