

[By Humberto Sanchez and Jessica Brady](#)

Rep. Peter Welch (D-Vt.) is looking to form a bicameral coalition of Republicans and Democrats from states hit by Hurricane Irene that will help ensure federal disaster aid doesn't become the latest battlefield in the debate over reducing the deficit.

"All of us have folks who are out of their homes, businesses are destroyed, and the last thing we want is a spectacle in Congress where we don't do what needs to be done right away to help them," Welch said in a brief interview. "I think we are going to see Republican and Democratic legislators realizing that we have to act."

Welch has invited 43 lawmakers from 10 states — plus Puerto Rico — to meet Thursday morning. Federal Emergency Management Agency Administrator Craig Fugate and White House staff will also be there. Welch's office said it expects at least 30 Members to attend, including a half dozen Republicans.

The group is expected to review Hurricane Irene recovery efforts and steps the group can take in Congress to ensure Members' states have the federal assistance they need to recover, according to Welch's office.

"We are all in the same boat," Welch said. "We can only succeed by doing this together." Vermont, as well as much of the Northeast, sustained historic floods in Irene's wake.

Welch's comments come as Republican leaders have fought to keep promises made during last year's election — which put Republicans in the majority in the House and boosted their numbers in the Senate — to cut spending and reduce the deficit.

Republicans managed to win about \$30 billion in cuts in a deal enacted in April to fund the remainder of fiscal 2011, and the August package to raise the debt ceiling put in place provisions to cut about another \$2.1 trillion over 10 years.

Disaster funding for Hurricane Irene now could be in the GOP crosshairs. The storm is expected to cost about \$1.5 billion in disaster relief, according to a White House estimate.

House Majority Leader Eric Cantor (R-Va.) has said he wants disaster spending to be offset by cuts elsewhere in the budget.

Welch said he has invited Cantor and several other GOP Members, including Sens. Richard Burr (N.C.), Scott Brown (Mass.) and Pat Toomey (Pa.).

"I am sure Leader Cantor is every bit as much concerned about helping his folks as the rest of us, and he is a critical player; it would be great to have him involved," Welch said.

Cantor, who has come under fire from Democrats for insisting on offsets for disaster aid, refuted claims that he would block emergency funding that's not fully paid for with spending cuts elsewhere. He told reporters at his weekly briefing, "I have never, never said that I'm holding anything hostage or would be for playing politics with this.

"Don't tell me that we don't know from disaster. People are hurting," Cantor added. "The conversation still at home is, Do you have your power?' So, I am for making sure that people get their money and that there will be no hold up."

But Cantor, whose district was the epicenter of the 5.8-magnitude earthquake that shook the East Coast two weeks ago and was badly hit by Hurricane Irene, would not say whether the \$6 billion emergency funding bill moving through the Senate was an appropriate amount of money.

"We don't know, and the president hasn't asked for additional monies," Cantor said, adding that "we now have a mechanism" for dealing with emergency funding through the debt limit deal crafted over the summer. The debt deal allows spending caps to be raised by as much as \$11.5 billion to account for disaster spending.

Asked whether he would attend Thursday's bipartisan meeting with Fugate, Cantor spokeswoman Laena Fallon said: "As his district was severely impacted by both the recent earthquake and Hurricane Irene, Leader Cantor has been in constant contact with state and local officials as well as FEMA."

Welch said he is happy to debate offsetting the aid but doesn't want that to delay the enactment of the funding or inhibit it from getting to victims.

"My view is if we see money that can [be] saved because it's not being well spent, let's do that; that ought to be a 24-7 commitment," Welch said. But "I don't want the offset issue to become an obstacle to getting relief to folks up and down the coast that are still reeling from Irene," Welch said.