The Honorable George W. Bush
The President
The White House
Washington, D.C.

Through: Mr. Kenneth O. Burris
Regional Director
FEMA Region IV

Dear Mr. President:

Under the provisions of Section 401 of the Robert T. Stafford Disaster Relief and Emergency Assistance Act, 42 U.S.C. § 5121 et seq. (the Stafford Act), as implemented by 44 CFR § 206.36, I request that you declare a major disaster for Individual Assistance for Palm Beach County, and Hazard Mitigation for the entire State of Florida due to a persistent weather pattern, which most recently resulted in the occurrence of severe weather, including tornadoes, on August 7, 2003 in South Florida.

A persistent weather pattern affecting the eastern half of the nation during the spring and summer months of 2003 has resulted in several severe weather episodes over the Florida peninsula. In each case of these weather episodes, a strong trough of low pressure located in the mid and upper levels of the atmosphere promoted a fetch of southwesterly winds moving across the peninsula. This pattern of strong southwesterly winds aloft in association with a strong upper level atmospheric trough is typical during the spring months, but is atypical during the summer months. This tremendously moist wind flow originating across the Gulf of Mexico has brought periodic flooding events along the Gulf Coast of Florida. In two cases, the strong southwesterly winds aloft have intersected with the sea breeze circulation located along the Southeast Atlantic coast of the state to produce damaging tornadoes. The abnormal upper level trough strengthened over the southeastern United States during the first week in August and resulted in yet another severe weather event in the Florida peninsula.

The strengthening trough produced thunderstorms on the afternoon of Thursday, August 7, 2003 that moved into south Florida and developed a tornado near Riviera Beach in northeastern Palm Beach County. Thunderstorms that developed in association with the southwesterly winds aloft over the Gulf of Mexico during the late morning hours were driven northeastward onto Florida’s southwest coast by early that afternoon. The thunderstorms produced cool air outflow boundaries that moved towards the Atlantic coast of southeast Florida. These outflow boundaries created thunderstorms that merged with the sea breeze circulation to produce the necessary wind shear for tornado development during a brief time period. A damaging tornado in southeast Florida during the summer months is a rare event and
can be attributed to the unusual and persistent weather pattern that developed these severe thunderstorms.

A severe thunderstorm warning was issued for Palm Beach County as these weather variables merged within thunderstorms along the Atlantic coast. The tornado suddenly developed at 5:13 PM and moved southeastward across a highly populated region in northeastern Palm Beach County for nearly a half an hour. Normally, Palm Beach County observes two to three tornadoes per year, and these rarely cause extensive damage.

This weather pattern has affected the state since spring, and has produced several severe weather events across the peninsula. The first event produced a damaging tornado in northeast metropolitan Miami-Dade County on March 27, 2003. This tornado was created via wind shear produced by a similar upper level trough of low pressure residing across the Florida peninsula. Strong southwesterly winds aloft, which often produce severe weather episodes during the spring in the Florida peninsula, developed in late March. This pattern produced severe thunderstorms that spawned the deadly tornado.

The weather pattern again developed a tremendously moist and unstable channel of upper level southwesterly winds across South Florida on May 28, 2003 to produce extensive flooding. Fort Lauderdale was most impacted during this event, as over ten inches of rainfall fell during a nine-hour time span. Urban flooding resulted in numerous damage reports throughout Broward and southeastern Palm Beach counties, resulting in a Small Business Administration Disaster Declaration for Broward and the contiguous counties, including Palm Beach County.

The upper level trough again strengthened southwesterly winds aloft over the Florida peninsula during mid and late June. Ten to twenty inches of rainfall occurred over west central and southwest Florida. A persistent episode of moist winds occurred during the period from June 13-23, 2003. Extensive urban and river flooding developed as heavy rainfall poured over the region during this unusually persistent weather pattern. The latest strengthening of the persistent trough has again produced flooding across west central and southwestern sections of Florida concurrent with the tornadic activity in Palm Beach County.

Well over 200 homes were impacted as a result of this weather event. Hardest hit were Riviera Beach, Palm Beach Gardens, and additional nearby areas of unincorporated Palm Beach County, some of the most economically depressed communities in the county. The tornadoes caused widespread human impacts, with over 28 injuries reported. These injuries, as well as memories of past disasters, have intensified the degree of trauma that these communities are experiencing. Further, these communities are comprised of special populations, with high numbers of low-income, elderly and unemployed residents, many of whom are renters, creating a greater and particularly urgent need for assistance.
This event caused over 10,000 homes and businesses to lose power. A gas leak forced the evacuation of the Garden Walk mobile home community, which also incurred numerous, serious structural losses. In response to the damages and the gas leak, two shelters were opened. Both the Salvation Army and the American Red Cross have active canteens in the impacted area, and are serving over 1,100 meals a day in these communities. This event also created large-scale debris, which the county is still in the process of clearing.

Damage assessment teams from Palm Beach County and the State of Florida conducted a detailed assessment of all the impacted infrastructure, homes, and businesses in the disaster area on August 8, 2003. On August 9, 2003, an official joint Preliminary Damage Assessment (PDA) was initiated by representatives from the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), the Small Business Administration, the State Emergency Response Team, and local emergency management officials. On August 10, 2003 the State requested a revisit of several severely impacted areas with the FEMA assessors because of unresolved discrepancies in the PDA figures.

