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Louisiana buys \$13M in generators for Gustav

by The Associated Press

BATON ROUGE - In the days after Hurricane Gustav struck, Louisiana shelled out more than \$13 million to buy large commercial power generators, then loaned them out to help restart grocery stores, gas stations and pharmacies in communities struggling without electricity.

Now, as regular electric power is restored in much of Louisiana, authorities are getting ready to retrieve all those generators — but questions remain about how the costs will be covered and what the state will do next with the generators it bought.

"The state has an asset. Now, what we need to do is have a public discussion about what is the best way to employ that," said Natural Resources Secretary Scott Angelle, who was charged by Gov. Bobby Jindal with leading the generator purchasing effort.

The state bought more than 300 generators since Gustav struck last week, and Jindal said at least 250 of those had been trucked to 21 parishes across south and central Louisiana to power ice plants, supermarkets, fueling stations and drug stores. The governor called the generators a critical way for communities to become more self-sufficient until power was fully restored.

"I cannot tell you what a difference that makes in terms of people's spirits and recovery," Jindal said.

The purchase marked the first time Louisiana has provided state-owned generators to private businesses after a storm, and state officials said they didn't know of any similar programs in other Gulf Coast states.

Generators were sent to parish emergency centers, and local leaders determined which stores and gas stations got them. The business owners who received the generators had to operate and fuel them, and parish leaders are responsible for collecting the generators and returning them to the state after power is restored, Angelle said.

Power came up in some communities more quickly than initial worst-case estimates, and Angelle said he ended up canceling some of the purchase orders for generators and now is looking at what to do with generators the state will collect after businesses return them.

Angelle thinks the state should keep some generators for the next storm.

"Should the state of Louisiana have a bank of generators available for those essential service providers? Obviously, I think it's critical that we do," he said.

But Angelle said that conversation will need to involve state lawmakers and local leaders as well.

Another ongoing conversation centers on just who will pay for the generators. The money initially came from the Department of Natural Resources, but Angelle said he can't float the cost long term and will need somebody to reimburse his agency.

One possibility involves a \$30 million pool of hazard mitigation dollars earmarked to the state after hurricanes Katrina and Rita. The dollars are supposed to be used to prepare the state for future storms, and state officials already were asking for federal permission to buy generators for the state emergency preparedness office and parish emergency offices. Angelle said Louisiana will try to use those dollars to reimburse the generator purchases for Gustav. •