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Bush: It's a disaster

President orders federal funds be used to help cleanup in eight counties.

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President Bush declared eight counties, including Northampton, major disaster areas Friday evening and ordered federal aid for flood cleanup efforts.

The Federal Emergency Management Agency, for up to 72 hours, will fund all eligible state and local efforts for debris removal, damaged public property, loans for essential government functions and grants for public schools.

The news came as Gov. Ed Rendell and other lawmakers planned to fly over Easton this morning to survey Easton and other flood-ravaged communities. Rendell is still asking for federal aid in 26 other counties.

Rendell is expected to step off his helicopter in Wilson Borough and deliver remarks about his tour at noon at Philip F. Lauer Middle School.

U.S. Rep. Charlie Dent, R-Lehigh Valley, on Friday toured businesses hit hard by floodwaters. He plans to fly with Rendell and U.S. Sen. Rick Santorum, R-Pa., this morning.

"My sense of Easton is that the business owners especially were better prepared for the storm this time than they had been for the previous two (floods)," Dent said. "The damage was, of course, significant but their preparation helped mitigate some of those losses."

He recalled a relieved garage owner near Larry Holmes Drive who raised much of his belongings on hydraulic lifts used for vehicles. He noted that many people began pumping out water early in the flood.

Dent, Santorum and U.S. Sen. Arlen Specter, R-Pa., all sent letters to President Bush this week asking for federal help.

"Governor Rendell has determined an effective response to this disaster is beyond the state's capabilities and federal assistance is necessary," Dent wrote to Bush.

Dent, a member of the U.S. Homeland Security Committee, said he'll talk with FEMA officials after he continues surveying the damage.

On an unrelated note, Santorum and Specter announced Friday the U.S. Senate Appropriations Committee approved federal funding for several water projects, including \$175,000 to study measures to improve flood plain management and damage protection.

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