

Feds release flood-project funds

By [Nancy Perkins](#)

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ST. GEORGE — Nearly six months to the day after raging flood waters gobbled up homes, parks and roads in Washington County, the federal government on Wednesday released \$63 million for flood protection projects.

"We've been waiting quite a while for this money," said Washington County Commissioner Alan Gardner, just after getting the good news through a phone call from the office of Sen. Bob Bennett, R-Utah. "We're just glad to get it."

The U.S. Department of Agriculture released Utah's share of \$104.5 million in Emergency Watershed Protection Program funding that is earmarked for local watershed protection projects in 15 states.

The funds were included in the emergency supplemental package that passed Congress last month and then signed into law by President Bush.

Gardner said the money would be used as soon as possible on Washington County watershed projects already identified by the Natural Resource Conservation Service and county officials.

"We've got a number of projects identified, and some of them have already been engineered," said Gardner, who said many of the projects are ready for the bidding process.

"We're hoping we get the money incrementally, since we'll have 30 days after we sign a project contract to complete the job."

Topping the project list is a plan to clear the silt and debris-clogged channel of the Santa Clara River near Gunlock, he said.

"We'll clear it all the way down to Gunlock Reservoir and put in some riprap," Gardner said.

Residents of the rural community were landlocked for a time when floodwaters tore out the town's two access roads and bridges. County crews have repaired the damages several times, and Gardner said a permanent fix is finally under way.

"I appreciate USDA's quick response to distribute this money to southern Utah," said Bennett, chairman of the Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on Agriculture that is responsible for USDA funding. "These funds are critical to the rebuilding effort under way in Washington County, and with ongoing weather concerns this will certainly help mitigate future flooding in the area."

Nearly \$10 million in NRCS funds were spent earlier on clearing portions of the Santa Clara River in the Green Valley area of St. George. Tons of rock and material were used to riprap vulnerable sections of the riverbank. Officials are now hoping to do the same with the Virgin River.

Damage estimates from January's floods vary, but most officials agree the public and private losses totaled nearly \$200 million. A private, nonprofit group continues to seek \$3 million in donations to help those who lost their homes.

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