

Testimony of Deputy Secretary Xochitl Torres Small
U.S. Department of Agriculture
before the
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Thank you, Chair Murray, Vice Chair Collins, and Members of the Committee for the opportunity to come before you today to provide an update on the impact of disasters on American farms, ranches, private and public forest lands, and rural communities, and the work the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) and the Biden-Harris Administration are doing to support producers, families, farmworkers, and businesses.

In the aftermath of the devastation wrought by Hurricanes Helene and Milton, I want to share with you USDA's observations and findings regarding the destruction experienced by agricultural producers and rural communities affected by these disasters, and to emphasize that the Department seeks to partner with you to support those affected by these and other recent natural disasters.

As has been widely reported, farmers, ranchers, and private forest landowners across a wide swath of the southeastern United States have suffered catastrophic losses – both of the commodities they produce and of the physical infrastructure and equipment that they rely on to produce their crops and run their operations, and for some their homes as well. To add insult to injury, many of these producers had just completed, or were preparing to complete, the fall harvest of their commodities as the storms hit. Now, instead of seeing the anticipated revenue from the sale of those commodities, producers are confronting ruined fields, downed trees, and a litany of other impacts that will make for an exceedingly arduous recovery. I must also mention, that in addition to the recent hurricanes that hit the Southeast, many these same communities and other regions throughout the country have been struggling with intense and often historic drought conditions this year. Many farmers they have been hit with both disasters simultaneously. Generational family farms, ranches, and forest landowners are facing unthinkable decisions, and I am here today to share those challenges.

USDA's response in the Southeast has been robust, with staff working around the clock to support producers and rural communities. It is important to note the sacrifices USDA employees have made as they rose to meet this challenge. One quarter of the Farm Production and Conservation (FPAC) mission area employees are located in counties across the Southeast, and despite facing power outages and significant impacts to their own operations, continued to show up each day to stay on the job and serve producers. Rural Development employees immediately showed up in their service areas to support rural communities as they began to make plans to rebuild. Our United States Forest Service (USFS) employees across the country uprooted their lives to deploy to the region for weeks or months at a time to provide support to the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and provide capacity for emergency response work. All of this work continues despite damage to their own homes, farms, and workstations. I want to take a moment to thank these employees for their service, dedication to mission, and invaluable contributions to supporting American agriculture during an especially hard time.

I also want to acknowledge that while we are here today to discuss the immediate impacts of the hurricanes, this has been a difficult wildfire year and communities across the country are working to rebuild after facing their own devastating disasters.

Impact on Agriculture, Rural Communities, and Emergency Food Support

In my own travels, and those of Secretary Vilsack, USDA Under Secretaries, and Administrators to the affected areas, we have witnessed firsthand the magnitude of the destruction left behind by Hurricane Helene and Hurricane Milton. During my visits in South Carolina and Georgia in October, I saw the devastating impact the storms had on communities. I witnessed damaged pecan trees— many that will never produce a crop again, productive farmland ravaged by winds at shocking speeds, and farm infrastructure and buildings in need of massive repairs. We also had a chance to hear from farmers who are just beginning to come to terms with the long road to recovery ahead of them, including laborious requirements for assistance such as rejection letters to comply with credit elsewhere restrictions, which would be alleviated with our legislative proposal to remove the credit elsewhere test for Emergency Farm Loans. Additional concerns included debt for new processing infrastructure for crops that will now take years to re-establish.

Recently, Secretary Vilsack visited Asheville, North Carolina and had the chance to speak with a broad group of producers and community leaders impacted by the flooding. They each had a different experience and road to recovery, from a dairy farm that was essentially wiped out and as a result decided to sell all their cows because all of their infrastructure was completely gone, to an ornamental nursery that had been under 40 feet of water, to specialty crop producers dealing with the loss of soil, and Christmas tree producers dealing with infrastructure and farmworker challenges. We have also heard from farmworkers now suddenly out of work who may not be able to put food on their families' table. Not to mention the local electric cooperative and water processors worried about needed repairs and the technical assistance required for the recovery.

While in Asheville, Secretary Vilsack also spoke with volunteers and staff at the MANNA Food Bank, a member of the Feeding America network. After their primary location was destroyed by flooding, they quickly pivoted and stood up a new operation at a temporary warehouse.

Despite the unfortunate circumstances, disasters always impress on me just how resilient communities are. In Augusta, Georgia, I visited Golden Harvest Food Bank where I heard from a roundtable of stakeholders who forfeited sleep and comfort to serve neighbors who had lost their homes overnight. Only at the end of the conversation did I learn that one of the participants had also lost his own home in the hurricane. He spent his time advocating for other unhoused individuals who needed ready-to-eat meals. At MANNA, Secretary Vilsack met a volunteer who had just reached the 4,000 hours volunteering mark. Others shared with him that “MANNA was never just about a building,” and emphasized that though the road to recovery is long, their commitment is steadfast. We know that in an emergency situation, access to safe and healthy food is critical. I appreciate the investment this Committee continues to make in the Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP) so that USDA can support food banks like MANNA and Golden Harvest in times of need.

