Senators say storm aid survives budget talks

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WASHINGTON — Critical housing and levee money for Louisiana is still in legislation being hammered out by a House and Senate conference committee.

U.S. Sen. David Vitter, R-La., and U.S. Sen. Mary Landrieu, D-La., reported that the panel formed to reconcile differing House and Senate bills is keeping $5.2 billion in Community Development Block Grants funds in the proposal.

Vitter said that money would include the $4.2 billion President Bush set aside for Louisiana’s Road Home program. Homeowners with damaged properties would receive $150,000 minus any insurance or federal payments under the plan.

“It looks good for us getting our needs met,” Vitter said.

Landrieu, a conference committee member, agreed the total funding seems assured but she had reservations about the status of the Louisiana’s share.

“There are a few areas of potential concern,” said Adam Sharp, a spokesman for Landrieu. “The CDBG money is very much in play.”

The state also would also get $3.7 billion in money to repair crippled levees. The money is $200 million short of what the Senate approved but significantly more than the $1.4 billion passed by the House.

Agriculture and fisheries would take the biggest hit in the bill cuts. The Senate approved $4 billion in agriculture relief, which has been cut to $409 million for areas damaged by hurricanes Katrina and Rita. Fisheries would be cut from $1.3 billion to $118 million.

The Senate has approved a $109 billion bill for the Iraq war and hurricane relief. The House approved $91.9 billion.

Bush has vowed to veto any bill higher than $94.5 billion.

Despite the cuts, Vitter said “All in all if that’s what is produced, I would call it a huge victory.”

Meanwhile, Landrieu was concerned about $845 million for higher education cut from the measure but intended “to get everything the president committed to,” going into the
Tuesday night meeting, Sharp said.