

FEMA Approves Aid For TX Fertilizer Plant Blast

Will Weissert, Associated Press

AUSTIN, Texas (AP) — The Federal Emergency Management Agency reversed its [previous decision](#) [1] and approved additional funding Friday to help rebuild the small Texas town where an April fertilizer plant [explosion](#) [2] leveled homes, damaged buildings and killed 15 people.

President Barack Obama issued a "major disaster declaration" for the community of West, just north of Waco, freeing up federal support to supplement state and local reconstruction efforts that are already underway.

Even before the decision, FEMA had provided millions of dollars in aid to West and its residents, but in June denied Texas' original application for major disaster funding, preventing the town from accessing widespread assistance money typically available to victims of tornadoes, hurricanes and other natural disasters.

In its original letter to the state, FEMA said the explosion was "not of the severity and magnitude that warrants a major disaster declaration." That ruling affected both public assistance aid — which provides funding to the city to rebuild — and further individual aid, which provides crisis counseling and other services.

Gov. Rick Perry had vowed to appeal the decision and released a statement Friday calling the reversal "great and welcome news for the people of West." He also thanked the state's congressional delegation for "standing with the people whose lives have been forever impacted to move this appeal forward."

Reached by cellphone, West Mayor Tommy Muska joked: "I think I just missed a call from the White House."

"It's going to throw open the door to federal funding," Muska said, later adding, "I know that they didn't make the right decision, but I'm glad they changed that decision."

A fire at the West Fertilizer Co. the evening of April 17 triggered an explosion that smashed homes, business and municipal buildings and emitted waves of energy so fierce it registered as a small earthquake and left a 93-foot crater. Fifteen people — 10 of them first-responders rushing to fight the initial blaze — were killed and about 200 others injured.

The close-knit farming community was thrust into the national spotlight, and Obama even traveled to Waco to attend a memorial service for the West victims.

The cause of the fire remains unclear, and a criminal investigation is still open. But investigators say the heat of the blaze destabilized tons of ammonium nitrate, a potentially explosive fertilizer, being stored at the plant. The incident highlighted

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how loosely regulated storage of potentially dangerous chemicals are statewide, and critics say the state government needs to tighten its oversight of such plants.

West Independent School District Superintendent Marty Crawford's voice cracked as he talked Friday about FEMA's aid reversal.

"It's already a little emotional right here. I don't know if I'm in shape to talk to you," he said. "We've been living this for three months and it's been pretty major."

Parts of three schools were damaged in the blast, and hundreds of older students had to be bused to a Waco-area school district for the last weeks of the most recent school year. Officials are working to level part of the damaged middle school and set up a temporary campus for all classes to resume in West later this month.

"Our main concern is getting kids back in school in West on August 26," Crawford said. "That's going to be a great day. It's going to be in temporary facilities, but either way."

He said the additional funding will allow officials to more quickly tackle construction of permanent school facilities, but added, "We're more worried about the next 24 days right now."

Crawford, who says he greets new residents to West by saying "welcome to the way things used to be," insisted he never lost faith that the federal government would come through — eventually.

"You can call me an eternal optimist," he said, "but I've always had faith that this little piece of Americana was going to be taken care of."

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