

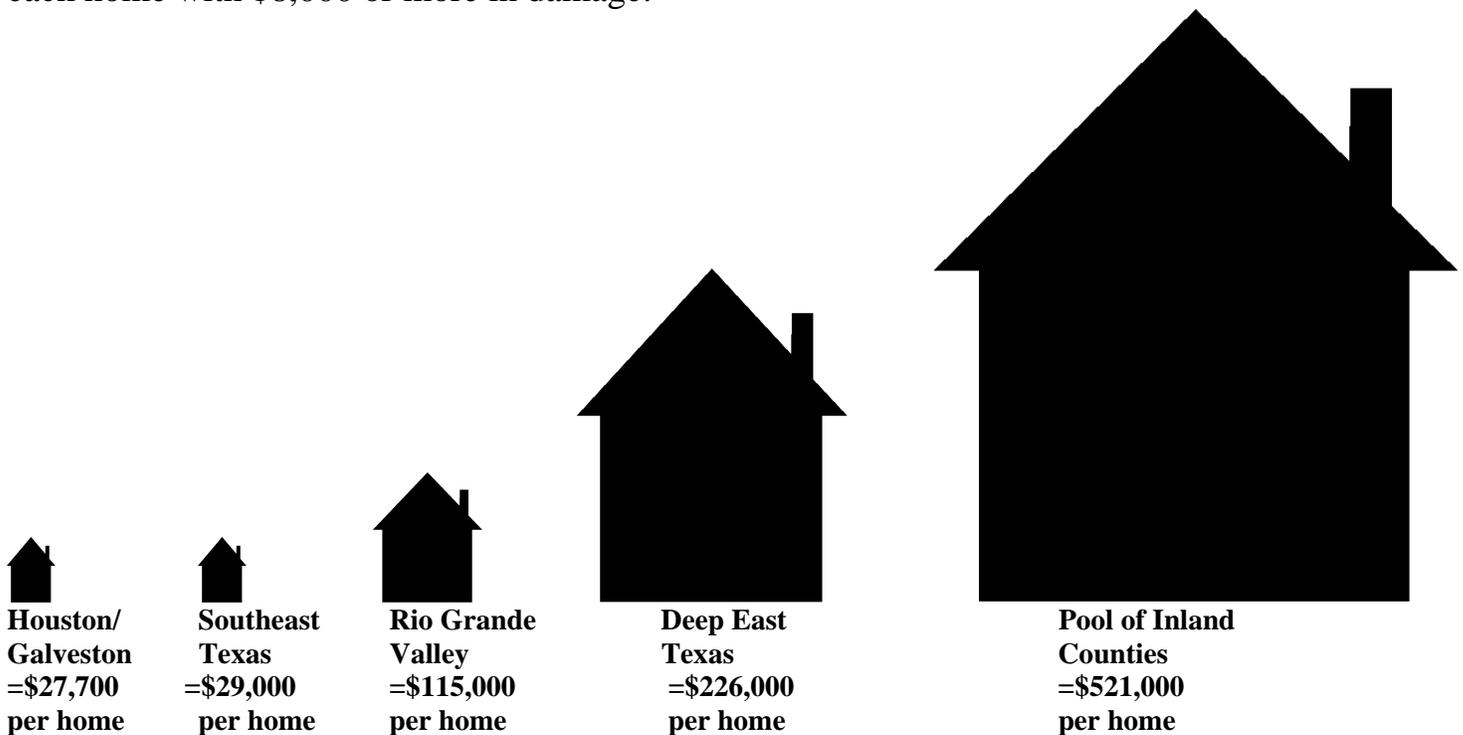
Gulf Coast Interfaith

Gulfcoastinterfaith.org 409-939-0045

The Texas Department of Rural Affairs (TDRA) wants to distribute \$2.7 Billion in federal disaster funds based on a model that generates “**estimated damages**” from wind, rain and storm surge and the number of Low and Moderate Income families. It ignores extensive data about “**actual damages**” maintained by FEMA, the Small Business Administration and other independent, reliable sources.

