

[By Seung Min Kim](#)

Amid some early partisan sniping, lawmakers are moving quickly to try to douse politics from the disaster relief process to secure federal aid for storm victims.

About 20 House members representing storm-stricken areas, as well as staff from 10 more congressional offices, met Thursday with Federal Emergency Management Agency Administrator Craig Fugate and White House aides to discuss the federal aid and begin assembling a bipartisan coalition to respond cohesively to Hurricane Irene.

"If it takes a storm to get us together once in a while, God has strange ways of dealing with the Congress," said Rep. Bill Pascrell (D-N.J.), whose congressional district has been overwhelmed by flooding from Irene.

Several congressional Republicans have insisted that any additional money for disasters should be offset by federal spending cuts elsewhere, while Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid (D-Nev.) wants to move quickly on \$6 billion in disaster relief.

Meanwhile, House Majority Leader Eric Cantor (R-Va.) has been targeted by Democrats for saying disaster spending should be offset — but has pushed back, asserting he's not holding federal relief hostage.

"Unequivocally, I am for sure making people get their money and not having to wait," said Cantor, whose Richmond-area district was first shaken by a 5.8-magnitude earthquake last month and then hit a few days later by Irene.

Rep. Peter Welch (D-Vt.) — whose state was also hit hard by Irene and who convened Thursday's meeting — defended Cantor, whom he spoke with on the House floor Wednesday.

"I'm fully confident that he is the same as all of us when it comes to wanting what can be done for citizens in his district," Welch said.

The White House has projected that Irene will rack up at least \$1.5 billion in damages. But Fugate cautioned Thursday those numbers are still preliminary. Federal officials haven't been able to examine all damaged infrastructure yet, and Tropical Storm Lee is flooding some of those same areas again.

Those who attended the hourlong session were members who represent areas hit hard by the

recent storms, including House Minority Whip Steny Hoyer (D-Md.), Rep. Nan Hayworth (R-N.Y.) and House Democratic Caucus Chairman John Larson (D-Conn.).

Lawmakers who talked to reporters after the meeting said they were working to make sure the process of paying for disasters wouldn't be inflamed by budget politics.

"Hurricane Irene had no partisan preference," Welch said. "Anyone in the wake of this fury suffered the consequences."