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FEMA Doubles Estimate of Lost Meals to 13 Million

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The Federal Emergency Management Agency yesterday more than doubled its estimate of the number of prepared meals lost during the 2006 hurricane season because of storage problems to 13.4 million, up from the 6 million it reported earlier.

The lost food consisted of civilian box lunches, said FEMA press secretary Aaron Walker, not versions of the military's Meals Ready to Eat, as officials had said.

The revised figures bring the estimated loss to taxpayers to \$70 million for food that was bought in anticipation of a severe hurricane season but went unused when no major storms made landfall. The Washington Post reported on the waste yesterday.

FEMA donated most of the food to America's Second Harvest, a U.S. hunger-relief group, which reported sending about 90 percent of it to shelters and food banks and throwing away the rest. FEMA itself discarded another 400,000 spoiled meals, or \$2.2 million worth, officials said.

Reforms to FEMA logistics operations led to erroneous information being provided to its deputy director, Coast Guard Vice Adm. Harvey Johnson, Walker said.

"In the process of standing up the new logistics directorate, some of the information was mishandled and inappropriately directed to FEMA leadership," Walker said. He said FEMA in 2006 should not have referred generically to food stocks as MREs.

Six months after the food was donated, FEMA officials provided new details in an effort to explain how much had been lost and why. Logistics director Eric Smith and Ron Cooper, chief of FEMA's response support section, said FEMA stockpiled 18.4 million meals in 2006 – enough to feed 1 million people for about a week – in response to forecasts of at least 13 named hurricanes.

FEMA had been condemned for not moving emergency supplies of food, water and ice quickly enough to victims of Hurricane Katrina in 2005.

Most of the meals were commercial products with a shelf life of six to 12 months. FEMA ordered the food because, after hurricanes Katrina and Rita, and the October 2005 landfall by Hurricane Wilma in Florida, Pentagon planners concluded the military could not spare more MREs.

Realizing the food would expire after the 2006 hurricane season, FEMA donated it last fall, Smith said. Although FEMA officials earlier said up to 279 truckloads of MREs spoiled because they were stored outdoors last summer on the Gulf Coast – where interior temperatures of trailers exceeded 120 degrees – Smith and Cooper said the food was in the form of less durable box lunches, not MREs.

FEMA is stockpiling about 12 million MREs worth \$70 million this year, relying on Pentagon managers and cold-storage depots for about one-fourth of them, Smith said.

“We don't have the rated facilities, management structure or the know-how to make sure that the meals and products that we buy are adequately managed . . . [to later] meet approved standards for consumption,” Smith said.