

[By Nicole Gaudiano](#)

Legislation containing disaster relief money for Vermont and other states affected by Hurricane Irene could come up for a House vote as early as Wednesday. Vermont's lone representative plans a reluctant "yes" vote. The bill, which would keep the government running through Nov. 18, includes \$3.65 billion for disaster relief, far less than either President Barack Obama has requested or the Democratic-controlled Senate has approved.

The House bill would offset some disaster relief spending by cutting spending elsewhere -- a demand by House Majority Leader Eric Cantor of Virginia that has drawn criticism from Democrats who say he's holding disaster aid "hostage" in an ideological battle.

Rep. Peter Welch, D-Vt., said he will vote for the bill, despite his strong opposition to the offset and his support for greater funding for disaster relief.

"My fundamental responsibility is to protect innocent Vermonters and get the money back to them as soon as possible," he said. "So I'm going to vote for the highest dollar aid figure I can to keep the process moving and accelerate getting that money back to Vermont."

Sen. Patrick Leahy, D-Vt., and Sen. Bernie Sanders, I-Vt., were among 61 senators who helped pass legislation last week that would give \$6.9 billion to FEMA and other agencies for disaster recovery efforts. Both say the House bill is inadequate.

Leahy, a senior member of the Senate Appropriations Committee, said the bill would fund FEMA disaster relief only through February.

"That falls short of our duty to help Americans hit this year by natural disasters, including flooding in Vermont this spring, and the devastation that accompanied Irene," Leahy said. "These House leaders had no problem putting hundreds of billions of dollars for Iraq and Afghanistan on a national credit card, but when it comes to emergency help for Americans here

at home, they hold a different standard."

Sanders said he's optimistic that when the Senate takes up the House bill, it will be amended to include additional funding.

"It is an outrage that, for the first time in modern history, the Republicans want to have a budget debate over urgently needed emergency funding," Sanders said. "The American people know that when disaster strikes, our whole country responds to protect devastated communities, and we do it as quickly as possible."

The House bill would designate \$1 billion of the disaster aid for this fiscal year, which ends Sept. 30. That includes \$226 million for Army Corps of Engineers flood control efforts and \$774 million for the Federal Emergency Management Agency's Disaster Relief Fund, which is nearly depleted.

The bill would offset that \$1 billion by taking money from what Republicans consider an "underperforming" program that offers loans to car manufacturers that build efficient vehicles.

The \$2.65 billion designated for fiscal 2012 represents a base level of funding for the year. Additional emergency FEMA funding would be considered over the next weeks and month as the House Appropriations Committee completes next year's spending bills, according to a committee spokeswoman.

Welch voted against a similar bill in June because he said the offsets were "quite unwise." Shortly after the storm, he was among Democrats who criticized Cantor for insisting that disaster spending would require savings elsewhere.

Cantor's strategy of using Hurricane Irene to further his views on spending is a "prescription for failure and suffering," Welch said last month.

He formed a bipartisan Hurricane Irene coalition, which he said has been pushing for the most money it can get quickly for disaster relief. But he said the spending total and offsets in the House bill were Cantor's decision and "not within my control."

Welch said he would support extra funding when congressional negotiators work out the final bill, but "we've got to keep this process moving."

"The consensus in the coalition, Republicans and Democrats, is against the offset, but we don't have final say," he said. "So, should we delay getting money back to Vermont because we have a dispute about this or should we help Vermonters get back on their feet?"