

LAST WEEK'S BLIZZARD, THIS WEEK'S HELL

Did you know there was a blizzard last week? I'll admit I didn't. Never saw a peep about it across several Twitter and internet news feeds until today.

Between 28 and 60 inches of snow fell across parts of South Dakota late last week in a freakishly early snow storm, the white stuff accumulating rapidly while many of us were picking apart reports about the National Security Agency's breaching of Tor. I was watching my feed pretty closely at the time, and never saw a thing about South Dakota's weather.

Many if not all of South Dakota's cattle ranchers still had herds out in summer grazing areas at the time the storm hit. The results are still being measured; somewhere between 15% and 50% of the entire South Dakota herd died in the storm, with long-term effects on the remaining herd as yet unknown.

I haven't seen a map of the affected area, but I'll bet these same ranchers may have been impacted by flooding earlier this year. Comprehensive maps detailing the affected area probably won't be widely available until after Congress resolves the budget and debt ceiling disputes, restoring funding to government agencies like National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) National Weather Service. Fortunately less detailed maps are available, reflecting flood warnings in western South Dakota.

The worst part of this situation isn't the lack of predictive information in advance of the storm or impact maps in the wake of the blizzard. It's the lack of any federal assistance to ranchers devastated by this storm; state agencies struggling with the impact of the storm on their normal operations will be challenged to respond without additional aid.

Was adequate advance warning possible from NOAA's skeleton crew? Should the affected area have been declared a federal disaster? Should there be assistance for cleanup and disposal of approximately 75,000 head of cattle? Should there be agencies looking into financial aid for those ranchers most impacted? Should there be health assessments with regard to the potential spread of disease among humans and cattle alike as the storm's damage is documented?

Of course there should be assessments and assistance. We've agreed as a nation these kinds of services and more are in the best interest of the public as a whole, and we've funded them in the past. We help our neighbors in times of trouble just as they help us – this is and has been part of our American values.

It's too damned bad, though, that Congressional Republicans have decided hard-working farmers – folks who ordinarily might be their base – are less important than a massive temper tantrum about health care and debts they agreed to under the last three presidential terms. Compare the speed with which Congress agreed to bail out soft-handed, flabby-assed bankers back in 2008 – the same bankers who made money off shady subprime mortgages and then tanked the economy with equally shady derivatives based on the same. It took one week from the time Congress reached a tentative agreement between parties, and passage of the Emergency Economic Stabilization Act of 2008. If speed of Congressional response were a measure of importance, helping hard-working but distressed small business owners in the heartland clearly isn't a benchmark of note.