

The Virgin Islands Consortium

House Of Representatives Approves Major Changes To Disaster Recovery Law To Better Respond To Natural Disasters

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The U.S. House of Representatives on Friday approved components of the Disaster Recovery Reform Act (DRRA) to improve the federal government's response to disasters and rebuilding communities. The bill, HR 4, will head to the Senate where lawmakers will be prompted for the second time to consider DRRA provisions.

If enacted, the changes would amend the 1988 Stafford Disaster Relief and Emergency Assistance Act, which regulates how disaster recovery dollars are spent throughout the United States and its territories.

According to a Government House release, soon after Hurricanes Irma and Maria devastated much of the U.S. Virgin Islands, Governor Kenneth E. Mapp began lobbying Congressional members and the Trump Administration to revise the Stafford Act in order to eliminate red tape, help control wasteful spending and, most importantly, speed up federal aid to homeowners and businesses.

Under the current law, local authorities can only use federal funds to rebuild to pre-disaster standards, which limits federal agencies, such as FEMA and their local counterparts, from using their discretion with common-sense approaches for specific jurisdictions.

For example, in the U.S. Virgin Islands, repairing a house within the construction code might require successive programs in which a temporary roof would be put on a damaged structure through one program and then later removed to rebuild the entire house by another program.

The components of the DRRRA included in HR 4 would increase the federal investment in pre-disaster mitigation, increase reimbursement caps for state and local governments on a range of disaster costs, and allow state and local governments to administer housing assistance grants. Specifically, the bill would:

- Amend the [Stafford Act](#) to establish increased and fixed reimbursement rates to state and local governments for direct and indirect administrative costs associated with disaster recovery efforts. This includes no more than 15 percent for hazard mitigation and 12 percent for essential assistance; repair, restoration, and replacement; debris removal; and transportation assistance (section 502).
- Allow states the option to administer FEMA funding for direct temporary housing and permanent housing construction in the wake of a disaster. FEMA must fund 100 percent of the direct temporary housing costs.
- Establish the National Public Infrastructure Pre-Disaster Mitigation Assistance Program, which would commit certain funding from the Disaster Relief Fund (DRF) to pre-disaster mitigation efforts. It would allocate 6 percent of the combined obligations estimated following a major disaster (unemployment assistance, assistance to low-income migrant and seasonal farmworkers and crisis counseling assistance and training) to mitigation assistance.
- Require the FEMA administrator to develop a plan to streamline information collection processes for grant applications and make the process less burdensome and time consuming.
- Direct FEMA to increase consideration of severe local impact when evaluating whether to recommend a major disaster declaration.
- Allow the FEMA administrator to develop incentives and penalties to encourage state and local governments to expedite the timely closeout of recovery-related expenditures and activities.

The House passed several emergency management amendments to the bill throughout floor proceedings. In part, these amendments would:

- Create an interagency council to improve coordination on the federal, state and local levels on extreme weather, resilience, preparedness and risk identification.

- Improve FFEMA's reimbursement amounts and processes for state and local governments in the areas of housing assistance, building inspections, and in cases of delayed recoupment.
- Require FEMA to coordinate emergency response plans with state, tribal and local governments.
- Require FEMA to provide training to state, local, and tribal governments, first responders, and facilities that store hazardous materials in the event of major disaster.

Mr. Mapp had made the case to Congressional members and federal partners that it would be less disruptive for families and more cost-efficient to repair the entire home immediately without intervening steps.

"I am pleased that the House has overwhelmingly approved the Disaster Recovery Reform Act," the governor said. "I have been in government service for a very long time in various positions and have been through five major hurricanes. My experience has taught me that the approach to federal disaster aid must be reformed not only in the U.S. Virgin Islands, but throughout the United States."

He added: "Over recent months, I presented this case to Congressional leadership as well as to our federal partners, and they seemed to understand the need for reform, so I look forward to the Senate passing this measure and quickly placing it on the President's desk, so we can apply it to our current recovery efforts. Once again, I thank Congress, President Trump and his Administration for their support."