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Bush visits Florida to survey damage

LAKE WALES, Fla. (AP) — President Bush, touring hurricane-battered Florida on his way to Thursday night's presidential debate, pressed Congress on Wednesday to approve his latest request for emergency federal aid for storm victims, this time for more than \$7 billion. (Related video: [Bush surveys damage](#))



President Bush, center and his brother Florida Gov. Jeb Bush, left, look over an orange grove damaged by Hurricane Jeanne in Lake Wales, Fla.

Stephen Jaffe, AFP

"I know Florida's agricultural sector has been hit especially hard," Bush said after inspecting orange groves devastated by three of the last four hurricanes. His walking tour was in a fast-growing political swing area in the center of the state and came as the president made his way to Miami for the debate against Democratic presidential rival John Kerry.

"My administration will make sure citrus remains a strong part of this state's economy," said Bush, who has repeatedly inspected hurricane damage over the past month.

Bush surveyed a 4,000-acre farm owned by Marty and Pat McKenna, who have seen almost half their crop wiped out. Some of the fruit had been torn off the trees, leaving three layers of downed oranges that told a story: the darkest fruit on the ground, shriveled and black, had been left by Hurricane Charley, the first storm; yellow fruit was left by Frances, and green fruit stripped from the trees just days ago was from the most recent storm, Hurricane Jeanne.

GOP Rep. Adam Putnam, the area's congressman, said at least 40% of the state's citrus crop had been lost.

The president asked Congress late Monday for more than \$7.1 billion to help Florida and other Southeastern states recover from the storms. It was Bush's third request for supplemental storm aid.

Congress approved his first request for \$2 billion and is considering his second, for \$3.1 billion — bringing the total to more than \$12 billion.

"These are storms that have taken lives," Bush said, speaking from a presidential lectern that White House aides placed in front of the one downed tree that could be seen. "It's been a devastating period for the state of Florida. ... The people of Florida have met historic challenges."

On Thursday, before the debate, Bush was to visit hurricane-ravaged Stuart, Fla.

The hurricanes have all but halted campaigning in Florida, where the close 2000 election was decided in Bush's favor by 537 votes. But Bush, with the power of incumbency at his disposal, has visited after every storm — helping to distribute ice and water and patting the backs of residents whose homes and possessions have been damaged.

Bush aides have also taken care after each storm to note the federal resources being funneled to the state.

"It's all hurricanes all the time right now, and politics is sort of an afterthought," said Susan MacManus, a political scientist at the University of South Florida. "We're still at a suffering period — a lot of people still without power in big urban areas as well as rural areas."

Polls show a close race in Florida, but few people have confidence in the results with telephone outages and people living away from their damaged homes.

"Most political pundits won't dare to forecast the outcome of this state," MacManus said.

Florida Democratic Chairman Scott Maddox has accused Bush of traveling to Florida on taxpayer money so he can be seen in the important election state. The trip was Bush's 29th to Florida as president.

Asked whether there was any political motivation to the aid requests or the damage tours, White House press secretary Scott McClellan said Tuesday: "It's about helping them respond and recover from the damage of these storms."

Bush surveyed hurricane damage on Aug. 15 in southwestern Florida; on Sept. 8 in Port St. Lucie, Fla., and on Sept. 19 in the Florida Panhandle and Alabama. On Aug. 27, he received a briefing on Hurricane Charley in a Miami firehouse.

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