

[By Chris Garofolo](#)

Lawmakers on Capitol Hill Thursday evening approved emergency relief funding for Vermont and other states recovering from Tropical Storm Irene.

House representatives passed the legislation by a 298-121 margin to provide relief from the Aug. 28 natural disaster, which caused millions of dollars in damage to the Green Mountain State. The measure passed the Senate in a 70-30 vote and was sent to the White House.

U.S. Rep. Peter Welch, D-Vt., told the Reformer this legislation is extremely important for Vermont.

"With the budget politics being what they are, the House of Representatives made this a very dicey battle and I think the reason we succeeded in the House was we created this Irene coalition right after the storm," he said. "We contacted all the members of Congress whose districts had been hit by Irene, and the day we got back, we had a meeting with [the Federal Emergency Management Agency] and Republicans and Democrats were able to ask questions, make the case on why we needed disaster assistance."

The legislation includes funding for a Federal Highway Administration emergency relief program that will help repair the state's damaged infrastructure, estimated at more than \$250 million. It also provides money to the Community Development Block Grant program to aid states and cities rebuild housing and other structures.

Other restrictions originally in the House version were lifted, such as the reimbursement for more than the current \$100 million per-state limit on federal emergency highway repair funds, which is especially critical as Vermont's repair costs are expected to exceed the current cap.

"That cap being lifted means Vermont will be able to get help all the way through all the damage that we suffered," Welch said. "We can't play politics with a natural disaster."

Legislators are also optimistic the disaster assistance through the Economic Development Administration will create new jobs to replace those lost in the floods and the Emergency Watershed and Emergency Conservation programs will help repair the damage to dozens of rivers that jumped their banks.

"Irene will go down in history as one of the worst natural disasters ever to hit our state," said Sen. Bernie Sanders, I-Vt., in a statement.

"There is no doubt that Vermonters will pick up the pieces and restore our homes, businesses and communities, but the simple fact is that we cannot do this alone," Sanders added.

"Vermont, like every other state that experiences a disaster, is entitled to federal help to rebuild our communities. I am glad that in a significant way we were able to accomplish that with this bill."

Vermont was slammed during Irene, causing property damage in 230 towns and forcing more than 1,500 families to leave their homes. Roughly 2,200 roads and bridges were lost, isolating some towns for almost a week.

More than 7,000 Vermonters registered with the Federal Emergency Management Agency. The state's Waterbury office complex was destroyed, causing nearly 1,600 employees to work in temporary sites or at home.

The state congressional delegation is awaiting further action with a Homeland Security Department funding bill.