

Special Report

FEMA Director Brown paid millions to Florida residents unaffected by '04 hurricanes to help Bush win majority of votes there

By Jason Leopold

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September 11, 2005—Michael Brown, the embattled head of the Federal Emergency Management Agency, approved payments in excess of \$31 million in taxpayer money to thousands of Florida residents who were unaffected by Hurricane Frances and three other hurricanes last year in an effort to help President Bush win a majority of votes in that state during his reelection campaign, according to published reports.

“Some Homeland Security sources said FEMA's efforts to distribute funds quickly after Frances and three other hurricanes that hit the key political battleground state of Florida in a six-week period last fall were undertaken with a keen awareness of the looming presidential elections,” according to a May 19 Washington Post story.

Homeland Security sources told the Post that after the hurricanes that Brown “and his allies [recommended] him to succeed Tom Ridge as Homeland Security secretary because of their claim that he helped deliver Florida to President Bush by efficiently responding to the Florida hurricanes.”

The South Florida Sun-Sentinel uncovered emails from Florida Gov. Jeb Bush that confirmed those allegations and directly implicated Brown as playing politics at the expense of hurricane victims.

“As the second hurricane in less than a month bore down on Florida last fall, a federal [FEMA] consultant predicted a 'huge mess' that could reflect poorly on President Bush and suggested that his re-election staff be brought in to minimize any political liability, records show,” the Sentinel reported in a March 23 story.

“Two weeks later, a Florida official summarizing the hurricane response wrote that the Federal Emergency Management Agency was handing out housing assistance 'to everyone who needs it without asking for much information of any kind.'”

The records the Sentinel obtained were contained in hundreds of pages of Gov. Jeb Bush's storm-related e-mails the paper received from the governor's office under the threat of a lawsuit.

The explosive charges of mismanagement of disaster relief funds made against Brown and FEMA were confirmed earlier this year, following a four-month investigation by Richard Skinner, the Department of Homeland Security's inspector general. Skinner looked into media reports alleging that residents of Miami-Dade were receiving windfall payments from FEMA to cover losses from Hurricane Frances they never incurred.

Hurricane Frances hit Hutchinson Island, Florida, about 100 miles north of Dade County, on Sept. 5. Miami-Dade officials described damage there from heavy rain and winds of up to 45 mph as "minimal," according to the Post.

Indeed. A May 14 story in the [Sun-Sentinel](#) said: "Miami-Dade County residents collected Hurricane Frances aid for belongings they didn't own, temporary housing they never requested and cars worth far less than the government paid, according to a federal audit that questions millions in storm payouts.

Responding to those allegations, Brown held a news conference Jan. 11 blaming the overpayments on a "computer glitch" and said the disbursements were far less than the \$31 million that was cited in news reports and involved 3,500 people. Moreover, to silence his critics who said that Hurricane Frances barely touched down in Miami-Dade, Brown cited a report by the National Oceanic Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) to prove that there were legitimate hurricane conditions there and as a result that the bulk of the payments was legitimate.

But according to the Sun-Sentinel, NOAA had refuted the weather maps Brown claimed to have obtained from them. That report prompted Congressman Robert Wexler to send off a scathing letter to President Bush calling for Brown's resignation.

Bush rebuffed Wexler. However, the DHS' inspector general launched a probe to determine how widespread the problems were involving overpayments to Miami-Dade residents. In May, the inspector general released his [report](#). What he found was damning.

"The review found waste and poor controls in every level of the Federal Emergency Management Agency's assistance program and challenges the designation of Miami-Dade as a disaster area when the county did not incur any hurricane force winds, tornados or other adverse weather conditions that would cause widespread damage."

In identifying one of the overpayments, the inspector general's report said FEMA paid \$10 million to replace hundreds of household items even though only a bed was reported to be damaged.

