

FEMA refuses disaster relief to West, Texas

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14 June 2013

In a letter dated June 10, addressed to Texas Governor Rick Perry and signed by Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) administrator Craig Fugate, the government stated it would provide no additional money to help rebuild the small Texas town of West.

The farming community was the location of a deadly fertilizer plant explosion that killed 15 people, injured more than 200 others, and destroyed 37 blocks.

Following the April 17 disaster, President Barack Obama attended a memorial service for the victims, including 10 first responders. The president stated in front of the grieving crowd that they “are not forgotten.” Obama declared, “we stand with you, and we do not forget. And we’ll be there even after the cameras leave and after the attention turns elsewhere. Your country will remain ever ready to help you recover and rebuild and reclaim your community.”

In response to the June 10 memo from FEMA, Governor Perry was at pains to explain the rejection of requests for federal recovery funds. “[Obama] said his administration would stand with them, ready to help,” Perry stated. “We anticipate the president will hold true to his word and help us work with FEMA to ensure much needed assistance reaches the community of West.”

According to the Associated Press, which obtained a copy of the letter, FEMA made clear that after a review of the state’s appeal, the agency decided that the explosion “is not of the severity and magnitude that warrants a major disaster declaration.” Therefore, this denial is for funds for public assistance, which would help the city to rebuild, as well as for further individual aid.

FEMA provided several million dollars in assistance to the town and its residents in the month after the disaster. But the agency stated that will not provide the widespread assistance typically available in the wake of

natural disasters such as tornadoes or hurricanes.

It is not unusual for FEMA to reject assistance requests in the wake of emergencies that do not stem from natural disasters. In 2010, FEMA turned down a similar request after a gas pipeline explosion consumed most of a northern California neighborhood.

The West rejection is also the latest in a host of disputes between the state of Texas and the Obama administration, which includes a previous denial of assistance following the devastating 2011 drought and wildfires.

This decision means that there will be less money to repair public roads, sewer lines, and a school that was destroyed by the explosion.

As of Wednesday, FEMA has stated that the US Small Business Administration has approved some \$7 million in aid and loans for West residents who were impacted by the blast. FEMA has said it is paying 75 percent of the debris removal costs—mainly to private contractors and other for-profit companies—and will reimburse the state and the municipality for the initial emergency response. FEMA also says that the 764 applicants who have registered so far will receive follow-up telephone calls to identify any pending needs.

However, West Mayor Tommy Muska has stated in response to the FEMA letter that the rural community of 2,800 people cannot cover the costs of the repairs. “I’m very disappointed,” he told reporters. “I guess we’re third page news now.”

FEMA representative Dan Watson states that some funds will be available through insurance payouts and through the state, but Muska does not believe that the state will provide enough money on its own. “I’m not sure what their definition of a major disaster is,” he commented. “I know what I see over there and it’s pretty bleak.” Muska estimates the cost of repairs to be about \$57 million, including \$40 million to rebuild a

school. “We’ve got to have some assistance,” he said.

West schools superintendent Marty Crawford has stated that officials had requested the FEMA aid to help pay for structural damage. An intermediate school by the plant was completely destroyed, along with parts of the high school and middle school. The district expects to get tens of millions of dollars in insurance money to help pay for the repairs, but they still require the FEMA aid to complete the repairs.

The FEMA announcement follows complaints the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF) and the State Fire Marshal’s Office have shut out US Chemical Safety Board investigators from the explosion site, hampering the investigation, and have irreparably altered and removed important physical evidence.



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