USDA leaders have been in Florida, Georgia, South Carolina, North Carolina, Tennessee, and Virginia in the last month to meet with impacted producers and community leaders, assess the extent of damage, and gain an understanding of where gaps in existing USDA and other federal programs and authorities may need to be filled.

USDA Disaster Assistance

As the People's Department, the USDA's work spans across every community and landscape throughout our nation. We provide safety nets for farmers, champion renewable energy, and support firefighters who keep our communities safe. In times of disaster, USDA plays a crucial role in supporting farmers, ranchers, and rural communities, giving them the resources they need to persevere, rebuild, and regain their livelihoods. In the past, Congress has responded on a bipartisan basis to support the communities facing devastating crises by providing additional resources to USDA programs. We urge Congress to work together to quickly provide funding for needed relief to farmers, ranchers, private forest landowners, and rural communities.

Our partnership with FEMA allows us to get critical response and recovery resources to areas that need them the most. We at USDA had more than 8,000 USDA federal employees on the ground, coordinating a full-scale federal response to support hurricane recovery efforts. Among them, over 260 responders were actively engaged in clearing debris, removing downed trees, search and rescue efforts, and providing critical support across North Carolina, Tennessee, and Georgia. Farm Service Agency (FSA) employees immediately began to start registers for programs that would open applications within several weeks, and since those applications opened, staff in unaffected parts of each state have been assisting in working through the interested persons to begin Emergency Conservation Program (ECP) and Emergency Forest Restoration Program (EFRP) applications. Our Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) employees have already visited dozens of potential sites for the Emergency Watershed Program. These teams collaborated closely with FEMA, performing daily assessments and logistical coordination.

In the days and weeks following these devastating storms, USDA wasted no time in responding to these disasters with all the available tools at our disposal. Immediately, the agencies across the department implemented various flexibilities to get producers the help they need as quickly as possible.

Farm Service Agency

For farmers and ranchers facing the devastation of disasters like severe storms, wildfires, droughts, and floods, the FSA serves as their frontline resource. Our local FSA offices provide tailored support and access to recovery programs, including crop insurance support and emergency farm loans offering crucial financial aid to cover operating expenses, livestock purchases and essential supplies. FSA has also made use of the Administrator's Physical Loss Notice to make certain impacted counties eligible for emergency loans.

FSA runs several standing disaster programs, such as the Livestock Indemnity Program (LIP) which compensates livestock owners impacted by natural disasters. In hurricane-affected states,

FSA extended the date for submission of the LIP notice of loss, and applications, for payment until early 2025 for 2024 losses. While standing disaster programs are a foundational component of assisting farmers and ranchers after disasters, additional assistance in the amount of \$21 billion can ensure that farmers and ranchers are better positioned to recover from catastrophe.

To expedite assistance through the ECP and EFRP, FSA extended the sign up for the for states affected by Hurricanes Helene and Milton; and waived the requirement for prior approval for practices involving surface debris removal, fence restoration, hazard tree removal and non-ground disturbing activities and, waived onsite inspection requirements for non-engineering practices. Current ECP funds will not allow full recovery, and we estimate an additional \$617M is needed and an additional \$366M for EFRP.

In the wake of Hurricanes Helene and Milton, FSA is surging additional staff, temporarily, to local and state offices to address the increased demand for disaster assistance programs and the number of concurrent disasters is placing significant stress on FSA staffing. Over the longer term, FSA needs resources to establish a group of trained and dedicated staff that can be deployed to disaster areas as needed.

Risk Management Agency

The Risk Management Agency (RMA) is another essential partner in disaster resilience. RMA works with Approved Insurance Providers (AIPs), helping farmers file claims and access crop insurance coverage when weather impacts their crops. In times of disaster, this insurance is a lifeline, safeguarding farmers' investments and future harvests. Following disasters in 2023, total indemnities paid out were \$17.5 billion. While we don't yet have total claims processed for 2024, in the days following the hurricanes, our team at RMA provided flexibilities know as emergency procedures to streamline the loss adjustment process for pecan trees, to expedite claims, and allow AIPs to waive premium interest up to 60 days for those with spring crops such as apples, corn, cotton, and peanuts. And the agency moved swiftly to approve counties for the Hurricane Insurance Protection - Wind Index (HIP-WI) endorsement and the Tropical Storm endorsement, within days of the storm. To get payments to producers as quickly as possible, RMA utilized NOAA's Climate Prediction Center data, International Best Track Archive for Climate Stewardship (IBTrACS) data, and data from the National Hurricane Center to publish the initial triggers for Hurricane Helene.

Recently, I announced additional USDA assistance for producers impacted by Hurricane Helene under our Hurricane Insurance Protection-Wind Index (HIP-WI) program. As a result, Approved Insurance Providers (AIPs) have already began issuing payments for over \$233 million in indemnities for hurricane-related losses across Alabama, Florida, Georgia, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Virginia, and an additional \$143 million for Florida producers impacted by Hurricane Milton. These payments will directly help farmers and rural communities recover. In total, \$937 million has been paid to producers who suffered losses from hurricanes or tropical storms in 2024. Nearly \$800 million of that has been paid through HIP-WI, greatly speeding the payments of indemnities to producers. We will see the total amount surpass \$1 billion as underlying HIP-WI insurance policies are adjusted and indemnities are paid.

