

[By Nicole Gaudiano](#)

A bipartisan group of House members whose states were affected by Hurricane and Tropical Storm Irene will form a coalition to help obtain disaster funding, Rep. Peter Welch, D-Vt., announced Thursday. The announcement came after a meeting Welch organized with 20 House members, staffers, White House staff and Craig Fugate, the Federal Emergency Management Agency's administrator.

"Hurricane Irene had no partisan preference," Welch said. "Anyone in the wake of its fury has suffered the consequences, and we in Congress understand that we have to work together to help the folks in our district recover from this terrible storm."

President Barack Obama has declared a disaster in Vermont. The White House budget office estimates damage in Irene-affected states will cost \$1.5 billion, but Fugate said that figure is "very preliminary."

FEMA's disaster-relief fund is running low. The Senate Appropriations Committee on Wednesday approved legislation that would include \$6 billion for the fund next fiscal year. In June, the GOP-led House approved providing \$2.65 billion for the fund next year and \$1 billion in emergency money for this year that would be offset.

House Majority Leader Eric Cantor's recent comments that disaster spending would require savings elsewhere provoked a backlash from Democrats and liberal groups who accused Cantor, R-Va., of holding disaster aid "hostage" as part of an ideological battle.

Welch said he believes, after a conversation with Cantor, that Irene-affected states will receive the money necessary for recovery.

"There's a lot of debate and controversy about how we do it, but we don't want to inflict the spectacle of budget politics on folks back home that have been reeling as a result of Hurricane

Irene," Welch said.

At a breakfast meeting with reporters, Cantor said Thursday that he applauds Welch's efforts, and his own comments have been misconstrued. He wants to get money to victims, but at the same time, he wants to make sure Senate Democrats don't try to pass an inflated disaster spending bill. He noted that Obama hasn't requested emergency funding yet.

"I'm sure Peter is well aware of what the needs are, and those will be addressed," Cantor said. "People are not going to go without."