

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 just received approval for the 2023 Plan in 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.

---

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 Flood Resilient Communities Fund today, but I would be happy to answer any questions related to the FEMA funding that I manage as well.

---

The purpose of this program is focused around reducing our flood risk – and creating an accessible program for our small communities that fills some of the gaps we see in available FEMA funding.

In FY22, we received an allocation from the Legislative to develop this program. We very quickly obligated the first \$5 million in the fall of 2022 and received an additional ARPA allocation in FY23 for \$15 million. We also received a general fund allocation to be used towards FEMA match since we were unable to use our State ARPA funding to match FEMA dollars.

The program was funded through ARPA, which required at the time that project eligibility align with the requirements under the Clean Water State Revolving Loan Fund, which required that we make a tie to water quality for all of the approved projects, with the focus being flood reduction.

---

Eligible projects under the program include buyouts as the top priority – those that are ineligible for FEMA funding, which includes vacant parcels. Natural resource projects are also eligible, which are generally floodplain restoration projects where we're removing fill to slow the river down and give it space during flood events. And we also allowed for project scoping to develop projects and planning activities.

---

As of December 2023, all of our available ARPA funding has been obligated to specific projects with a small amount retained in the event that project costs are higher than anticipated. Specifically with the property buyouts, we are seeing appraised values come in high given the current market.

This map shows the distribution of where we have obligated funding across the State.

---

Here is a by the numbers of what we have obligated under the program – the main purpose of the program from the beginning was having a way to do property buyouts that were not FEMA eligible, so that has been the focus – with 35 individual properties and \$13.3 million total of the \$20 million going towards buyouts.

We have obligated 12 floodplain restoration projects – which, like the property buyouts, are opportunities to open up our floodplains to give the river space and slow it down during a flooding event. A few of these projects were paired with buyouts, so we can purchase the property and also lower flood elevations in surrounding neighborhoods.

We also awarded one large community flood reduction infrastructure project in Whitingham and several scoping assessments to develop future projects, that we should be able to submit for implementation under our current FEMA funding following the July flood.

---

I would like to spend just a couple of minutes on how we got to this program and the need it has been filling –

---

One of the biggest challenges we have in funding projects with FEMA dollars is that flooding in Vermont looks different than it does in a lot of the country. FEMA is very focused on inundation flooding, which is water coming up and spilling out onto its floodplain, like the picture on the left – while the most significant flood risk we have in Vermont is erosion based, which is caused by water flowing quickly down mountains and cutting around corners, eroding away the bank, as shown in the picture on the right.

---

The Special Flood Hazard Area is the FEMA map which shows inundation flooding – that is the map that is used for flood insurance purposes. While the River Corridor is mapped by ANR to show the meander belt of the river, which is the space where the rivers wants to move within overtime and where we see the greatest potential the potential for erosion-based flooding.

---

What we saw following Tropical Storm Irene was a lot of houses like this – that were higher than the river, but the bank eroded underneath – and with only a one-time failure of a property that is outside of FEMA’s Special Flood Hazard Area, we were not able to do property buyouts with FEMA funding.

Following Irene, the main source of funding we had to do these buyouts was the Community Development Block Grant Disaster Recovery program.

---

And we have continued to have the same challenges following the following in July.

Directly following the July flood, we set up an intake form for property owners that may be interested in buyouts and we have about 300 responses to that form. My team and I have been meeting with

communities over the last several months to have initial conversations regarding the process and to develop applications. The first thing we're able to do once someone fills out the form is to determine whether the buyout would be eligible for FEMA funding or not.

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 for properties with demonstrated flood risk.

Property buyouts are voluntary for both the property owner as well as the municipality, who generally ends up owning the property following the buyout.

Under FRCF, there are buyouts that were just approved following the July flood in Hardwick, Marshfield, Middlebury, Wolcott, Cambridge, Plymouth, Morristown, and Montpelier. This was the final \$5 million worth of FRCF funding obligated and 16 individual properties.

We currently have applications under development for around \$4.5 million worth of buyouts of properties that were impacted in July, in the event that future funding is available. These were all in process prior to our final obligations in December.

Under FRCF, we're looking at a potential gap of around \$20 million worth of property buyouts based on the intake form and our initial assessment of what will not be FEMA-eligible. We are expecting to see some attrition from this list, but I also anticipate that we will see increased interest as we continue work with specific communities and see buyouts going forward.

---

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