

United States Senate Committee on Appropriations
A Review of Disaster Funding Needs
November 20, 2024

Senator Thom Tillis (R-NC)

Chair Murray, Vice Chair Collins, and Members of the Committee: Thank you for the opportunity to testify this morning to be a voice for the people of Western North Carolina.

My state was permanently changed on September 27, 2024. Hurricane Helene brought more than 30 inches of rainfall in some areas, unleashing floodwaters and landslides the likes of which we have never seen. Many areas experienced hurricane-force winds with speeds over 100 mph, despite being more than 250 miles inland. I am saddened to report to the Committee that this is the worst storm in my state's history.

We are now 54 days past Helene's initial impact. Many in the mainstream media and outside world may have moved on and returned to business as usual, but for my constituents in Western North Carolina: life is now measured in the time before and after Hurricane Helene. As we sit here today, tens of thousands of North Carolinians are still struggling to even begin putting their lives back together.

I have heard countless stories of tragedy and resiliency from people who have lost everything. I would like to share just one of those stories with the Committee today:

Fairview is small community of around 2,500 people outside of Asheville. As Helene brought devastating wind and rain to Fairview, firefighter Tony Garrison and his nephew Brandon Ruppe responded to a rescue call for 11 people trapped by a mudslide. As they selflessly answered the call of duty, flooding triggered a second landslide that tragically claimed the lives of all 13 people. This is just one of countless stories of devastation and sacrifice from communities all across Western North Carolina that will never be the same.

The magnitude of Hurricane Helene's destruction to the people, landscape, and communities of Western North Carolina is difficult to quantify, but I will try my best:

- At least 102 lives were lost in North Carolina
- 151,000 homes damaged
- 500,000 small businesses in disaster-declared counties
- 5,000 miles of roads, including 4.5 miles of I-40, damaged
- 1,300+ public bridges and culverts damaged
- More than 80 miles of railroad destroyed
- 163 water and sewer systems damaged
- 400 hazardous waste facilities damaged
- 20,000 farms in disaster-declared counties with \$2.4 billion in crop losses
- 822,000 acres of damaged timberland

Western North Carolina is a place of unrivaled natural beauty. Many of you have likely visited Great Smokies National Park, driven through the Blue Ridge Parkway during the peak fall leaf season, or seen the grandeur of the Biltmore Estate. Helene hit right at the start of tourism season when businesses in Western North Carolina depend on visitors to make ends meet each year. Local businesses typically make enough money in October during peak fall leaf season to sustain them until spring.

Now, after weathering the economic hardship of the pandemic and rebuilding from Tropical Storm Fred in 2021, many businesses in the region are on the brink of collapse. Without swift, comprehensive economic relief from Congress, Western North Carolina runs the risk of a second catastrophic storm—this time an economic one. These businesses, like BearWaters Brewing in Canton, are the bedrock of Western North Carolina’s economy, and now they have been left holding the bag for Congress to do its job since the Small Business Administration ran out of money more than a month ago.

Similarly, the timing of Helene could not have been worse for the many small family farms throughout the region. Due to the topography and nature of agriculture in the region, only 5-10% of crop losses are estimated to be insured. Even farmers with insurance and access to USDA programs are struggling to get the resources they need. This comes on the heels of an already tough growing season for farmers across North Carolina, with 99 of our 100 counties having a federal disaster declaration this year alone.

Earlier this month, I met with local leaders from each of the impacted counties as well as stakeholders committed to Western North Carolina’s rebuilding. These local leaders shared challenges, coordinated efforts, and advocated for much-needed resources to rebuild their communities.

Like all attendees, I came away encouraged by Western North Carolina’s resiliency and further energized to advocate for their needs here in Washington. The discussions that took place clearly identified a number of immediate, intermediate, and long-term needs, including:

- **Immediate Needs:**

- Economic support for businesses and local governments facing unprecedented revenue shortfalls.
- Direct housing assistance for the tens of thousands of displaced residents.
- Repair and replacement of water and sewer systems
- Debris removal and disposal.
- Repair and replacement of the countless private roads and bridges.

- **Intermediate Needs:**

- Statutory flexibilities and regulatory relief to ensure continuity of government.
- Technical assistance and support to navigate federal disaster programs.

- Repair and replacement of infrastructure and government facilities.
- Extension of the deadline for State and Local Fiscal Recovery Funds.
- **Long-Term Needs**
 - Economic and workforce development assistance.
 - Infrastructure investments to increase resiliency and redundancy.
 - Housing repair and replacement.
 - Mental health assistance for survivors.

Helene is by far the most significant natural disaster our state has endured in my time as an elected leader. Many parts of Western North Carolina will never be the same. The mountain folks of my state have spent their entire lives working, paying taxes, and never asking for anything from the federal government, but now it is time for their government to step up and help these people in their time of greatest need.

Thank you again for having this hearing and allowing me to be a voice for Western North Carolina. I look forward to continuing to work with the Members of this Committee to ensure that my constituents have the resources they need to rebuild and plant the seeds of Western North Carolina's long-term recovery.