



Officials should act on GulfGov ideas

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Two organizations without ties to government and politics have joined the Blanco administration in criticizing federal disaster aid programs for the slow pace of recovery from the 2005 hurricanes. The organizations are the Public Affairs Research Council of Louisiana, described as an independent voice and catalyst for governmental reform, and the Nelson A. Rockefeller Institute of Government, the public policy research arm of the State University of New York.

The two entities, in *GulfGov Reports*, which they publish jointly, blame the slow pace of recovery in Louisiana and Mississippi on the fact that federal disaster aid programs now in place were not designed to handle the devastation caused by hurricanes Katrina and Rita. The report is critical of FEMA public assistance funding and of HUD's Community Development Block Grant program. It says slow disbursement of grants is debilitating to the recovery efforts of the two states.

"It is evident from the continuing slow pace of the recovery more than two years after the storms that other avenues need to be explored," the joint report says.

The two organizations support the claims of Louisiana officials that the federal aid provided the two states is not proportional to the amount of damage suffered. *The Advertiser* has made the same argument since the first issuance of federal recovery funds.

GulfGov Reports says Louisiana suffered 67 percent of the major and severe housing damage and received 62 percent of the block grant funding. Mississippi, the report says, suffered 20 percent of the major housing damage and received 33 percent of the block grant funding.

Louisiana officials have tried for months to point out to federal officials the unfairness of the allocation of federal dollars. We hope, attention will be paid to the PAR/Rockefeller report. Andy Kopplin, Louisiana Recovery Authority executive director, calls it an independent validation of what Louisiana has been saying to Washington.

Kopplin says, "Red tape needs to be cut and reconstruction funds provided fairly to states in proportion to damages."

Another problem pointed out in the PAR/Rockefeller report is that the public assistance program generally requires local governments to first pay for work out of their own pockets. Governments cannot meet the requirement when they are left after a disaster with little to no tax base or revenue sources.

Institute co-director Richard Nathan says state and federal agencies must learn from the lessons of Katrina and Rita. "A catastrophic disaster like this breaks the normal rules of intergovernmental roles and responsibilities and forces a fresh look at the appropriate assignment of governmental responsibilities," he said.

Problems with the Road Home program were also pointed out. Recovery efforts can stall, the report said, if officials "overcompensate, as is the case with Louisiana's multiple layers of rules for its homeowner grant program."

The two independent, nonpolitical agencies offer comments that everyone involved in disaster recovery work should heed.