

061108 Media Availability

[0:00] GOV: The process of damage assessment and application is moving very swiftly. Seventeen counties now submitted and were very hopeful of approvals beginning to flow soon. What this means is that in counties where we have such an approval we will be able to start accepting application for assistance and that on that score we have taken some action that is new in Indiana, maybe anywhere, I don't know, we have worked out cooperatively with FEMA to co-locate in state offices in each affected county a place where people can come with all their questions and to make multiple applications if they may qualify. We will have people trained to help them make that application if there is any part of it that confuses them. [Federal Emergency Management Agency] (FEMA) will also set up a number, something like 15 I believe, regional centers in more populated areas. There too we have offered to co-locate and house them in existing state space so we can get right down to work. So the process is within a short period of time we hope and believe that there will be federal approvals county by county. As soon as we have those we will move to open these offices and help people begin to get people's questions answered and their applications filed. The only other thing I have to tell you is that part of my confidence that the good coordination that we have had from the federal authorities will continue was a phone call I got on the town square of Hope that I got today at about noon from President Bush who was calling from Italy simply to inquire about how Hoosiers were getting through this and to ask me directly, as I ask local officials, is his level of government doing all it can to support us here and to cooperate with us, and I told him so far so good.

[2:19] Question: How soon from your past experience will the president give his approval?

[2:28] GOV: From past experience it might take a while, but we are moving more quickly than anything I think we've seen. I don't know the experience of other states lately, but the rain only quit falling 36 hours ago and in much of Indiana we still have as a first priority the protection of life in property in many places where we still have real hazard. So to be very close to the first approval and just days from accepting the first application I think if it's not a land speed record, it's probably close.

[3:05] Question: Have 17 of the counties done everything that they need to do?

[3:12] GOV: Well, we'll hand you out the list, but it starts with the tornado-affected areas. As you might imagine, their event was a few days earlier, or their principle event.

[3:26] Question: Have folks been getting sort of monetary estimate on the damage assessment yet, or is that still coming through?

[3:32] GOV: Well, not to my knowledge. Someone who has been in one place, and not in multiple, as I may have, may have a clearer idea. I'll just tell you anecdotally. As I have moved around, the macro estimate we heard yesterday is probably going to be on the low side.

[3:53] Question: The situation in Daviess County sees to have gotten a little worse over night, and we wanted someone to tell us about that. It looks like we have, is it, two breaches in the levies there?

[4: 05] GOV: Yeah, I don't know about the first part of you question, but we were just discussing that. Joe, do you want to talk about?

[4:11] Homeland Security: Well, actually, the report around Elnora is approved. The water levels have been dropping and we're hoping to let the residents start coming back later. Maysville, which is a little further on down the river, had some topping of the levy, and we've taken precautionary actions and asked some of the folks to evacuate that area until we've really got a handle on the magnitude of what that water was going to do.

[4:40] Question: You said topping, but your office and the people down there say breach.

[4:46] Homeland Security: Well, you could use *breach*. It's semantics. What happens is the water does top the levy, then it erodes places in the levy, which causes a breach of various degrees. It's not a catastrophic failure of the levy.

[5:04] Question: Governor, do you have any specific addresses of where those offices are going to be located?

[5:12] GOV: No, and honestly, if I did, I wouldn't give them to you now, because I don't want anybody to misinterpret that they're open today. We have to have the approval, but this is going to be the fastest action, post approval, that probably anybody's done. We think we know where they're going to be. We're going to use existing facilities that we know are accessible. Our goal is accessibility and user friendliness-simplicity. We've got folks who have suffered really serious hardship here, and they're shook up, as anyone would be. And my assignment to these folks is, we've got to find a way to make it as easy for them and as comfortable for them to go through this process and answer their questions as we can. But, the minute we have approvals, we'll tell you the when and the where.

[6:03] Question: And in those seventeen counties, damage assessments have been completed, correct?

[6:07] GOV: They've been completed and turned in And there are several more that we have done.

[6:13] Question: Do you have the information on the number of homes?

[6:16] GOV: I don't know.