"Millions of individuals and households became eligible to apply for [money], straining FEMA's limited inspection resources to verify damages and making the program more susceptible to potential fraud, waste and abuse," the report states.

Sen. Susan Collins, R-Maine, chairwoman of the Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs committee, said during a committee hearing in May that Brown "approved massive payouts to replace thousands of televisions, air conditioners, beds and other furniture, as well as a number of cars, without receipts, or proof of ownership or damage, and based solely on verbal statements by the residents, sometimes made in fleeting encounters at fast-food restaurants."

"It was a pay first, ask questions later approach," Collins said. "The inspector general's report identifies a number of significant control weaknesses that create a potential for widespread fraud, erroneous payments and wasteful practices."

But the most interesting charge against Brown is that he helped speed up payments in Florida and purposely bypassed FEMA's lengthy reviews process for distributing funds in order to help Bush secure votes in the state during last year's presidential election.

Bob Hunter, director of insurance for the Consumer Federation of America, who was a top federal flood insurance official in the 1970s and 1980s and a Texas insurance commissioner in the 1990s, told the Post "that in the vast majority of hurricanes, other than those in Florida in 2004, complaints are rife that FEMA has vastly underpaid hurricane victims. The Frances overpayments are questionable given the timing of the election and Florida's importance as a battleground state."

FEMA consultant Glenn Garcelon actions certainly lends credibility to questions raised by Hunter.

On Sept. 2, 2004, Garcelon, wrote a three-page memo titled "Hurricane Frances—Thoughts and Suggestions."

"The Republican National Convention was winding down, and President Bush had only a slight lead in the polls against Democrat John Kerry," the Sentinel reported in its March 23 story. "Winning Florida was key to the president's re-election. FEMA should pay careful attention to how it is portrayed by the public, Garcelon wrote in the memo, conveying "the team effort theme at every opportunity" alongside state and local officials, the insurance and construction industries, and relief agencies such as the Red Cross."

Gov. Bush received the memo Sept. 30, 2004, shortly before a swell of payments made its way to residents in Miami-Dade who did not sustain damage as a result of Hurricane Frances.

A couple of weeks before Gov. Bush received the memo from Garcelon, Orlando J. Cabrera, executive director of the Florida Housing Finance Corp. and a member of the governor's Hurricane Housing Work Group, said in a different memo to Gov. Bush that FEMA was allocating short-term rental assistance to "everyone who needs it, without asking for much information of any kind," the Sentinel reported.

In addition, "standard housing assistance," of up to \$25,600, Cabrera wrote, is "liberally provided without significant scrutiny of the request made during the initial months; scrutiny increases remarkably and the package is far more stringent after an unspecified time."

The DHS audit report found that, under Brown, FEMA erroneously distributed to Miami-Dade residents:

- \$8.2 million in rental assistance to 4,308 applicants in the county who "did not indicate a need for shelter" when they registered for help. In 60 cases reviewed by auditors, inspectors deemed homes unsafe without explanation, and applicants never moved out.
- \$720,403 to 228 people for belongings based on their word alone.
- \$192,592 for generators, air purifiers, wet/dry vacuum cleaners, chainsaws and other items without proof that they were needed to deal with the hurricane. Three applicants got generators for their homes, plus rental assistance from FEMA to live somewhere else.
- \$15,743 for three funerals without sufficient documentation that the deaths were due to the hurricane.
- \$46,464 to 64 residents for temporary housing even though they had homeowners insurance. FEMA funds cannot be used when costs are covered by insurance.
- \$17,424 in rental assistance to 24 people who reported that their homes were not damaged.
- \$97,500 for 15 automobiles with a "blue book" value of \$56,140. In general, the report states that FEMA approved claims for damaged vehicles without properly verifying that the losses were caused by the storm.

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Jason Leopold is the author of the explosive memoir, "News Junkie," to be released in the spring of 2006 by Process/Feral House Books. Visit Leopold's website at www.jasonleopold.com for updates.

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