

TCPalm: Mahoney, Hastings ask FEMA to rethink disaster housing options

By Jason Kane

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WASHINGTON - Thousands of Floridians could be forced to live in formaldehyde-infested trailers if a major hurricane strikes this year, two area congressmen said in a letter to the Federal Emergency Management Agency on Friday.

Reps. Tim Mahoney, D-Palm Beach Gardens, and Alcee L. Hastings, D-Miramar, requested the agency develop a more viable option for disaster victims forced from their homes.

Last year, news of formaldehyde in emergency trailers led FEMA to stop using the shelters and to promise to test them for chemicals and other hazards. But this year - without explanation - the agency put the travel trailers back on the agenda, without "properly testing for traces of formaldehyde," the congressmen said.

"We are gravely concerned that (the trailers) provide an option that is, and has already proven to be, infeasible," they wrote in a letter to FEMA Administrator David Paulison.

The law says FEMA cannot use mobile homes in floodways or coastal areas considered "high hazard" unless they meet specific criteria. Shipping the displaced to hotels, rental homes and mobile homes in past years has proven ineffective because of a lack of undamaged and vacant buildings after a hurricane. In 2004 and 2005, tens of thousands of families ended up living for extended periods in the travel trailers.

Both congressmen sent FEMA a letter expressing similar concerns in September of last year but did not receive a response.

"The major concern that we've got is that if a major hurricane strikes, we're not going to have any options, and people have the potential to be living on the streets or living in a trailer that could be potentially damaging to their health. Those are two extremely bad options," said David Goldenberg, chief of staff for Hastings.

Noting this year is predicted to be an "active" hurricane season, the letter also requested the agency quickly release details of its research into innovative forms of interim housing for use in flood plains.

FEMA spokeswoman Debbie Wing said the agency plans to review the letter and "respond to them directly."

She added FEMA does have a solid disaster housing plan in place for this hurricane season. According to the agency's Web site, FEMA has been working with the Centers for Disease Control to develop testing for formaldehyde and to evaluate the results in comparison with the levels present in most homes.