

[By Jenna Pizzi](#)

Rep. Peter Welch announced Wednesday that he has invited members of Congress from all the states affected by Hurricane Irene to join a special caucus to direct more money to the Federal Emergency Management Agency.

Welch stressed that FEMA is short on federal funding at a time when more and more disaster-stricken states need its assistance. The agency has only about \$7 million or \$8 million left in its budget for this fiscal year, which ends Sept. 30, and it has not yet paid out ongoing costs associated with disasters earlier this year, like the tornadoes in Joplin, Mo., he said.

Congress approved \$2.7 billion to FEMA for the Disaster Relief Fund in fiscal year 2011 in addition to \$2.8 billion in unused funds from the 2010 fiscal year. Another \$1.8 billion in funds that were no longer needed from previous years were also made available to the disaster relief fund in fiscal year 2011. Still, Welch said the Disaster Relief Fund is nearly exhausted.

"It is going to need more money," he said during a press conference at the Burlington International Airport on his way back to Washington, D.C. "We've got to make sure that we get sufficient funds to meet the demands of these natural disasters."

In Vermont alone, the cost of infrastructure lost to the remnants of Hurricane Irene, which caused flooding that washed out roads across the state, could be in the tens of millions.

The caucus will consist of 47 Republicans and Democrats, and Welch said he has heard overwhelming support from many of those congressmen and women who have been invited.

"We are all in the same boat," said Welch.

He is gearing up for a contentious debate in the House of Representatives, where Majority Leader Eric Cantor has already said he would not support allocating more FEMA funds without reciprocal cuts elsewhere in the budget.

While Welch seemed to expect the same kind of partisan battle that occurred in the debate over whether to raise the debt ceiling, he hopes it doesn't leave Vermonters and others struggling to recover from natural disasters all over the country without the funds they have come to expect.

"We saw from the debt-ceiling debate that this is a dead-end partisan battle that is really going to disrespect folks that have been hit real hard," said Welch.

Costs associated with Hurricane Irene can be covered in the 2012 fiscal year, but because the House and Senate have yet to pass a budget, it is unclear how much disaster relief funding will be made available.

FEMA has already pledged to help Vermont, despite budget constraints. At a press conference this weekend, Richard Serino — FEMA's deputy administrator — told Gov. Peter Shumlin the agency has pledged support to the state "for the long haul."

"FEMA is going to be here," said Serino. "Not just today. Not just tomorrow. We are going to be here for the long haul helping rebuild the roads and bridges, the infrastructure throughout Vermont."

Welch said he hopes that Vermonters, who have with their taxes helped other parts of the country recover from disaster through FEMA funding, can get what they deserve now that the tables have turned.

"Vermonters have always been extremely generous when it came to providing their tax dollars to fund emergency assistance in other parts of the country," he said. "And now Vermonters who have been generous are going to need some help for our own recovery."

The caucus will meet at 8 a.m. today, and Welch said he hopes Congress can increase the FEMA budget before the end of September.