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La. gets \$28.5 million for tourism

Area agencies get lion's share of aid

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By Robert Travis Scott

BATON ROUGE -- New Orleans area tourism agencies will lead the pack of statewide programs receiving portions of \$28.5 million in federal money to promote tourism and help reverse the decline in visitors after Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, state officials announced Tuesday.

The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development approved the financing for the Louisiana Tourism Marketing Program. Louisiana Sens. Mary Landrieu and David Vitter delivered the news to Gov. Kathleen Blanco and Lt. Gov. Mitch Landrieu, who appeared jointly to discuss the grant at a press conference in front of the Louisiana State Museum.

The money will be distributed to 17 tourism offices and other organizations to promote their venues, including the New Orleans Tourism Marketing Corp. and the New Orleans Metropolitan Convention and Visitors Bureau, which will each receive \$8.5 million.

"We are able to receive visitors in all areas of coastal Louisiana," Blanco said. This money will help get the word out, she said.

The Louisiana Department of Culture and Tourism estimated that the state lost 7 million tourism and convention visitors and \$2.2 billion in tourism spending last year due to the hurricanes. Recently, the New Orleans region has been losing an average \$15.2 million per day.

Post-storm figures show that 1,409 of the state's 9,153 travel and hospitality businesses had shut down after the storms, resulting in about 33,000 job losses, according to a study by the Louisiana State University Department of Economics.

"Our brand and our image has been seriously damaged," said CRT Secretary Angele Davis.

The federal money authorized by Congress and approved by HUD will help fix the damage by helping the individual tourist agencies advertise, Davis said. The Louisiana Office of Tourism is getting \$5.5 million of the money.

"We were initially told we would not be able to get this funding," Davis said. "We've overcome a lot of hurdles."

To decide which organizations would get a share, the tourism office put together a panel of "stakeholders" in the business, including representatives of restaurants, hotels and local visitors bureaus, Davis said. The panel reviewed grant applications from the various local agencies and ranked them according their qualifications and proposals.

New Orleans' role as a dominant tourism player before Katrina was one of the primary factors in deciding which agencies should get a share of the money to revive the industry, Davis said. As a result, New Orleans area tourism marketing agencies got 71 percent of the money.

A separate accountability panel will review the use of the money. Members of that panel include representatives of the Louisiana Recovery Authority, the Public Affairs Research Council and outside auditors, Davis said.

Most of the grants announced Tuesday are targeted at local organizations to help them recover from the storms, as opposed to other federal and state spending programs that are aimed at broader state efforts to recruit tourists.

Other agencies in the New Orleans area receiving part of the \$28.4 million are: The Ernest N. Morial Convention Center, \$2 million; the Louisiana Stadium and Exposition District (Superdome and New Orleans Arena), \$1 million; Jefferson Convention and Visitors Bureau, \$750,000; St. Tammany Parish Tourist Commission, \$500,000 for parish tourism recovery and \$100,000 for Northshore Harbor Center marketing; St. Bernard Parish Office of Tourism, \$200,000; River Parishes Tourist Commission, \$150,000.

Separately, the Louisiana tourism office spent \$7.5 million in state money for an advertising campaign in March and plans to spend \$8 million more this year. The agency's campaign is targeted at national magazines and local television in major cities spanning from Texas to Georgia.

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