[6:18] Jane Jankowski: There are nine counties that have been completely turned in. There are 8 counties that the state has done and is still waiting their joint assessment, and once the joint assessment is done, these other 8 counties will be done too.

[6:33] GOV: Some of them will be finished yet today and a few tomorrow. You know, too, and by the way, a common point of easiness of understanding is this: one reason things are moving this quickly is there is a threshold level of damage which qualifies a subdivision, like a county. As soon as our people and FEMA can agree that we're over that threshold, they stop working that county and move on to the next one. So some folks in a couple places I was today were wondering where are these tabulators we've heard about. The answer is they've been and gone. Work's done here.

[7:14] Question: I guess I'm wondering if the settlements have been done, why can't we get some sort of information about the number of homes? I assume the assessments say number of buildings destroyed?

[7:23] GOV: We'll get you what we can. Once again, it won't be complete because it needn't be. Once you hit the threshold, you stop counting, so you can start applying yourself to the next county and the next county and get them done and qualified, we hope, as quickly as possible.

[7:40] Question: Can you just give what the definition of that threshold is?

[7:44] GOV: Somebody remind me of what it takes.

[7:46] Homeland Security: Our real threshold is 250 homes that have received major damage or destroyed in the event, which obviously we've exceeded, but FEMA wants to make sure that there's a substantial-again that's kind of a fuzzy term, but a substantial amount of damage in a particular area that would be able to qualify it.

[8:11] Homeland Security: The public assistance for infrastructure is a separate issue.

[8:14] Homeland Security: For individual assistance there is kind of a macro-threshold, as Joe refers to, but county by county there has to be some evidence of substantial damage for that county to qualify as well, so it is kind of an estimate of work as to what we think sufficiency is to be able to establish that county to be able to move on, so its not a defined answer per se but...

[8:39] Question: Is that 250 statewide or for an area or for a county?

[8:41] Homeland Security: Well, I think Joe was referring to statewide, but the issue is to have the substantiated damages appropriate for each county to be able to qualify, because the state has to qualify as do the counties, so we're taking what we think is an appropriate mark on the board and then...

[8:59] Question: Governor, could you speak to some of the environmental impact of what this flood has done. Not only do we have a lot of farmland and agriculture, we've got chemicals all over the place, and you start getting runoff.

[9:08] GOV: I'm going to refer you to Andy Miller about that. I just don't think we're far enough to know whether that's a factor or not, honestly. A lot of these fields had just barely been planted.

[9:18] Question: have you received any response to your letter to the U.S. Secretary of Agriculture concerning disaster relief for farms?

[9:29] GOV: Well, our secretary has been in touch with him on the phone, and they have made it plain they will be as helpful as they can be quickly. We assume we will get the same positive reaction we have thus far from FEMA.

[9:46] Question: The update says for the Owen County that the Graybrook Reservoir failed. What does that mean?

[9:53] GOV: Well I just came from there. We have been up in some areas where you just would not believe the damage. Now there aren't very many people living there, but the damage is incredibly severe and they've got some terrible damage to roads that people need. A couple of private dams—built fifty years ago they tell me—didn't hold. There was also some incredibly violent damage done just by a lot of water running down a hill in a hurry. We're very lucky we didn't lose some people. I stood just a couple of hours ago at the edge of a road that's now about a 50-foot chasm. That was simply from water running down a hill toward a creek at the bottom. As we've seen elsewhere, there are some of these private dams that were built in a different era, and they didn't stand up to a 100-year event.

[11:03] Question: With all these levees over-topping or breaching, does the state need to look at strengthening them? Is that the state's responsibility?

[11:21] GOV: It is in some cases. Of course we will look at that. I think I reported to you yesterday that after the '05 flood, the levee at Hazleton was substantially strengthened and there were some engineering improvements. So they feel like it can take a harder hit now than it could then. And I'm sure there will be lessons learned like that. All of these, even the old ones, were built with an eye to history and what kind of event was likely. But this one was not likely, or even particularly thinkable. Thinking back to that gentleman I met on the streets of Worthington yesterday who said, "Forget 1913, around here it was 1875" the last time they'd seen this much water.