The PDA identified 236 homes that were impacted by the high winds and heavy rains associated with the severe weather. Subsequent rainfall has drenched the contents of many homes with minor structural damage, greatly increasing eligible losses. The City of Rivera Beach conducted a thorough review of damaged rental units on August 11, 2003, and identified 157 units with contents losses exceeding $656,000. Although these units had been reviewed during the initial damage assessment, there was not an estimate of content losses available at that time. Most of these victims do not have renters insurance, and have no source of assistance available to them to bring them back to pre-disaster conditions. Rainfall continues to exacerbate these property losses. Due to these ongoing impacts, it is expected that the official PDA figures will significantly underestimate storm related damages.

While ongoing losses are anticipated to be quite significant, the PDA identified at least 62 homes which have sustained major damage or were destroyed. The damage to homes and businesses is characterized by, but not limited to, damage to roof systems, windows and doors, as well as structural damage to walls and foundations. The damage housing stock, which predates the adoption of the Florida Building Code, includes large quantities of particle board construction and windows without shutters. These impacts are summarized in Attachment 1. Economic impacts in the affected area are also large and include major damage to a Pepsi Cola bottling plant, a COSTCO food wholesaler, and a number of additional small to medium sized businesses.

Another aggravating factor to consider in this event is the continuing, daily rainfall in this area. Damages to structures, although initially determined to be "minor", rapidly escalate to the level of "major" as interior contents are drenched, and the rapid onset of mold begins to occur. Toxic mold is a serious concern in Florida’s humid climate under normal conditions, but under these extraordinary conditions, toxic mold will become a serious health hazard preventing victims from reoccupying their dwellings.
As was very evident in our recent declaration for the Miami-Dade tornado (FEMA-1460-DR-FL), initial damage assessment figures are dwarfed by the number of applicants who are ultimately determined eligible. In the Miami-Dade Tornado, the initial federal and state assessments identified only 222 homes impacted, of which 117 were identified as having major damage or were destroyed, yet as of July 27, 2003, 2,483 individuals received Housing Assistance, and 5,745 received benefits under the Other Needs Assistance Program. Due to the high percentage of renters, and low to moderate income residents, it is often difficult to identify the full extent of the damages in a timely manner.

Under the authority of Chapter 252, Florida Statutes, Palm Beach County and the City of Riviera Beach declared local states of emergency on August 7, 2003. The State Emergency Operations Center was activated at a Level 2 on August 7 to support state and local response efforts, and remains activated. On August 8, I issued Executive Order 03-147 (Attachment 2) declaring a state of emergency because of the severe impacts of the Palm Beach County tornadoes, activating the State’s Comprehensive Emergency Management Plan.

Several volunteer agencies and groups have converged on the communities affected by the severe weather and resultant tornadoes to assist in recovery effort. They have been active in helping to clean up and make minor repairs to affected homes. Such activities, though welcomed, are not a permanent solution for the disaster victims. In many cases, they provide temporary relief from the elements, and keep residents out of long term shelters, allowing them to stay in their homes. These Voluntary Organizations Active in Disasters (VOADs), though responding to the best of their abilities to ongoing federally declared and non-declared events, are finding their resources rapidly exhausted.

Florida relies on an extensive and active VOAD network. Already this fiscal year, however, these organization have dedicated human and financial resources to a range of state level disasters including assistance to individuals affected by the extensive localized flooding that impacted some of the poorest regions of North Florida, the tornado that struck Miami on March 27, 2003, the flooding that occurred in Broward County on May 28, 2003, and the Southwest Florida flooding event, FEMA-1481-DR-FL, which remains open and continues to impact Floridians. These organizations have also been providing support to the numerous fishermen and related workers affected by the severe freeze. Further, several of these organizations dedicated resources to the families of servicemen on active duty in Operation Iraqi Freedom. Their commitment to these critical causes has depleted resources that might have otherwise been directed to help alleviate the suffering now evidenced in Palm Beach County. While it is clear that the State of Florida, Palm Beach County, and the state’s voluntary organizations have taken every measure to support the victims of the tornado, without the resources that a Presidential Disaster Declaration for Individual Assistance would make available, the extent of the losses in the affected area will impede disaster recovery efforts.
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I have determined that this incident is of such severity and magnitude that effective response is beyond the capabilities of the State and the affected local governments and that supplemental Federal assistance is necessary. With unprecedented revenue challenges and ongoing budget commitments, the state is unable to assist these local governments to the extent necessary in their recovery efforts. This request for a major Presidential Disaster Declaration for Individual Assistance is essential to help these impoverished communities recover from their uninsured losses and expedite their recovery from this devastating event.

I am specifically requesting the full compliment of Individual Assistance Programs, to include the Individuals and Households Program, Disaster Unemployment Assistance, Crisis Counseling, Disaster Legal Services and the Small Business Administration Disaster Loans Program for Palm Beach County, and the Hazard Mitigation Grant Program for the entire State of Florida. I intend to implement the Individuals and Households Program.

I certify that for this major disaster, the State and local governments will assume all applicable non-Federal share of costs required by the Stafford Act.

I have designated W. Craig Fugate as the State Coordinating Officer for this request. He will work with the Federal Emergency Management Agency in damage assessments and may provide further information or justification on my behalf. Due to the severity and magnitude of the event and the impact upon the affected communities, I request that a determination on this request for federal assistance be made as expeditiously as possible.

Sincerely,

[Signature]

Jeb Bush

JB/wcf

Attachments (2)