

Flood damage claimed at 140 homes; officials to tour Wednesday to assess FEMA eligibility

By Jennifer Sorentrve, Palm Beach Post Staff Writer, Wednesday, Jan. 15, 2014

State and Palm Beach County emergency managers today will tour homes flooded by last week's torrential storm in an effort to determine whether residents may be eligible for federal disaster money to help pay for the damage.

Assistant County Administrator Vince Bonvento, who oversees the county's emergency management division, said county staffers will take two state emergency operations officials on a tour of neighborhoods hit hardest by the unnamed storm, which dumped nearly 2 feet of rain over parts of south county between Thursday night and Friday morning.

Bonvento said the county has received unverified reports that as many as 140 homes were damaged by the rain and flood waters. It is unclear how many homes were flooded, as opposed to how many suffered roof or other storm-related damage, he added.

"It is pretty speculative right now," Bonvento said.

Under the Federal Emergency Management Agency's guidelines, only homes with significant flooding that damaged the structure's electrical systems may be eligible for aid, Bonvento said.

It's a difficult threshold, Bonvento said. "If you have 1 or 2 inches it is not what FEMA considers major," he said.

The county's tour will center on the Kings Point subdivision, south of Atlantic Avenue and west of Military Trail. Some residents reported knee-deep water in the homes at the height of the rain.

County emergency managers have been working with homeowners' associations in the area to determine where water may have entered homes.

Residents whose homes were flooded, but do not live in a community with an association, are asked to report the damage to the county's emergency operations center by calling 561-712-6400.

Bonvento said the tour is designed to determine whether flood damage meets the federal threshold for assistance. That bar varies depending on how many homes were impacted, he added.

"We are going to try real hard to document the flood," Bonvento said. "Hopefully, we will be successful."

County Commissioner Mary Lou Berger, who lives in the Kings Point community, praised emergency managers and rescue crews for their response to the storm.

In an email to county administrators, Berger said the flood water sent cars in the neighborhood floating into each other. Dumpsters and recycle bins were lifted and overturned, and streets were littered with debris.

Berger said her home also suffered damage. The rain caused a large section of waterlogged ceiling and insulation to fall to the floor near her entryway.

"I have never seen so much damage in such a short amount of time," Berger said. "We are hopeful that all agencies will be able to work with Kings Point to see what can be done to avoid flooding problems like this in the future."