[12:05] Question: Are the areas you were most concerned with yesterday still the ones you're most concerned with today?

[12:15] Other: Yes.

[12:17] Question: I wanted to go back to the approval question from earlier: Do you know exactly when individual assistance will happen? Especially in Bartholomew County?

[12:35] GOV: Well it could be in a couple of days, which I will point out to you is one week from when this started. Now I don't what the world record is for speed, but if it happens in the next few days, we probably set it. So I think people's questions, and I was in Bartholomew County today, their questions are quite natural and appropriate and human, but let's also remember again that the rain just stopped falling 36 hours ago, and so the people here and all of those working with them, I think, are doing a tremendous job and as fast probably as is humanly possible. And I think that's going to apply to this relief aspect, too.

[13:15] Questions: Some scientists at Purdue are saying that this is attributed to El Nina and it could be like this all summer.

[13:30] GOV: I don't know. Somebody handed me something from the National Weather Service yesterday predicting a long period of high pressure in the Midwest, so I guess in this one case I'm hoping they're smarter than Purdue!

[13:39] Question: Any projection you're seeing of the overall negative impact on the Indiana agricultural economy?

[13:53] GOV: It's such an important question but I wouldn't hazard to guess now. I met with Andy last night, that was my last meeting, and it's just too darn soon. Again, I've checked with my seed expert, who happens to be my military expert too, General Lumbarger, they've conceded that corn can take a day or a little more underwater if there's not too much damage to the root system and so forth. So we're just not going to know for a little how many people are going to be able to continue with the crop they've put in, how many people are going to have time and be able to reap plants, and what kind of yields that will get, and how many people are just washed away for the year and will have to fall back on crop insurance or something like that. It is a very large question. As we said yesterday, a very positive thing going on economically in Indiana the last couple of years is our agricultural sector has really been growing and bringing a lot of dollars into places that need it. And we're headed for a really good year in agriculture this year, but now this problem—at least in places—is going to set us back. I just can't quantify it for you yet.

[15:10] Question: Have you talked to the governors of Iowa or Wisconsin?

[15:14] GOV: I honestly have not. I've talked to a lot of county commissioners and sheriffs, but no governors.

[15:26] Question: As you've gone around the state and asked everybody if there's something that hasn't been done, has anyone answered you and told you there's something that's still not being done?

[15:33] GOV: Yeah. There's been no pattern, I will say that. I've not had the same as I probe for anything we could possibly do better. It's never been the same in any two places. And there

haven't been too many. I found a place today where the communication system we had built was inadequate to the job. And I found a place where one of the agencies might have responded more quickly on one request for a certain facility. And I have been reporting those back to Director Wainscot. But they have been very isolated and very few. The pattern really has been tremendous mutual respect and affection between the local responders and the state folks who have come to their assistance. That's encouraging.

[16:25] Question: Do you know the number of National Guard still called up for this?

[16:30] GOV: 1200. That's about the number still. Couple three hundred state police have been deployed on top, the last I heard. No more Marines. I told a few of those Marines, "After you visit Indiana, Iraq will seem like a vacation! I mean, this is where it's dangerous!"

[16:54] Question: Have you received any information on nursing homes needed to be evacuated?

[17:00] GOV: Yeah, I've run across a couple of those. I don't know, does anyone have a number? We know of four. God bless the people who did that. Imagine how difficult that evacuation was in many cases. I was at the site of at least one of those.

[17:17] Question: Can you confirm any information on the Columbus Regional Hospital? There's rumor that it won't be able to reopen at all.

[17:25] GOV: No. I saw several people from the hospital. I saw some today in Moscow and I saw a couple in Hope. It's going to be out of commission for a while, but I think we need that facility and we'll get it back in shape.

Mitch Roob: I was there yesterday, and I talked to a CEO who said they are trying to expedite things. They are going to try and get the ER open first and then other services. Their flood was very serious in the basement. It was pretty massive. But they're working hard it.