- The TDRA Weather Report Model says that Galveston County suffered only **6.74%** of the total damage from Ike and Dolly and that the Houston Galveston region suffered only **53.2%** of the total damages from Dolly and Ike.
- TDRA converts the “damage factors” into funding percentages so that Galveston County only deserves about \$210 Million and the Houston-Galveston Region only \$1.6 Billion of the of the CDBG funds. That is \$233 Million **less than** Galveston County was promised in February when the Houston-Galveston Council used “actual damages” to divide the first \$814 Million of these funds.
- Galveston County has 25% of all the households eligible for FEMA Housing assistance and 46% of the homes where FEMA found more than \$8,000 in damage. H-GAC has 77% of the households eligible for FEMA Housing Assistance and 75% of the homes with greater than \$8,000 in damage.
- TDRA under-funds the Houston-Galveston region by at least \$280 Million and over-funds the Deep East Texas region by about \$180 Million and the Pool of 30 Counties by about \$76 Million.

The entire Houston-Galveston region receives significantly less funding than some other regions for each home with \$8,000 or more in damage:



For more information about the TDRA funding model, go to GCInterfaith.org

Commentary: Is God good at politics?

By RICK CASEY HOUSTON CHRONICLE Sept. 6, 2009

It must have seemed like a good idea at the time: Let God decide how to distribute \$1.7 billion. Now in federal money to clean up Texas after Hurricanes Dolly and Ike. Rather than use federal data on the actual number of buildings, dams, roads and bridges damaged by last year's storms, let's base the local allocations on where God made the sea surge, the wind blow hard and the land flood from heavy rain. (*GCI note: funds distributed now \$2.7 billion*).

Measure the acts of God, not the damages to people. That's what ORCA did, perhaps thinking it would blunt accusations of politics in disaster relief distribution. Don't like the formula? Blame God. It didn't work.

ORCA in this case is not a whale. It's the state's Office of Rural Community Affairs, and it was tasked by Gov. Rick Perry with deciding how to divvy out the federal recovery funds for Ike and Dolly. Choosing an agency with "rural" in its title was, of course, a political decision. We shouldn't be surprised that it would come up with a plan that starts by treating population density as irrelevant. (*GCI note: ORCA was just renamed Texas Department of Rural Affairs*).

According to an analysis by Gulf Coast Interfaith, a respected Galveston community organization, ORCA's approach puts Ike's damage factor in Chambers County at higher than either Galveston or Harris counties. Yet Galveston County had 10 times more documented damaged homes than Chambers, and Harris County had 36 times more. The analysis indicated money available to homes with more than \$8,000 in damage would average \$27,111 in the Houston/Galveston area but \$237,047 in deep East Texas. Not surprisingly, the Harris County Commissioners Court unanimously opposed the plan recently.

Perry had a legitimate reason for what appears to be the strange choice of using a rural agency to distribute funds that come from Washington's Department of Housing and Urban Development. The state agency that normally deals with such funds, the Texas Department of Housing and Community Affairs, was excoriated two years ago for its handling of funds for Hurricane Rita. An audit found that more than two years after the hurricane, only 13 families had been helped of the more than 4,000 that applied. But just because one bureaucracy blew it doesn't make another bureaucracy the savior.

ORCA said it went to the God model because it didn't have good damage estimates for Hurricane Dolly, which hit the Rio Grande Valley a month before Ike hit Galveston and Houston, among others. Federal Emergency Management Agency workers had to leave the Valley to deal with Ike. But FEMA did a good job documenting damage from Ike, the far greater storm. So it makes no sense to ignore the data from Ike because of poor data from Dolly.

Because it makes no sense, political conspiracy theories abound. For example, while U.S. Sen. Kay Bailey Hutchison led the state delegation to secure a total of about \$3 billion in federal funds for Ike and Dolly, the governor, whom she is challenging in March's gubernatorial primary, is in charge of distributing it. The resulting plan looks much more like a "spread-the-wealth" plan than a plan based on actual damage. And Perry's base is stronger in rural East Texas than in the big cities and their suburbs.

The way the money is being distributed is also good for local politicians. It does not require them to follow federal guidelines on spending for housing, allowing them to fund more infrastructure projects.

Infrastructure projects generate more campaign contributions than hiring small firms to fix up the homes of poor folks, most of whom don't vote.

There's more, but I'm out of room. Suffice it to say the formula may be based on acts of God, but as always the devil is in the details. rick.casey@chron.com