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Governor Wolf Requests Federal Disaster Aid for March Snowstorm

Harrisburg, PA – Governor Tom Wolf today sent a letter to the President, requesting federal disaster aid for Bradford, Lackawanna, Luzerne, Susquehanna, Wyoming, Northumberland, Pike, Wayne and Montour counties to help offset the financial burden of a record-breaking snowstorm that crippled much of the northeastern part of the state in March.

“This snow storm required the resources of all state and local snow removal capabilities, including state and local road crews and equipment, and countless hours of staff time to ensure the health, welfare and safety of the public and property. The closure and slowing of mass transit then caused a ripple effect in the lack of access to critical facilities,” Governor Wolf said. “The severity and magnitude of this storm stretched our commonwealth resources well beyond their limits, which is why supplemental federal assistance is now necessary.”

The major disaster declaration through the Federal Emergency Management Agency would provide federal funding to local, county and state governments, as well as certain eligible non-profits in those counties through the Public Assistance program. Applicants can be reimbursed up to 75% of the costs incurred on eligible expenses for the eligible 48-hour time period. Eligible expenses can include but is not limited to: costs associated with paying overtime, repairs to damaged infrastructure, equipment rentals and materials.

The overall total costs associated with this request, as validated by the Joint Preliminary Damage Assessment conducted by PEMA and FEMA, are \$7.2 million:

COUNTY	COSTS
Bradford County	\$540,823
Lackawanna County	\$2,022,195
Luzerne County	\$2,640,384
Montour County	\$114,796
Northumberland County	\$420,817
Pike County	\$360,559
Susquehanna County	\$328,926
Wayne County	\$470,254
Wyoming County	\$248,957
State Agencies	\$67,940
TOTAL	\$7,215,651

The governor signed a Proclamation of Disaster Emergency, which is a required step in order to request federal aid, for this storm on March 13.

MEDIA CONTACTS: J.J. Abbott, Governor's Office, 717.783.1116
Ruth A. Miller, PEMA, 717.651.2009

The full text of the letter is below:

Dear Mr. President:

Pursuant to the provisions of section 401 of the Robert T. Stafford Disaster Relief and Emergency Assistance Act, 42 U.S.C. § 5170 (Stafford Act), and implemented by 44 CFR § 206.36, I request that you declare a major disaster for the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania (the Commonwealth), as a result of Winter Storm Stella, a severe snow event, that impacted Pennsylvania during the period of March 13 through March 16, 2017. I have determined that the disaster is of such severity and magnitude that effective response is beyond the capabilities of the Commonwealth and that supplemental federal assistance is necessary. I am specifically requesting a major disaster declaration for a snowstorm, including all categories of work available under the Public Assistance program for the counties listed below. The Commonwealth is also requesting Hazard Mitigation, for the affected counties. The Commonwealth reserves the right to add additional counties to this request.

For this request, the following counties in Pennsylvania are core counties that have met record, or near record snowfall totals pursuant to the Federal Emergency Management Agency's (FEMA) Public Assistance Program and Policy Guide, Appendix H: Snow Assistance (FEMA Snow Policy) and have met the per capita threshold: Bradford, Lackawanna, Luzerne, Montour, Northumberland, Pike, Susquehanna and Wyoming.

The following county is contiguous to the above listed core counties that have met the required record snowfall totals pursuant to FEMA Snow Policy and the per capita threshold: Wayne.

I. STATE OF EMERGENCY

On March 13, 2017, I declared a disaster emergency throughout the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania due to the impending effects of the severe snow event. As part of this proclamation, I directed that appropriate response action be taken, and that the Commonwealth's emergency operations plan be executed.

The following counties within Pennsylvania also declared disaster emergencies: Berks, Carbon, Chester, Lackawanna, Lancaster, Luzerne, Perry, Schuylkill, Susquehanna and Wayne.

The snow event resulted in damages of approximately \$7,200,000, to date. This snowstorm produced heavy snowfall across the entire northeast corner of the Commonwealth, prompting the National Weather Service to issue blizzard warnings for much of eastern Pennsylvania. The storm consisted of high winds and strong gusts creating periods of near-blizzard conditions accompanied by very cold air and sub-zero wind chills. The storm was rated a Category 3, or Major storm, on the Northeast Snowfall Impact Scale (NESIS) scale. These severe weather conditions generated significant transportation issues including preemptive road closures, numerous accidents, disabled or stranded vehicles, which caused the closure of portions of the Commonwealth's major transportation corridors, including Interstates 81, 80, 84, 380, and portions of the Northeast extension of the Pennsylvania Turnpike. An avalanche closed a vital auxiliary route between 2 of the affected counties for the duration of the event. The conditions

generated significant life-safety issues requiring a variety of critical resource and support needs, such as: rescue and evacuation of stranded motorists; wrecker service with recovery staff; generators; transportation of emergency workers; and effective communications. Significant delays were also realized in truck service, mass transit, and some regional and international airports. Continued state assistance, support and monitoring were required as the snow event continued. The severity of the snow storm depleted financial resources for many of the municipalities located in the affected counties, including one already designated a financially distressed city pursuant to Pennsylvania's Municipalities Financial Recovery Act, Act of 1987, P.L. 246, No. 47.

