

OPINION

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Another FEMA fiasco

It would almost be funny if it weren't so infuriating. Last week, the Federal Emergency Management Agency — FEMA, that pillar of vision and efficiency — ruled that it will not reimburse Tillamook County for the rapid and heroic efforts its leaders went to after last November's flood, when they rebuilt a critical levee on the Wilson River just one day ahead of a storm that surely would have flooded North Tillamook yet again.

The county had asked FEMA to reimburse 75 percent of the cost.

The answer was no. Why? Because FEMA officials believe the county did not prove it had a "legal responsibility" to do the work.

This ludicrous decision begs the question: If it is not the responsibility of our leaders to act swiftly to do whatever it takes to protect us in times of crisis, just what, pray tell, IS their responsibility?

It would seem that FEMA officials believe that all arms of government should act ... or more correctly, fail to act ... just like them.

But after all, FEMA's middle name is "emergency" — it's in the disaster business. So, if local government officials everywhere went around preventing disasters like that, all those fellas might be out of work!

Heaven forbid.

No. Shame on us. Our leaders decided to put their necks on the line, do the work and hope like the devil that FEMA would see the wisdom and foresight of their actions and help out.

They thought maybe the guys at FEMA would agree it's way more cost effective to spend \$87,000 on a levee now than to spend hundreds of thousands later to clean up the mess.

Of course, our county officials did one other unforgivable thing, too. They acted swiftly. Eeek! Isn't there a law against that somewhere? Where were the committees? Where were the studies? Where were the stacks of paperwork? Where was — a moment of silence, please — the red tape?

What were our guys thinking? No, thank God, FEMA saved us from ourselves and failed to reward such reckless behavior.

It's a shame our guys didn't take their cues from FEMA's playbook. The one it used after Hurricane Katrina. Then we might have gotten some cash. After all, in the wake of Katrina, FEMA doled out \$1.4 billion in bogus victim assistance. It gave money to prison inmates who used a New Orleans cemetery as their home address. It paid for hotel rooms in California and Hawaii. It sent ice needed in Louisiana to Maine. It issued

debit cards that were used to pay for a Caribbean vacation, season tickets to New Orleans Saints games, adult erotica products, Dom Perignon champagne and even the services of a divorce lawyer.

After all that, maybe it thought our levee was just one more scam.

Well, the county is appealing the decision and County Commissioner Mark Labhart said he is still hopeful FEMA will come through and reimburse the 75 percent the county requested.

"We believe we still will get FEMA cost-sharing money for the levee," he said. "We did it in the public's interest."

We hope you are right, Commissioner. And we hope FEMA officials can overcome all their instincts and grasp the concept.

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COMMISSIONER MARK LABHART-
Tillamook County Commissioner
