

NEWS

Tab mounts to clean up Irma water debris

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TALLAHASSEE, Fla. – Florida continues to spend about \$2.4 million a week to clean up debris strewn across state waters during Hurricane Irma two months ago.

The state money could soon run dry, even as the weekly costs grow with the cleanup moving deeper into counties more heavily damaged by the storm.

Department of Environmental Protection Deputy Secretary David Clark told members of the House Select Committee on Hurricane Response and Preparedness on Monday that by early next year the state may use up the \$36 million allocated to the agency for storm-debris cleanup.

“At the current pace, we’re spending about \$2.4 million a week to do the waterway cleanup,” Clark said. “At that pace, we’re going to run out of money by the time we get into session at the beginning of January or sooner.”

Committee members, while praising the state agency for waterway cleanup efforts, didn’t offer direction on future or emergency funding.

Chairwoman Jeanette Nunez, R-Miami, has said she expects legislation to come out of the committee in mid-December.

The state expects to receive at least 75 percent reimbursement for its expenses from the Federal Emergency Management Agency.

But based on past storms, Clark said the federal money, which isn’t guaranteed, might be at least two years away.

Clark said the state has already spent about \$12 million to clean up about 76,000 cubic yards of household goods, building materials and vegetation that ended up in state waters following the powerful and deadly storm.

By comparison, the state spent close to \$15 million to clean up 79,000 cubic yards of debris after Hurricane Matthew caused damage along the East Coast in October 2016.

Clark said Irma's numbers will increase as the state has ramped up efforts in Collier County, which sustained the second of two landfalls by Hurricane Irma on Sept. 10. Also, the state is still working on an agreement with Monroe County to assist in waterway cleanup at the southern end of the state, which received the first landfall and saw some of the most severe impacts from the storm.

The "hope" is to have boats in the waters of Monroe County in a few weeks, he said.

"As the rising waters and the king tide events are subsiding we're starting to find more debris that is either coming up to the surface or as the waters drop we're finding more debris," Clark said.

The DEP cleanup work doesn't include vessel removal.

The Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission estimates about \$25 million will be needed to complete removal of the remaining 514 damaged vessels still in the water or thrown ashore.

Maj. Robert Rowe, the commission's boating and waterway section leader, said the state is expected to pay 25 percent of the vessel-recovery costs.


More than 1,800 boats have already been moved from state waters, many into storage areas by the owners or the state, working with the U.S. Department of Environmental Protection and the U.S. Coast Guard.

The state estimates that each vessel costs \$25,000 to \$40,000 to remove, Rowe said.

Unlike water-debris removal, the pace and cost of storm debris hauled from land has been among several points of contention in the government's response to Hurricane Irma. The House committee didn't address land-debris removal on Monday.

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