

Audubon Aquarium of the Americas Battles FEMA

The cost of rebuilding the Audubon Aquarium of the Americas in New Orleans, after Hurricane Katrina.

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Photo courtesy of Audubon Aquarium of the Americas

According to The Associated Press, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) is refusing to pay for the restocking of the Audubon Aquarium of the Americas in New Orleans, because of how the replacement fish were obtained: straight from the sea.

The report stated that FEMA would have been willing to pay more than \$600,000 for the fish if they had been bought from commercial suppliers. But because the Audubon Aquarium of the Americas went out and replaced the fish the old fashioned way, with hooks and nets, they will not pay. The money-saving expedition saved taxpayers a half-million dollars, but did not comply with FEMA regulations.

Aquarium officials wanted to reopen the aquarium as soon as possible after the hurricane. So even before the monetary commitment from FEMA came through, they sent a team on an expedition to the Gulf of Mexico, the Florida Keys and Bahamas, where they caught 1,681 fish for \$99,766, The AP reported.

Despite the savings, the dispute has dragged on for 17 months.

"FEMA does not consider it reasonable when an applicant takes excursions to collect specimens," FEMA quality control manager Barb Schweda wrote in a 2006 e-mail, as reported by The Associated Press. "They must be obtained through reputable sources where, again, the item is commercially available."

The New Orleans case has been appealed to FEMA offices in Texas and Washington. The dispute could wind up in federal court.

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