

Stephanie Smith, State Hazard Mitigation Officer at Vermont Emergency Management.

I manage our Hazard Mitigation Program – with the goal of making Vermont safer and more resilient in the face of climate change and natural hazards.

The program includes planning and grants –

On the planning side, we update a State Hazard Mitigation Plan every five years and received approval for the 2023 Plan last November. The State Hazard Mitigation Plan assesses all natural hazards that Vermont is vulnerable to and proposes a mitigation strategy to improve resilience and reduce future risk which cuts across state government and includes stakeholders outside of state government.

On the funding side, I manage several FEMA-funded grant programs and a state grant program, the Flood Resilient Communities Fund.

I will focus on the funding we currently have available, which is through FEMA's Hazard Mitigation Grant Program.

We receive an allocation under this program when we have a federally declared disaster and the amount available varies depending on the scale of the disaster. This funding can be spent anywhere in the state on proactive future risk reduction, so it does not have to be tied to the disaster event.

For context, following Tropical Storm Irene, we had around \$34 million available in the Hazard Mitigation Grant Program.

We are waiting for final numbers, but I anticipate over \$75-90 million will be available in this program following the flooding in July. We released our notice of funding in February, which includes a June 21, 2024, deadline for a pre-application with full applications due in late 2024. The pre-application will help us to prioritize our technical assistance in developing full project applications. So far, we have 36 responses to the pre-application form which are under review with my team.

With this funding pot, we can do a variety of things, including property buyouts, project scoping activities to develop projects, floodplain restoration, infrastructure projects such as upsizing culverts/bridges or removing dams, residential property elevations and floodproofing of commercial or municipal buildings. We can also fund utility resilience projects to protect against ice, wind and snow events. So not just flooding, although that is the majority of what we have funded in the past.

FEMA funding requires a 25% local match. We have a one-time General Fund allocation which will allow us to cover the match for property buyouts specifically. We have currently obligated all existing match funding to buyouts that have already been submitted to FEMA. The Governor's budget included an additional \$12.5 million worth of match funds which will be necessary to ensure we can keep the buyout applications moving.

So far under this July flooding round, we have submitted just over \$10.5 million into FEMA review for buyouts and scoping applications under the Hazard Mitigation Grant Program. This represents 38 individual properties for buyouts as well as nine scoping assessments.

More specifically on property buyouts –

Since Tropical Storm Irene, our program has completed around 170 buyouts across funding programs. Property buyouts are voluntary for the property owner as well as the community, who generally ends up owning the parcel following the buyout and is required to maintain it as open space. The majority have been residential, but commercial properties are eligible as well and we have done a few of those.

We are able to do day-before-the-storm property values for properties that flooded during this event – so the purchase price will be based on appraisals as of July 9. Properties are not required to have been flooded in the past, so we can also do current market appraisals.

We have developed a new model for buyouts following this even which will allow VEM to act as sub-applicant on behalf of our communities if that is of interested – we would be able to have one contract to do all of the appraisals, one to do all of the legal work, demolition, etc. – with the town still ending up as the property owner – which significantly reduces the administrative burden on the town and will streamline implementation for buyouts.

More specifically on project scoping –

Directly following the flooding, VEM submitted a scoping application to FEMA that will allows us to work with some of the hardest hit communities to develop a list of potential projects that can lower flood elevations within their downtowns. This is a collaboration with DEC Rivers and ACCD and the RPCs. TRORC is currently procuring engineering support for this effort, with bids due tomorrow.

On the state funding side, we previously had state ARPA funding under the Flood Resilient Communities Fund program, which is focused on projects, including buyouts, that we're not able to do with FEMA funding – one of the main reasons properties are ineligible for FEMA funding is that they are outside of the FEMA-mapped Special Flood Hazard Area (SFHA), which maps inundation flooding risk, but they still have demonstrated flood risk, for example, by being within the ANR-mapped River Corridor and being vulnerable to erosion-based flooding.

We obligated the final \$3 million under this program in December out of the total \$20 million program, specifically to buyout projects that were impacted in July but not eligible for FEMA funding.

I will stop there and I'm happy to answer any questions.