

[By Nicole Gaudiano](#)

Vermont will seek significant disaster relief because of the catastrophic damage caused by Tropical Storm Irene, Rep. Peter Welch warned House leaders Wednesday. His letter to House Speaker John Boehner of Ohio and Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi of California follows a statement from House Majority Leader Eric Cantor of Virginia that disaster relief must be offset by spending cuts, setting up the possibility of another spending battle.

"Vermonters have always supported disaster relief for communities around the country hit hard by natural disasters, and we always will," Welch, D-Vt., said in his letter. "Now we ask for the support of our colleagues to assist Vermont."

The Federal Emergency Management Agency's Disaster Relief Fund is running low. The agency is delaying long-term rebuilding projects linked to earlier disasters, such as the tornados in Joplin, Mo., to support the immediate needs of states affected by Irene. Congress likely will need additional disaster assistance funds to pay for federal recovery efforts in Vermont and elsewhere.

"In instances like this, yes, there is a federal role," Cantor said Monday on Fox News. "Yes, we're going to find the money. We're just going to need to make sure that there are savings

elsewhere to continue to do so."

Welch said he worries that Cantor's rationale could lead to "gridlock" and make a "spectacle" of Congress at a time when storm victims need help.

"If you have Mr. Cantor basically saying he's going to use this act of God to further his political, ideological point of view on spending, it's a prescription for failure and suffering," Welch said during an interview.

House Republicans passed legislation in June that would provide an additional \$1 billion in emergency funding for the disaster relief fund this year and an additional \$2.65 billion next year, which is \$850 million more than President Barack Obama requested.

The bill would offset this year's increases by taking money from what Republicans consider an "under-performing" program that offers loans to car manufacturers that build efficient vehicles. It also would cut FEMA non-emergency state and local grants by \$1.8 billion and would reduce non-emergency funding for Department of Homeland Security programs overall.

Welch said Congress should always be looking for ways to save money, but he didn't vote for the GOP bill because the offsets were "quite unwise."

"What we can't do is use a budgetary agenda to deny providing help when there's been an act of God that's inflicted enormous harm on people up and down the eastern seaboard," he said.

The Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on Homeland Security will take up its version of the spending bill when Congress reconvenes on Tuesday.

Sen. Patrick Leahy, D-Vt., a subcommittee member, said Tuesday on PBS that he takes the debate over the affordability of disaster relief "with a bit of a grain of salt."

"We're spending several billion dollars a week in Afghanistan," he said. "We spend billions, hundreds of billions of dollars in Iraq, a war we never should have been in."
Vermont is struggling to recover from extensive damage after some areas received more than 11 inches of rain within eight hours. More than 250 roads are closed, 35 bridges have been

heavily damaged and six state highway bridges have been destroyed, according to Welch's office.

In his letter to Boehner and Pelosi, Welch said Vermont is responding "promptly and energetically."

"But we cannot do it alone," he said.

Obama declared a state of emergency in Vermont on Monday to clear the way for FEMA to coordinate disaster relief efforts and pay for up to \$5 million for that assistance.

The state can request a disaster declaration if it determines its resources will be overwhelmed. That would provide a wide range of federal assistance for individuals and public infrastructure.

On Wednesday, the U.S. Department of Transportation released \$5 million in emergency funds to rebuild and repair Vermont roads and bridges destroyed by the storm.

Sen. Bernie Sanders, I-Vt., a member of a Senate transportation subcommittee, has sought aid from the department.

"While no one can yet estimate the full extent of the damage and destruction that Vermont has suffered, it is likely that the long-term cost of rebuilding our roads, bridges, rail lines, businesses, homes and public buildings will be in the hundreds of millions of dollars," Sanders said in a statement. "For Vermont's rebuilding effort to be successful, there is no question ... that there will have to be strong cooperation between the federal government and the state."