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Disaster declaration will bring in federal aid

By Tammy Fonce-Olivas / El Paso Times

Gov. Rick Perry, in the city Thursday to survey damage from three days of powerful storms, has declared a state of emergency in El Paso County to get federal assistance.

Perry saw the destruction done to streets, homes and businesses by relentless rains. While the governor told reporters that he would try to get federal help, he is concentrating on public safety because of the continuing threat of heavy rains.

"Until we get this situation under hand, the fact of the matter is if the forecast calls for more rain, I'm a whole lot more concerned about having the resources in place to save lives than I am in having some paperwork headed to Washington, D.C., because it may be months before dollars flow in to help the citizens that have been impacted (by the floods)," he said.

Perry said the proper documentation has been sent to President Bush about the emergency situation in El Paso and surrounding communities.

City Manager Joyce Wilson said the state of emergency declaration is critical for getting Federal Emergency Management Agency money to rebuild streets and damaged properties.

"FEMA has the flood insurance program that will help a lot of folks who don't have flood insurance to repair their property -- that is probably the most critical thing," Wilson said.

While the city waits to see if it will receive FEMA dollars, the governor said the state will continue to assist the county.

"Simply put, the state of Texas is committed to providing all the resources that are needed to get us through this tragedy," he said.

As of Thursday, the state had provided two Texas Department of Public Safety helicopters, 205-ton trucks from the Texas National Guard, three boats and 25 game wardens from the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department. In addition, 62 National Guardsmen have gone door-to-door in flooded areas to check on residents.

Perry said early estimates indicate the damage could be in the tens of millions of dollars.

"I hope we can stop at the tens of millions of dollars, but the fact of the matter is there is some huge damage to infrastructure and to residential and commercial property," he said.

City officials on Thursday said the damage so far is more than \$100 million. Property owners on the West Side suffered the heaviest losses, estimated at about \$52 million.

The governor mentioned the death Thursday of a worker trying to ease flooding in Canutillo.

El Paso County Sheriff's Office investigators said the worker, Juan Peralta, 31, of Anthony, N.M., was killed by an out-of-control tractor-trailer that might have had faulty brakes.

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"I know this is a huge tragedy for those who have lost homes and their goods that they've had in many cases for a lifetime, but in another sense we are blessed that all our citizens are safe," Perry said.

The governor also praised El Pasoans, both civilians and those working for government agencies, for their response to the disaster.

"Where the conditions have been the worst -- because of the heavy rains, mudslides and flooding conditions -- we have seen the citizens of this state at their best helping neighbors, rescuing folks, performing heroic deeds and providing shelters," he said.

Westway resident Jose Cadena, whose home was damaged by floodwaters, said he thinks first-responders have done a good job.

"From a one to a 10, I give them a seven," he said.

Cadena made a special trip Thursday to City Hall in Downtown El Paso to hear Perry address the media. He said he's pleased with the governor's response and thinks it's now up to local, state and federal officials to come together to make improvements to the infrastructure to prevent future damage.

"They need to fix the problems as soon as possible so that more people aren't affected by floods," Cadena said.

Cadena said he doesn't want people to suffer the same fate as he did. Nearly 4 feet of rainwater gushed into his three-bedroom home. His family's vehicles, which were parked outside his house, were also flooded.

"I have nothing. I lost everything," Cadena said. He, his wife and two sons are staying with relatives.

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Perry said rebuilding is going to take time and will require the assistance of the federal government.

"This is a going to be a long process. Don't get confused that somehow or another this is going to be quickly taken care of," he said. "But together and working with the state and working with the local officials and working with our federal counterparts we can get back to normal as quick as we can."

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