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CONGRESSMAN KENDRICK B. MEEK

December 14, 2005

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Mr. Richard L. Skinner
Inspector General
Department of Homeland Security
245 Murray Dr., Bldg. 4120
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RE: Investigation into FEMA overpayments

Dear Inspector General Skinner:

I write to commend to your attention a disturbing article that appeared in the Sun-Sentinel that discusses FEMA overpayments in South Florida. I have attached a copy of this article for your information.

This article raises serious concerns about FEMA overpayments and mismanagement in the wake of Hurricane Wilma, and it is of great concern to me.

I ask that your office investigate these allegations to determine if these reported overpayments actually happened; whether this is a widespread problem, or merely isolated incidents; whether FEMA officials or contractors are responsible; and what actions are being taken to recoup any improperly distributed funds, prevent abuse and improve FEMA's operation and administration of this program.

I look forward to your response and thank you for your kind attention to this important matter.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Kendrick B. Meek".

KENDRICK B. MEEK
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Management,
Integration and Oversight
Committee on Homeland Security



<http://www.sun-sentinel.com/news/nationworld/bal-te.fema12dec12,0,7167792.story>

FEMA reimbursements questioned

Storm program aids higher-income Floridians the most

By Sally Kestin, Megan O'Matz And John Maines

December 12, 2005

FORT LAUDERDALE, Fla. -- A Hollywood surgeon received FEMA money for Hurricane Wilma for a generator.

A Plantation lawyer received \$274 more from the agency than he paid for his generator.

But a Fort Lauderdale teen with serious medical problems had to insert catheters by candlelight when the Oct. 24 storm knocked out power. His family couldn't afford a generator.

A FEMA program to reimburse applicants for generators and storm cleanup items has benefited middle- and upper-income Floridians the most and has cost taxpayers more than \$332 million for the past two hurricane seasons, the South Florida Sun-Sentinel found in a continuing investigation of disaster aid.

For Wilma alone, the Federal Emergency Management Agency had spent \$84 million as of Dec. 6 on generators for 101,028 people in 13 Florida counties, including Broward, Palm Beach and Miami-Dade. Another \$6 million paid for chain saws for 27,394 applicants.

"I see people making \$200,000 a year putting in for a rebate for a generator," Davie Fire Chief Don DiPetrillo said last month. "This is just not a good use of public resources."

By agreement with the state, which pays 25 percent of the cost, FEMA reimburses for generators, chain saws, dehumidifiers, air purifiers and wet/dry vacuums purchased for home use after a disaster.

For the four Florida hurricanes in 2004, the reimbursements amounted to \$242 million. Eighty percent of the money went to applicants in middle- and upper-income areas.

FEMA imposes no income restrictions.

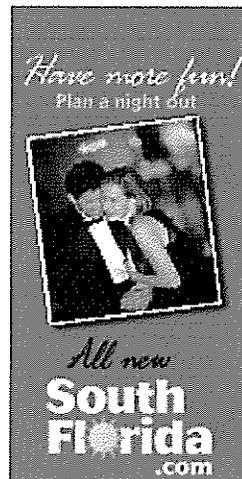
"You could make \$100,000 a year and still live paycheck to paycheck," said Randy Bartell, community assistance consultant with Florida's Division of Emergency Management.

FEMA leaves it up to states to choose what will be reimbursed in each disaster. States can elect to exclude certain items or limit eligibility.

Other states have imposed limits, but Florida's policy remains one of the most generous of the hurricane-vulnerable states.

"It's absolutely disgusting," said David Bronstein, an insurance fraud lawyer in Plantation.

Bronstein put in a claim for a generator he bought when his Davie home lost electricity from



Wilma. He said he "makes six figures" and could "certainly afford my own."

"My thought was, 'Well, if I'm eligible, I'll take it because I certainly pay enough in taxes,'" he said.

Bronstein was surprised that he qualified but even more surprised when his government check arrived for \$836, the maximum amount. He paid \$562, including tax.

"I profited from the hurricane," he said. "It's crazy."

When Wilma knocked out power to Debbie Springston's Fort Lauderdale home, she begged FEMA for a generator for her son, Marcus, 18, who was born with heart and kidney ailments.

"FEMA said, 'Go buy a generator' and they'll reimburse us for it, but we didn't have money," she said.

Springston does not work, and the hurricane left her construction worker husband unemployed.

Marcus uses catheters several times a day to remove bodily wastes. With no electricity, he performed the task using light from a battery-operated lamp and, when that failed, some small candles. "I could barely see," he said.

Dolores Morris of Hollywood, who suffers from lupus, pulmonary hypertension and diabetes, also lost power in Wilma. The 63-year-old part-time hospital computer programmer needs electricity to run a machine that feeds her oxygen. She also needs refrigeration for her insulin. Her husband, Robert, is a disabled utility worker.

When the couple told FEMA they couldn't afford a generator, a worker suggested she go to a hospital if she ran out of oxygen.

"I don't think FEMA is set up for the poor person," Dolores Morris said.

FEMA did not respond to requests for comment on the newspaper's findings.

Sally Kestin, Megan O'Matz and John Maines write for the South Florida Sun-Sentinel

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