

Alexander introduces hurricane relief bill

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Advocate Washington Bureau

U.S. Rep. Rodney Alexander introduced stand-alone legislation Tuesday that would dedicate close to \$7 billion to fund Gulf Coast hurricane recovery.

The action by the Quitman Republican came one week after President Bush vetoed a \$124 billion emergency war supplemental bill that contained \$6.9 billion for the Gulf Coast.

Bush opposed the war-funding measure because congressional Democrats had installed timetables to withdraw troops from Iraq next year.

Louisiana Republicans such as Alexander, who sits on the powerful House Appropriations Committee, were criticized by Democrats for voting against the supplemental.

So Alexander on Tuesday submitted an emergency supplemental worth \$6.9 billion that equals the amount that had been designated for the Gulf Coast in the war emergency bill.

"The Democrats sent out a press release saying that I turned my back on

the state of Louisiana," Alexander said. "We ought to separate the issues and that's what I'm doing."

The Bush administration and congressional Democrats have been negotiating a new supplemental bill that could appear as early as today. Even if Alexander's bill were to be approved in the House and the Senate, it would still face a hurdle with Bush.

The president has issued a statement opposing a bill provision that waives a 10 percent state match to all federal aid to Louisiana. Louisiana estimates the cost between \$800 million and \$1.8 billion.

The president also opposes \$1.3 billion added to the bill for levee bolstering. Bush proposed shifting \$1.3 billion from the east bank of New Orleans to the west bank, which is considered more vulnerable and where project costs have risen.

U.S. Rep. Charles "Charlie" Melancon, D-Napoleonville, said Tuesday he will support the Alexander bill but questioned whether it would be signed into law by Bush. Melancon said supple-

mental bill negotiators are considering breaking the legislation into war and non-war bills.

The Gulf Coast legislation would have to be contained in an emergency supplemental bill or face Democrat pay-as-you-go rules that require legislators to find money in the federal budget to compensate for their measures.

"If Gulf Coast recovery isn't in a supplemental, we have a problem," Melancon said.

U.S. Rep. Bobby Jindal, R-Kenner, has been calling for a separate Gulf Coast emergency bill from the outset and said Tuesday he would support Alexander's legislation.

After recently questioning Gov. Kathleen Blanco over the projected \$3 billion shortfall in the state's troubled Road Home rebuilding program, Jindal was criticized by Blanco for voting against the war supplemental.

"We need to support the needs of the Gulf Coast independent of the partisan politics that are being played," Jindal said. "Give us an up or down vote."