II. RECORD OR NEAR RECORD SNOWFALL

Based on our analysis using historical weather snowfall records provided by National Centers for Environmental Information (NCEI), current snowfall data also provided by the NCEI, and the National Weather Service per FEMA Snow Policy, 8 core counties experienced record or near record snowfall for either one or two day periods, and one county met requirements to be considered a contiguous county. Nine counties met the snow threshold and have estimated public assistance costs, including snow assistance costs within a 48-hour period, that meet the county per capita cost threshold required for a major disaster declaration.

In addition to generating record or near-record levels of snowfall throughout significant portions of the Commonwealth, the storms negatively impacted road conditions, accessibility and mobility. These conditions provided major challenges to the public safety community in supporting basic and event-related emergency services as well as disaster response needs at the municipal and county levels. The conditions also created major public safety situations in many areas of the Commonwealth. It required the mobilization and deployment of a variety of local, state, volunteer and private resources to address emergency needs and public safety issues associated with the event. As previously stated, portions of the Commonwealth's major transportation corridors were closed for extended periods of time, placing additional demands on other segments of the system. Basic access along the Commonwealth's transportation system had to be maintained to ensure the capability of providing essential emergency services and resource support to the required areas.

Given the characteristics and associated impacts of this event, snow removal assets at the local and state levels were primarily dedicated to maintaining access to and along major roads and highways to the detriment of snow removal on secondary, residential, and municipal roads during the period of March 13, 2017 through March 16, 2017. Continued work was required to conduct snow removal operations on these secondary roads to ensure that basic emergency services could be provided during this event.

III. IMPACT ON THE COMMONWEALTH

The impact on the Commonwealth from this severe winter snowstorms can be examined from different perspectives, for example, human resources and infrastructure.

A. Human Resources

This snow storm required the resources of all state and local snow removal capabilities, including state and local road crews and equipment, and countless hours of staff time to ensure the health, welfare and safety of the public and property. The closure and slowing of mass transit caused a ripple effect in the lack of access to and staffing of critical facilities.

In addition, Voluntary Organizations Active in a Disaster (VOAD) provided resources and conducted activities in response to this disaster. For example:

- American Red Cross provided continuous Agency Representatives (AREPS) to the Commonwealth Response Coordination Center (CRCC for coordination of possible sheltering operations and other unmet needs.
- Pennsylvania VOAD executive committee maintained communications and interagency coordination between the CRCC and member organizations for delivery of emergency assistance.
- State, county and volunteer services provided hospitals with transportation assistance for patients and staff.
- VOAD members provided material and personnel support to Emergency Support Function 6 (Mass Care) and Emergency Support Function 8 (Public Health).

B. Infrastructure

The Commonwealth's infrastructure was also greatly impacted by the snow event. Local governments and public schools were closed for multiple days. The Wilkes-Barre/Scranton International Airport remained open, but had limited runway availability, restricted air operations, and suffered cancellation of many flights, which led to delays, loss of revenue, citizen confusion, and additional taxing of emergency management efforts at state and local levels.

Some state and regional bus services were cancelled or delayed and other mass transit systems, if not cancelled or delayed, ran significantly behind schedule. Authorized waivers were issued to facilitate transportation activities, and to mobilize employees. Pennsylvania counties used crews from local public works departments, which incurred additional costs and severely depleted local supplies of road treatment materials.

IV. STATE AND LOCAL RESPONSE TO THE DISASTER

The CRCC was activated on March 13, 2017. This activation included pre-positioning PEMA personnel in the three area offices located in the east, west and central portions of the Commonwealth. PEMA coordinated with the National Weather Service, local jurisdictions and state agencies on March 13, 2017, concerning the severe winter storm forecasts and potential impacts associated with the level of snowfall and high winds. The CRCC fully activated all Emergency Support Functions on March 14, 2017, and did the following: monitored the storm and interfaced with localities and state agencies projected to be impacted by the storm; disseminated the necessary public information and guidance to the public; responded to media inquiries; mobilized and pre-staged resources to effectively respond to local and regional requests for assistance; and responded to requests for assistance, as required.

The CRCC logistics section coordinated resource requests for unmet needs, conducted the procurement of assets and supplies; and supported CRCC operations with information technology services, communications, provision of meals, security and safety.

