Grays Harbor PUD to Receive Nearly 4.5 Million Dollar Reimbursement From December Storm Response

Local News

Posted by: David Haviland

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Aberdeen, WA - The Grays Harbor Public Utility District (PUD) today said the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) has agreed to reimburse Grays Harbor almost $4 million paid to contractors who restored power and conducted emergency repairs to its electrical infrastructure caused by the destructive December 2, 2007 storm. In addition, the FEMA approval paves the way for the PUD to receive another $639,000 in State emergency funds that were contingent on FEMA’s approval of the District’s appeal, bringing the total to more than $4.4 million dollars.

FEMA initially denied the claim because Grays Harbor did not seek competitive bids or sign contracts before the emergency work began. The District successfully appealed arguing that the ability to anticipate a storm of that magnitude and have competitive bids for unknown levels of emergency work is not feasible as during this time we could not even access many portions of the county. Apparently, FEMA had changed their rules in 2007. The District now has taken steps to ensure future compliance to not face this situation again. In addition, another $1.3 million is still being reviewed as part of the appeal and also could result in additional funds being released.

“These big storms are expensive events and the FEMA dollars go a long way toward mitigating the cost,” said Commissioner Tom Casey. “We are especially grateful to U.S. Senators Patty Murray and Maria Cantwell and Congressmen Norm Dicks and Brian Baird who supported our appeal of FEMA’s initial decision to deny us disaster aid and we appreciate the through review by the State of Washington and FEMA which resulted in an outcome that we believe is appropriate.”

Commissioner Casey also credits PUD Staff for their work on the appeal. “Our ratepayers also are well served by the persistent and professional work by PUD staff that compiled and presented our appeals to FEMA. Getting cash relief from FEMA requires a lot of smart work. It doesn't happen automatically. This shows the value of competent hard-working staff."

In December 2007, southwestern Washington experienced a severe storm with winds of more than 100 mph and extensive flooding throughout the region. The county was declared a disaster area, and 98 percent of Grays Harbor PUD customers were without power at the worst point of the storm. Damage to the PUD’s system was extensive. Restoring power to the area was crucial to minimizing the impact of this disaster.

“With winds in excess of 100 mph knocking over trees, blocking major highways, destroying buildings and crippling our electrical infrastructure, our first and only thought was to move quickly to protect public safety by restoring power,” Casey said. “This was not business as usual.

“It was critical for us to restore power as quickly as possible to ensure facilities providing vital

resources such as food, lodging, fuel, and medical services were available to citizens. If we had not requested immediate assistance beyond our own line crews, many of the people impacted by the storm would not have had electrical power for weeks or longer. Any delay would have made the disaster much more devastating.”

Public utility crews from Grant, Douglas, Franklin and Okanogan Counties as well as the City of McCleary traveled to Grays Harbor to provide mutual aid. Additional contractors were called to the area to assist with repairs. FEMA approved disaster assistance to cover costs associated with the crews from other public utilities under mutual aid agreements, and contractors with existing contracts, but initially denied disaster aid to pay for costs associated with other contract crews. Casey pointed out that all the contract crews were approved contractors for use by the PUD and used standard storm rates.