

A formula to heap injury on injury

By Heber Taylor | Posted: Wednesday, September 23, 2009 12:00 am

The formula for the second round of federal funds to help communities hit by the storms of 2008 steers money all over Texas — but shortchanges the place where Hurricane Ike actually hit and did the most damage.

The formula is based on weather models rather than assessments of actual damage.

We agree with Gulf Coast Interfaith that the formula is off base. We hope officials with the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development should help the state's top officials correct the mistake.

If you take the formula seriously you have to believe the impossible. You have to believe that the 190921 houses in the Houston-Galveston Area Council of Governments area — the area hit directly by Hurricane Ike — sustained \$27175 of damage per house.

Meanwhile you have to assume that the 1361 houses that reported damage in the so-called Pool of 7 — the areas represented by seven councils of governments that were not hit by the storm — sustained an average of \$521387 of damage.

You also have to assume that the 10112 in the region of the Deep East Texas Council of Governments — which includes Lufkin and Nacogdoches — sustained an average of \$226096 damage.

If you don't believe that damage to the average house on the Bolivar Peninsula San Leon Galveston and other communities was so much lighter than damage to the average house in say Brookshire or Sealy you're going to have problems believing this formula.

State officials ordered the weather model formula after some folks complained they weren't getting their share of the money from distributions based on actual damage. The critics bashed the Federal Emergency Management Agency the whipping boy for half the world's problems. They claimed the figures compiled by that agency were just wrong.

Actually FEMA's estimates are in line with the estimates compiled by any other organization that put inspectors in the field to make estimates. For example if you look at Small Business Administration loans you'd conclude that 70 to 80 percent of the damage occurred in the Houston-Galveston region. The state's new weather model puts that figure at 59 percent.

Any formula that leads to absurd conclusions is wrong. Why would state leaders push a formula that's so obviously flawed?

Here's one theory: The formula was designed to spread money all over the place — not just toward the places hit by the storm — because in some circles political favors are more important than storm survivors.

It was designed to make it easier for cities and counties to use federal money for infrastructure projects they've had on the books for years rather than allowing most of the money to be spent on housing.

The proposed formula is a recipe for taking money away from people who are struggling to rebuild houses wrecked by a hurricane and for shifting that money to public-works projects that offer better political benefits to some state leaders.

If federal officials want federal relief money to get to storm victims they're going to have to step in.