

Disaster relief appeal denied

Capitola, county left with big bills

By TOVIN LAPAN

tlapan@santacruzsentinel.com

SANTA CRUZ — The Federal Emergency Management Agency has upheld its initial decision to deny disaster relief funding to California for damage from strong March storms, rejecting an appeal filed by Gov. Jerry Brown last month.

FEMA issued a two-paragraph letter Thursday addressed to Brown that said "after a thorough review" FEMA reaffirmed its "original findings that the damage to the infrastructure from this event was not of such severity and magnitude as to be beyond the combined capabilities of the state and affected local governments."

A series of severe storms in March caused more than \$50 million in damage in 17 counties. Santa Cruz County was left battered and bruised, with several landslides closing county roads and two flash floods in Capitola, leading to a total damage estimate of nearly \$19 million.

In June, FEMA denied the state's application for federal disaster relief, which would have covered 75 percent of the cost. Brown appealed on July 14.

FEMA explained in its initial denial that the damage was related to "three separate storms" and that "they were not severe or continuous, and were not beyond the combined capabilities of state and affected local governments."

In its appeal the state argued that all of the storms were the result of a single system.

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The Federal Highway Administration has committed \$5 million to the repair of county roads that are considered vital arteries. The highway administration does not need a disaster declaration to fund repairs for crucial roads. Yet, the county still has \$14 million in damage to other roads that is not covered.

That is one and a half times the county Public Works Department's annual maintenance budget, Public Works Director John Presleigh said.

"It's entirely beyond our capabilities. It will be years before we get some of these

roads fixed," Presleigh said upon hearing the news.

The work that is needed on Nelson Road, where a 100-foot wide landslide occurred on March 21, likely will cost more than \$2 million, he said.

The state has not released any of its own disaster relief funding yet, but Assemblyman Bill Monning, D-Carmel, said he will be speaking with Cal EMA about the release of funds in light of FEMA's decision.

Typically the state would pick up 75 percent of the remainder of the what the federal government does not cover. For the \$19 million in damage across Santa Cruz County, that would have meant \$14.25 million from FEMA and \$3.6 million from Cal EMA.

"To the communities

impacted, the damage caused by the March storm was of a magnitude to justify the declaration of a federal disaster and it is disheartening to hear that FEMA disagrees with this assessment," Monning said in a statement.

The effected communities are holding out hope that the state will help defray some of the cost of repairs.

"I don't know where we are supposed to come up with \$14 million," Presleigh said. "I hope Cal EMA steps up to the plate, because FEMA sure didn't. I don't understand why they would deny us, we meet all the eligibility requirements."

In Capitola, where the damage estimate is \$1.3 million after two floods swept through

the Pacific Cove Mobile Home Park and village, the city staff received word just last week that their insurance claim has been denied. The city has nearly depleted its reserves to pay for repairs.

"If you look at it by comparison, the millions in damage that Santa Cruz suffered as opposed to the more than \$1 million in damage we suffered, proportionally it's just as disastrous," Capitola City Councilman Mike Termini said referring to Capitola's \$12.3 million annual budget. "I'm concerned about our capital improvement budget, I'm afraid our road improvement and road maintenance budgets will go down, and I'm concerned about not impacting essentials like the police."

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