

Lincoln County gets Major Disaster Declaration for damage caused by winter storms



Several hundred feet of the Logger Trail along Libby Creek were washed out in the December 2025 flood that struck south Lincoln County. (Scott Shindledecker/The Western News)

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The wait is over for Montana communities to receive funds to fix infrastructure affected by December's extreme weather, which caused flooding and severe wind damage.

President Donald Trump recently signed the requests for Major Disaster Declaration status that will free up money to help with cleanup and repair work, according to officials with the Federal Emergency Management Agency. The declaration is critical for localities because it comes with federal resources to rebuild infrastructure.

The Individual Assistance program, which provides money for individuals and households, was not requested and is not being implemented. The Hazard Mitigation program, which provides funding for mitigation measures to help prevent future disaster damage, is still under review at this time.

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South Lincoln County suffered from severe flooding during the end of the second week of December and was rocked by extreme wind the following week. In its wake were tens of millions of dollars in damage. Several bridges and roads were damaged or destroyed. A small diversion

dam on Flower Creek was also damaged, which at the time threatened the city.

After local, state and federal officials worked to determine damage estimates that were just under \$10 million, Gov. Greg Gianforte submitted a request to Trump in January to issue a presidential Major Disaster Declaration.

President Trump did previously approve an Emergency Declaration, under which federal resources can be provided to assist a state with their response and incident stabilization.

Under this Emergency Declaration, the President authorized Direct Federal Assistance that provided specialized U.S. Army Corp of Engineer assistance in addition to U.S. Army Corp of Engineer assistance that was provided under their own authorities.

Direct reimbursement of emergency protective measures or debris under the Emergency Declaration was not authorized.

The state did request Joint Preliminary Damage Assessments after the storm, and federal (FEMA) personnel did visit affected communities to help local and state officials assess and document damages as part of the process to request federal assistance.

Public Assistance federal funding is available to the state and eligible local governments and certain private nonprofit organizations on a cost-sharing basis for emergency work and the repair or replacement of facilities damaged by the severe storms and flooding in Lincoln County.

Lincoln County District 1 Commissioner Brent Teske said in email to The Western News that the funding will help pay for additional projects in the county that were otherwise infeasible.

"The declaration will allow Lincoln County to continue with infrastructure repair projects and disaster debris removal. Without the declaration the county was not going to be able to fund all the necessary projects," Teske said. "Roads and bridge route restoration has been our priority. We have been working on those projects through disaster reimbursement from the state. Without knowing whether or not we were going to be able to fund debris removal, and now with the declaration being signed, and knowing that we are eligible for FEMA reimbursement, we can begin assessing additional projects that will impact Lincoln County."

Libby City Administrator Sam Sikes is grateful for the disaster declaration.

"The estimated cost to return the water system to normal operations before the flood will be roughly \$2.8 million, including the coffer dam installation/removal and the repair/replacement of the northern wingwall of the diversion dam," Sikes said. "We were estimating needing \$1 to \$1.5 million of city funding if the declaration was not signed by the president of the United States and the city was in the process of working with the Montana Department of Emergency Services and USDA RD on funding options."

"The declaration being signed means that the city will retain the funding in the capital improvement and operating reserve funds for future projects and loan repayments," he added. "In other words, the city will not be taking the blow to our funds that would take years to rebuild because we are being made whole from the disaster by our fellow Americans, and for that, I am very thankful."

In addition, FEMA announced that federal disaster assistance is available to the state of Montana to supplement recovery efforts in the areas affected by a severe winter storm and straight-line winds Dec. 17-18. Edwin J. Martin has been named as the federal coordinating officer for federal

recovery operations in the affected areas, which includes Lincoln County. Additional designations may be made at a later date if requested by the state and warranted by the results of further assessments.