After response operation subsided, PEMA reviewed and evaluated Preliminary Damage Assessments received from affected localities and state agencies. Historical snow totals were provided by the National Centers for Environmental Information (NCEI). The event snow totals were compared with the NCEI historic snowfall record database. Damage costs were compared with per capita thresholds. All data that was consistent with the FEMA Snow Policy, and met per capita thresholds was provided to FEMA Region III for review, which served as a partial Joint Preliminary Damage Assessment.

The Pennsylvania Department of Transportation (PennDOT) conducted statewide snow removal operations for interstate highways and other roadways. District incident command centers were activated and roads were closed, including: Interstates 81, 80, 380, 84 from below Interstate 80 to the New York State line. During the storm, PennDOT monitored road conditions; reduced speeds on designated roads; coordinated the closure of designated roads; activated variable message signs (VMS) with emergency messages; and responded to accidents and emergencies.

A waiver of the federal motor carrier hours of service regulations was implemented by PennDOT for the period of March 15, 2017, through March 20, 2017. This waiver ensured that carriers delivering essential food, dairy products, pharmaceuticals to food distribution, retail and wholesale food establishments, as well as transportation and distribution of agricultural feed.

The Pennsylvania Turnpike Commission conducted statewide snow removal operations on the Pennsylvania Turnpike; assisted stranded motorists; and set up detours when accidents closed portions of the Turnpike.

Nine hundred and forty-five (945) Army National Guard personnel were activated to perform multiple statewide missions that included: transporting emergency medical personnel and patients; assisting with highway closures; transporting citizens to warming centers; transporting cots to shelters; transporting Pennsylvania State Police troopers to police incidents; supplying food, water and other necessities to stranded motorists. Over 25 Humvees, or other high profile vehicles were utilized in the response efforts. In addition, the National Guard, the Pennsylvania State Police and the Department of Transportation coordinated personnel to transport a critically ill child from East Stroudsburg to the Janet Weis Children's Hospital in Danville during the height of the storm. This trip was well over eighty miles one way.

The Pennsylvania Department of General Services monitored all Commonwealth owned facilities and equipment; researched Commonwealth equipment to determine if resource requests could be filled; advised on the need for Commonwealth Agency Office closures due to the severity of the weather; and provided for the utilization of any requisite emergency procurement and contracts. All Commonwealth Agency Offices in the central, northeast and southeast part of the state were closed on March 14. Commonwealth Agency Offices were again closed on March 15 in the northeast, and delayed in central and southeast Pennsylvania.

The Pennsylvania Department of Aging monitored emergency meals provided by the Area Agencies on Aging, and ensured contact was made with citizens to verify their condition and wellbeing.

The Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and Natural Resources utilized four-wheel drive vehicles to transport CRCC personnel to and from PEMA in central Pennsylvania, and assisted in snow removal activities in the most severely impacted counties in the Northeast corner of the state.

The Pennsylvania Department of Health monitored emergency medical response statewide to determine if allocation of emergency response equipment would be necessary and verified one fatality in Susquehanna County with the Pennsylvania State Coroners Association.

The Pennsylvania State Police responded to police incidents, assisted with highway closures, and established detours around closed roads. The Pennsylvania State Police also conduct life-safety checks to stranded motorists throughout the counties affected by the snow event.

The Pennsylvania Game Commission also assisted in snow removal activities in Luzerne County, utilizing available heavy equipment that was brought to the affected counties from other areas of the Commonwealth.

V. RECENT DISASTER HISTORY

Over the last twelve months, the Governor of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania has declared 2 proclamations of disaster emergency. In October of 2016, the Commonwealth experienced heavy rain and flooding that resulted in a Presidential Declaration of Major Disaster. Some of these areas are again directly impacted by this snow event totaling \$540,823 in damages.

During this event, the Commonwealth experienced severe winter storms and resulting effects to warrant a Governor's proclamation of disaster emergency. The March 2017 winter storm warranted the Commonwealth's supplementation of county and municipal efforts, and included direct assistance from the Commonwealth valued at approximately \$467,000.

VI. CURRENT DAMAGES - 2017 WINTER SNOWSTORM

Preliminary Damage Assessments (PDA) were conducted with local governments, authorities, counties and state agencies. These PDAs provided cost information to PEMA from the local governments, authorities, counties, state agencies and eligible private, non-profit entities. The information contained in the PDA included, but was not limited to equipment costs, force account labor costs, material costs, and other information that is consistent with the FEMA Snow Policy.

Finally, I have designated Mr. Jeffrey Thomas (Mr. Thomas) as the State Coordinating Officer for this request. Mr. Thomas will work with FEMA to provide further information as needed on my behalf.

Sincerely,

TOM WOLF
Governor