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## Miss. seeks changes to Katrina cottage pilot program

### MEMA asks companies to re-submit bids on the program

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Modifications to a program that moves Hurricane Katrina victims into cottages continue as the state seeks a cheaper way to manage the project.

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The Mississippi Emergency Management Agency is asking companies to re-submit bids to oversee the pilot program. The agency decided not to extend its \$8.9 million contract with Florida-based PBS&J Engineering, the firm in charge for the last nine months.

MEMA officials said it has nothing to do with PBS&J's performance. The agency wants to "get the lowest bid from the best qualified contractor," officials wrote in an e-mailed response to questions.

The state did not use a competitive bid process when it selected PBS&J. Officials said they needed to move forward with the cottage program as soon as possible, and the firm was working on other recovery projects when it was chosen.

"We would be nowhere near where we are now, with almost 600 families in our units, had we gone out with a competitive bid in the beginning," MEMA spokeswoman Ashley Roth wrote. "We now have the time to go through the competitive process while the program is underway."

A PBS&J spokeswoman said the firm will submit another bid. Roth said it's possible the company could be re-hired.

In September, the state asked PBS&J to review the cottages' installation process after a Georgia businessman alleged the structures were not securely fastened to the ground. The businessman, Jerry Brown, hoped his foundation design would be used in the installation process.

A PBS&J engineer wrote the cottages were secure, and state officials said they were satisfied with the response.

MEMA stipulated its next contract with a program manager should not exceed \$6 million. It would expire in March 2009 but could be extended.

Bid proposals will be opened Nov. 27.

If a new manager is selected, it would be one of several changes to a program that ultimately will determine whether cottages are a better form of disaster housing than FEMA trailers. Mississippi estimates delivering between 3,000 and 5,000 during the two-year program.

At one point, state officials anticipated delivering between 5,000 and 7,000 cottages. But some of the intended recipients no longer need them because they're further along in their rebuilding efforts, officials said.

In its proposal to FEMA, state officials wrote they would rather use multiple companies to produce bundles of 500 cottages apiece, "resulting in the entire inventory of units being completed within this 12-week timeframe."

Roth said MEMA eventually decided the companies should produce between 50 and 200 units apiece.

"The smaller orders allowed us to have more effective oversight on the units as they were built," she wrote. "It is also a matter of supply and demand."

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The state also eliminated its method of choosing cottage recipients by a random selection process, allowing more people to qualify for the structures.

But leaders of some Gulf Coast cities have been reluctant to participate in the voluntary program.

Local governments are worried the cottages will remain after the program ends, housing advocates said.

"You're in a situation where people have been awarded things, and they can't get them placed," said Charmel Gaulden, executive director of the Gulf Coast Fair Housing Center.

George Tapp, 71, wants a cottage. Tapp's home near Ocean Springs was flooded in the Aug. 29, 2005, storm, and he lives in a FEMA trailer he said is making him sick from formaldehyde.

Tapp said he was told six months ago he would receive a cottage. He said FEMA told him to expect one in the next few weeks.

"I'll believe it when I get the key in my pocket," Tapp said.

It's too early to determine the success of the cottage program, said Curtis Carleton, FEMA's senior manager of the alternative housing program.

FEMA is evaluating it over a four-year period, he said.

But, he added, "In terms of safety and comfort, hands down they're a better deal. They look better and can withstand more wind."


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