WASHINGTON — While billions of dollars of losses mount from an extraordinary year of natural disasters, the federal relief fund designed to help stricken communities has dwindled to $307 million as of Friday.

Reimbursements to help Florida and other states recover from past disasters — and prepare for future hurricanes, floods and tornadoes — have been put on hold while Congress grapples with how to replenish the aid fund overseen by the Federal Emergency Management Agency.

State and federal officials say they can still meet emergency needs. But a partisan clash over spending threatens to delay additional funds and raises concerns — amid hurricane season — about the nation's ability to respond when disasters strike again.

"Given that there is likely to be more hurricanes and tornadoes or even earthquakes in parts of the country, the fact that the fund is running low has implications for the people who are facing these natural disasters," said Alka Sapat, an expert on disaster management and recovery at Florida Atlantic University.

"I'm sure FEMA will be prepared, and Florida is also prepared. But it ends up being crisis spending, putting out fires rather than planning in advance for potential disaster, which is what the fund is intended to do."

The Democratic-controlled Senate last week overcame Republican filibusters and passed a bill to add nearly $7 billion to the disaster-relief fund. But the Republican-run House plans to push through a bill this week that would provide about half that amount — $3.7 billion — and require that at least part of it be carved from elsewhere in the budget to avoid adding to the national debt.

The immediate result is an interruption in the flow of aid to reimburse recovery costs from past disasters.

Florida officials will have to wait for federal reimbursements to pay for some of the cleanup work after a batch of hurricanes that swept through the state in 2004 and 2005.

That includes $1.68 million — already delayed — for work in the wake of hurricanes Charley, Frances, Ivan, Jeanne, Dennis and Katrina in 2004-05. An additional $11.28 million for restoration work is in the pipeline and could be delayed.
Reimbursements of $4.25 million could also be delayed for disasters since 2005: Hurricane Gustav, severe storms, flooding and tornadoes.

Examples of recovery work include restoring a stormwater-drainage system in Miami-Dade County that was flooded; repairing the roof of a municipal building in Palm Beach County that was damaged by Hurricane Wilma; repairing two bridges in Glades County struck by Tropical Storm Fay; and fixing a local-government building in Brevard County that was shaken by Hurricane Jeanne.

Federal spending on this kind of work has been put on hold to preserve what's left in the FEMA fund to aid states stricken by more-recent disasters — flooding caused by Hurricane Irene; wildfires in Texas that have burned 2,000 homes — and to meet future emergencies.

"There are some [recovery] projects out there that may get slowed down because of this," said William Booher, external-affairs director for the Florida Division of Emergency Management. But he said state officials remain confident they will get reimbursed and can obtain the resources needed to respond to future emergencies.

Local officials say they're keeping an eye on the confrontation in Congress.

"The concern I have would be for emergency funds to individuals," said Dave Freeman, emergency manager for Orange County. "We can't provide that. It has to come from FEMA. Certainly, we can provide shelter, assist with ice and water and clear the roads."

Some local officials fret about depleted federal resources, especially during hurricane season.

"With the relief fund being so low, there may be a chance funding will not be available for the different types of individual assistance and public assistance provided by FEMA," said Miguel Ascarrunz, assistant director of emergency management in Broward County. "We will still respond with the resources we have, if there were to be a major event."

Major disasters this year have come at a record pace, with 10 so far that caused more than $1 billion of damages, the largest number since compilations began in 1980. The disasters — flooding in the Midwest, wildfires in Texas, tornadoes in much of the country, devastating rains, storms and a hurricane — have caused more than $35 billion in losses, much of them uninsured, according to the National Weather Service.

President Barack Obama has declared emergencies this year in 48 states.

Members of Congress agree they must put more money into the relief fund but remain split about how to pay for it.

Democrats call it emergency spending and accuse Republicans of blocking desperately needed funds.
"I guess we sit back while we see more and more severe-weather emergencies," Sen. Barbara Boxer, D-Calif., bitterly told her colleagues. Citing a recent poll finding a 13 percent public-approval rating of Congress, she added: "If we can't do these [disaster and other] bills, we don't deserve to be 13 percent popular."

Republicans say the money should be "paid for" by taking an equivalent amount from other spending.

"Do it in a way that we don't charge future generations because of our fiscal irresponsibility," urged Sen. Richard Burr, R-N.C.

Florida members in recent years — notably former U.S. Rep. Ron Klein, D-Boca Raton — have pushed for creation of a national insurance fund that would pool resources and lure private investment to cushion the financial blow of megadisasters and try to ease the cost of homeowner insurance.

Klein's legislation died in the past session of Congress, and the idea has languished amid the partisan gridlock of this session. In the absence of a long-range plan, Congress must focus instead on shoring up the government's relief fund before the next disaster strikes.