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## State, feds expected to help in covering the costs

**By Jennifer Vigil**  
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Early tallies show that local governments spent more than \$80 million fighting the October wildfires, but they are counting on federal and state agencies to reimburse them for most of the costs.

The overwhelming majority of the bills are from the city of San Diego and the county, and most of the estimates are preliminary. Officials continue to track the costs of putting out the fires, which destroyed more than 1,700 homes, but they also are still adding up the expenses of aiding victims and cleaning up.

The county estimates it has spent up to \$46 million on the fires, but some aid already is flowing in. The state has committed to covering \$21 million of the county's costs for clearing debris.

San Diego estimates its costs at \$31.2 million. So far, the city has received \$3 million in state aid for debris removal.

Despite the sizable expenses, San Diego Mayor Jerry Sanders and other local officials say residents will not have to endure cutbacks, because fire costs either were covered in existing department budgets or reserve accounts. They also expect to receive federal and state money – eventually.

“Once they say, 'You've got it,' you get it,” Sanders said. “But it can take years to get it.”

The bills go far beyond firefighting and other emergency services, such as police and sheriff's patrols. About 20 percent of San Diego's costs stem from the immediate response to the fires.

Expenses can range from operating victim assistance centers to preventing erosion on charred hillsides, said Dorothy Thrush, a county finance director.

Some cities said they may seek reimbursement for using public facilities to shelter and feed victims and firefighters, or even for lost productivity because some government offices closed during the crisis.

Eugene Ruzzini, manager of San Diego's disaster recovery program, called the cost estimates “very rough” projections that could change drastically as local agencies spend months hashing out claims with federal and state officials.

“That's what you have to do for every disaster,” Ruzzini said. “Sometimes there's little gray areas. We try to be all-inclusive.”

Dozens of cities and rural districts spent far less than San Diego and the county, but also will be eligible for reimbursement. In addition, mutual-aid agreements prompted cities not directly affected by the fires to send firefighters and other personnel to help battle the blazes. Those costs could qualify for payments from the state and the federal government as well.

The expenses range from the \$2 million spent in Poway, where the Witch Creek fire destroyed 92 homes, to Santee's \$2,800 in costs, mostly to run a generator at City Hall.

Other city estimates of fire costs include \$842,450 for Escondido, \$430,000 for Chula Vista, \$251,500 for Vista, \$130,000 for El Cajon, \$50,000 to \$60,000 for Del Mar and \$36,850 for National City.

Some cities – including La Mesa, Lemon Grove and San Marcos – have yet to prepare their numbers.

Local officials met Nov. 15 with representatives of the Federal Emergency Management Agency and the state Office of Emergency Services to launch the long process that allows public and private groups to try to recoup money spent in a crisis.

Hundreds of officials from 58 local agencies attended the Mission Valley meeting. Aside from the cities and county, other agencies represented there included the San Diego Unified School District and several small districts – from areas such as Alpine, Julian, Lakeside and Ramona – that oversee local fire and utility operations.

It will take months or even years for them to be fully reimbursed for their 2007 fire costs. Most are eligible to have about 95 percent of their expenses repaid; 75 percent of that would come from FEMA.

The aid comes from the Public Assistance Grant Program, which, unlike better-known programs for homeowners and other victims, offers funds to states, local governments and nonprofit agencies that incur expenses while contending with disasters.

Since 1998, the federal government has paid out an average of \$2.6 billion a year under the program to stricken areas.

A deadline Friday for beginning the reimbursement process was extended to December. Once an agency has taken that first step, officials meet individually with federal and state liaisons to assess claims, which eventually will be broken down for a project-by-project examination.

The agencies have 60 days to submit detailed requests, but some jumped in quickly. Ruzzini turned in San Diego's paperwork before the initial aid meeting. Poway has a one-on-one meeting Tuesday.

None of the governments seeking payouts can predict when the money will arrive. Agencies from San Diego to Poway still are awaiting the final settlement of their claims from the region's October 2003 fires.

“Everything's not finished from the Cedar fire,” said Annette Gonzalez, a senior financial analyst in Poway. “I still have the box on my desk.”

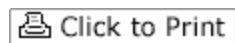
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