



**NRCS EMERGENCY WATERSHED PROTECTION PROGRAM FOR DISASTER-RELATED MARINE DEBRIS REMOVAL**  
**MONROE COUNTY'S EXPERIENCE, NEEDS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

**BACKGROUND**

In 2017, Monroe County suffered through Hurricane Irma, causing canals throughout the Florida Keys to fill with debris and sediment, along with extensive damage to public and private property. Toxic chemicals clogged once-navigable waterways and damaged significant ecosystems, including portions of the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary.

Through the Department of Agriculture's Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) Emergency Watershed Protection (EWP) Program, Monroe County was able to partner with the federal government to use \$49.2 million for the cleanup of marine debris and sediment from waterways in the aftermath of Hurricane Irma, which we matched with \$10 million of local funding.



While the NRCS EWP program proved to be a critical resource for the County, unfortunately it only partially solved the canal debris and sediment challenges of the Keys. Of the 422 canals submitted to NRCS for marine debris removal, 175 or 41.5 percent were not approved. Meanwhile, of 34 canals that were submitted for sediment removal, 21 or 67.7 percent were not approved. To summarize:

NRCS EWP Program	Marine Debris Removal	Percent	Sediment Removal	Percent
Rejected Canals	175	41.5%	21	67.7%
Approved Canals	247	58.5%	11	32.3%
Total Canals Submitted by Monroe County	422	100	34	100

**CHALLENGES WITH NRCS EWP**

With respect to the NRCS EWP program, the County had to go through an arduous and expensive process to even secure the funding it ultimately did for a partial cleanup of marine debris. The process for NRCS to approve or reject individual canals took too long if the intent is to protect an area from future storm damage and flooding. Even though Irma occurred in September 2017, NRCS was still approving 76 canals for debris removal in July 2019, almost two years later.

To secure approval, the County had to conduct side sonar scanning to calculate exact volumetric analyses and significant flood capacity modeling, all of which were time and resource intensive requirements.

The EWP program has also seemingly become a flood avoidance program, essentially to avoid future flooding from other storms; there is little to no consideration given to environmental concerns. Ultimately, the EWP program only approved Monroe County canals for cleanup if hydrologic conditions were impacted by debris, thereby ignoring the environmental degradation of the debris remaining in the canals – of which there is still too much.



**CHALLENGES WITH POST-STORM MARINE DEBRIS REMOVAL**

Despite the federal government's clear recognition that marine debris after a storm is a serious problem that deserves federal attention and support, none of the programs in existence appropriately deal with debris under water. For example:



- Funding to Coast Guard programs is meant to respond to derelict vessels.
- FEMA's funding can remove marine debris, but their criteria is limited only to navigational hazards, meaning that they will only address limited depths and will not remove all the debris present.
- NOAA funding can address marine debris, but they have limited funding and focus on environmental hazards. We do not believe any NOAA marine debris money was spent in the Keys after Irma.

FEMA will pay to remove all land-based debris that sits above the water line. Yet, in coastal communities throughout the country, whose waterways are as important as roads or other public infrastructure, there is not a similar program that is all-encompassing and thorough for marine debris.

***This inequity must be addressed by Congress, either by appropriately refocusing and adjusting the NRCS EWP program or by developing a new program to comprehensively address marine debris.***

## GENERAL RECOMMENDATIONS FOR NRSC EWP

Should Congress decide to improve the NRCS EWP program to more effectively respond to future disasters, the program should emphasize the protection of natural resources and place less emphasis on future flooding threats, particularly in sensitive marine environments like the Florida Keys.

Specifically:

- The program should allow for natural based factors such as environmental impacts to play a role in the eligibility process for the selection of projects.
- The program should implement a standardized approach for calculating hydraulic capacity impacts for canals and the associated information required to provide for justification.
- It should also increase the technical assistance percentage of reimbursement to 10% - 15% to account for industry standard for construction administration and inspections.

## MONROE COUNTY'S NEED FOR RULE CHANGE

Hurricane Irma left in its wake 100,000 cubic yards of construction and vegetative debris in Monroe County's canals. This posed significant threats to the health and safety, water quality, unique and fragile natural resources.

**In order to be prepared and positioned for federal assistance in future disasters, Monroe County seeks to clarify and confirm its qualifications as a sponsor pursuant to 7 CFR 624, ensuring its ability to receive funding to aid in future emergency and disaster response.**

This can be accomplished by amending program rules (the relevant rule governing the EWP, 7 CFR 624).

The following are recommendations:

- Amend one or more of the enabling authorities to clarify County eligibility for program funds.
- Recommend NRCS to publish a new final rule that removes any question as to the whether the County qualifies for EWP funds for waterway debris removal in a disaster relief scenario.
- Recommend NRCS to revise the Program Guidelines for the EWP to prioritize National Marine Sanctuaries for funding and to include a definition for "watershed" that describes Monroe County, as there is no existing definition within EWP program rules or guidance for the term "watershed." (This alternative does have uncertainty because Program Guidelines are non-bonding as described herein.)



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