

Washington (CNN) -- As rescuers raced Tuesday to free people trapped by floodwaters caused by Hurricane Irene, Washington politicians bickered over how to pay for it.

The same budget arguments that nearly brought the first government default in history earlier this month now raise questions about whether the Federal Emergency Management Agency will have enough money to deal with Irene's aftermath.

FEMA's Disaster Relief Fund has less than \$800 million remaining, and given the pace of operations in the wake of Irene, could run out before the end of the current fiscal year on September 30.

With conservative House Republicans calling for spending cuts to offset any increase in emergency funds -- a condition opposed by many Democrats -- the ability of Congress to act quickly on the issue remains uncertain.

"The notion that we would hold this up until Republicans can prompt another budget fight and figure out what they want to cut, what they want to offset in the budget, and to pit one section of the country against the other and to delay this and create this uncertainty, it's just the latest chapter and I think one of the most unsavory ones of our budget wars," said **Rep. David Price, D-North Carolina.**

Irene first made landfall on the U.S. mainland in North Carolina, devastating some coastal areas. Price said GOP efforts led by House Majority Leader Eric Cantor of neighboring Virginia to offset additional emergency funds amount to "an untenable position and one that simply is unresponsive and insensitive to the kind of situation we face."

Cantor's spokesman, however, noted that an appropriations bill already passed by the House and awaiting action in the Democratic-controlled Senate includes additional money to replenish the FEMA disaster fund.

"That funding was offset," said the spokesman, Brad Dayspring. "The Senate has thus far failed to act on that legislation."

While the appropriations bill is for fiscal year 2012, which begins October 1, the money could be used for disasters that occurred in fiscal 2011.

"People and families affected by these disasters will certainly get what they need from their federal government," Dayspring said. "The goal should be to find ways to pay for what is needed whenever possible. That is the responsible thing to do. "

States can request FEMA Disaster Relief Fund assistance once the president declares a federal disaster within their borders. Most of the Eastern and Northeast states hit by Irene already have that designation.

Federal officials say they don't yet know how much money will be needed for all the emergency operations associated with Irene. After a series of destructive tornadoes earlier this year, including one that leveled a large swath of Joplin, Missouri, FEMA announced Monday that it was not approving new long-term reconstruction projects in order to ensure it has enough money for immediate emergency funding needs.

"Historically, when the balance in our Disaster Relief Fund has been under the range of \$1 billion, we have employed this strategy," a FEMA statement said.

Rachel Racusen, a FEMA spokesperson, said in a statement that the revised funding strategy "prioritizes the immediate, urgent needs of survivors and states when preparing for or responding to a disaster."

"This strategy will not affect the availability of aid that any disaster survivors are receiving for recent disasters, such as tornadoes or flooding, or our response operations for Hurricane Irene or any event in the coming weeks or months," Racusen said.

Missouri legislators worried that FEMA was shifting priority from Joplin's recovery to focus on Irene because of the funding crunch.

"Recovery from hurricane damage on the East Coast must not come at the expense of Missouri's rebuilding efforts," Republican Sen. Roy Blunt said in a statement Monday. "If FEMA can't fulfill its promise to our state because we have other disasters, that's unacceptable, and we need to take a serious look at how our disaster response policies are funded and implemented."

To Price, the problem is the Republican demand for spending offsets, which he said ended up pitting regions against each other for needed emergency funding.

"I'm just very impatient and I think the American people are going to be impatient with any attempt to hold these funds hostage to political objectives," he said.

A Democratic Senate appropriations aide told CNN on condition of not being identified that the FEMA disaster fund was at \$772 million on Tuesday morning, and that it would be about a week before the agency can estimate the costs associated with Hurricane Irene.

The House appropriations bill for the Department of Homeland Security, which includes FEMA, will come up in the Senate Appropriations Committee on September 6, according to the Senate aide.

It doubled the original \$1.8 billion requested by President Barack Obama for fiscal 2012, adding \$850 million for emergency funding that was offset by cuts in other DHS programs including the Coast Guard, first responders and FEMA, the aide said.

In addition, House Appropriations Committee Chairman Robert Aderholt, R-Alabama, added another \$1 billion for the Disaster Relief Fund that was offset by cutting funds for a fuel-efficient vehicles program, according to the aide.

Democrats take issue with cuts to Homeland Security funding to offset additional emergency funding, the aide noted. In July, Sen. Mary Landrieu, D-Louisiana, who chairs the Homeland Security Appropriations subcommittee, criticized the House appropriations bill as "short-sighted."

Even the White House got involved in the fracas, with Press Secretary Jay Carney telling reporters Tuesday that he wished Cantor and other conservative Republicans had the same commitment to spending offsets "when they ran up unprecedented bills and never paid for them" during the administration of President George W. Bush.

That prompted a quick response from Cantor's office, which said: "The goal should be to find ways to pay for what is needed when possible. In the face of a \$14 trillion national debt, that is the responsible thing to do."