

Ex-FEMA chief urges revamping disaster legislation

BY ALEX DANIELS ARKANSAS DEMOCRAT-GAZETTE

WASHINGTON — As the scale of devastation caused by the cyclone in Burma became clearer Tuesday, James Lee Witt pondered the despair it and past disasters have spawned, and he offered a dire prediction.

“It’s only going to get worse.”

Witt, the director of the Federal Emergency Management Agency under President Clinton, called for an update of the Robert T. Stafford Disaster Relief and Emergency Assistance Act that would provide more federal money for states and cities that need aid and create a “catastrophe” federal disaster category.

He made the pitch at a meeting in a Capitol Hill hearing room put on by the New York University Center for Catastrophe Preparedness and Response. Witt’s current firm, Washington-based James Lee Witt and Associates, developed the school’s disaster response plan.

Witt, who splits time between Little Rock and Washington, has been working with the Democratic leadership of the Senate Ad Hoc Committee for Disaster Recovery to develop changes in the Stafford Act.

If a disaster was defined as a catastrophe, then “all federal resources” available would be directed to it, Witt said. And to avoid a repeat of the bungled response to Hurricane Katrina in 2005, local governments should be given block grants and wide discretion on how to spend money. This, he said, would speed recovery and limit bureaucratic requirements.

A catastrophic designation should be given, according to Witt, if a governor has requested it and the affected state is expected to lose at least 10 percent of its quarterly tax revenue, or if federal costs are expected to exceed \$1,500 per person.

Under his plan, once an event is designated a catastrophe, the requirement for state and local matching funds for emergency and restoration work would be eliminated, time limits to apply for disaster-related unemployment assistance would be extended, and funding for community disaster loans, now capped at \$5 million, would increase.

Donny Ray Williams, staff director of the disaster committee, said he will meet as early as next week with the FEMA inspector general’s office to further develop legislative language. He also invited House disaster-policy aides and FEMA staff.

The agency’s input is needed, he said, so “they don’t automatically oppose what we do.”

So far, “FEMA has given us nothing,” he added.

Democratic Sen. Mark Pryor of Arkansas, who sits on the committee, asked FEMA Director David Paulison during an April hearing what changes to the Stafford Act were needed.

Paulison complained about the lack of flexibility he has as director to distribute funds in an emergency — and then stopped short.

He said he was probably speaking "out of turn" for the administration and told Pryor that he had convened a national advisory council to come up with suggestions.

During the 1990s, the federal government declared 460 disasters, according to FEMA data. During the current decade, there have been 442 such declarations, on pace to surpass the 1990s.

Others speaking with Witt also had a sky-is-falling message.

Disaster recovery "is a growing business," said Mitchell Moss, a professor of urban policy and planning at New York University.

Paul Light, a professor at the university's Wagner School of Public Service, presented the audience of disaster-response professionals a paper in which he argued that global population increases and the creation of complex global-communication networks have the effect of magnifying future disasters.

"The crises ahead are increasing in both complexity and frequency," he writes.