Natural Resources Conservation Service

Our NRCS mission and work extends support beyond immediate relief, focusing on long-term environmental resilience. Through programs like the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) and the Emergency Watershed Protection Program, NRCS provides both technical and financial assistance to protect soil and water quality, repair damaged infrastructure, and restore habitats impacted by disasters. Our team at NRCS worked quickly to provide support for poultry and livestock producers in affected areas through EQIP. Due to the urgent need to dispose of poultry and livestock quickly to mitigate environmental and disease impacts, NRCS has used the flexibility of an early-start waiver for producers once an initial application is submitted to expedite recovery efforts. With respect to the Emergency Watershed Protection (EWP) Program, NRCS works with local sponsors – typically county or municipal governments – to address the recovery of streams, rivers, floodplains and other areas damaged by flooding, erosion and other severe impacts. While we are devoting all currently available EWP resources to this effort, we expect needs will far exceed our funding and have requested an additional \$1.08B for EWP. Because these projects require local input and matching funds, they can take substantial time to complete but have proven very effective in preventing future damage from floods. Earlier this week, we provided a cost-share waiver for EWP requests we've received in North Carolina, South Carolina, Virginia, Tennessee and Georgia for Hurricane Helene.

It is also worth noting two additional watershed programs that NRCS oversees, the Watershed Protection and Flood Prevention Operations (WFPO) Program and the Watershed Rehabilitation Program (REHAB), which we are thankful Congress has provided important investments in recent years. Both programs are critical in the long and short run as we hear from communities that want to pursue these locally led projects to protect and restore watersheds and to rehabilitate aging dams that are reaching the end of their design life and/or no longer meet federal or state safety criteria or performance standards.

Rural Development

For our rural communities hit by recent natural disasters, USDA's Rural Development (RD) programs provide significant aid for housing repairs, community facilities, water systems, and more. By engaging with rural water system officials, we help secure funding and resources to restore safe drinking water, leveraging Rural Utilities Service (RUS) grants to support FEMA projects. RD also collaborates closely with rural water system officials to connect them with funding and resources for water system restoration, utilizing RUS grant funding for FEMA repair projects. Within our limited budgetary constraints, RD is able to support communities to repair and rebuild essential water infrastructure through the Emergency Community Water Assistance Grants (ECWAG). Our Business Programs within RD also offer financial support to rural businesses impacted by storms, extending existing grants, and working with local intermediaries to assess disaster impacts and adjust funding strategies for immediate and sustained support. We also know that many of these affected areas, like those in Rural Partners Network communities, would benefit from technical assistance and capacity building needed to apply for federal funding, and continue to work to provide support for them.

In response to recent disasters, RD moved swiftly to use existing programs to support affected communities to address pressing needs, including housing assistance for tenants and homeowners, restoring water infrastructure, and helping rural businesses stabilize and prepare for the future. By activating these finite resources quickly, RD ensures that even the most remote communities have a clear pathway to recovery. However, while USDA has been able to act quickly, our response success could be improved if funding were made available in the Rural Disaster Assistance Fund, which provides the maximum flexibilities for RD programs to respond accordingly to natural disasters such as hurricanes and floods. While RD is responding to the needs of these hurting communities, the fact remains that in order for our broad array of RD programs to fully respond to these and other recent disasters, it will require additional \$375 million funding to be provided for these critical programs, including the Rural Development Disaster Assistance Fund and \$10 million for community facilities to assist these communities to full recovery.

Food and Nutrition Service

The Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) ensures food reaches those who need it most. FNS has collaborated with each affected state and Tribe as well as local voluntary organization partners on disaster response and recovery efforts. FNS has provided a range of flexibilities allowing states to replace lost benefits for SNAP participants, provide meals to children when schools are closed, offer food packages in devastated areas, and deliver emergency food aid through the Disaster Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (D-SNAP) to households in all six affected states who suffered losses from disasters. States also provide USDA food supplies for emergency shelters and impacted families through The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP).

This has been an all of USDA effort, but even with this level of responsiveness, more needs to be done to address the needs on the ground of farmers, workers, and people living in these affected communities.

Other USDA Agencies

USDA agencies across the Department are also deeply engaged in recovery efforts. The USDA's National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA) has been actively engaging in recovery by providing essential technical assistance and disaster education. The Forest Service, in addition to having teams on the ground clearing roads and removing debris, is working with our local partners to assess the damage, remove hazards, and make forests safe and accessible once again. Food safety, of course, remains a priority, with the Food Safety Inspection Service offering guidelines to those in Hurricane's path and areas hit by flooding and power outages.

Through partnerships with local and regional organizations, we are improving outreach, removing barriers in our assistance programs, and finding new, innovative ways to deliver support where it is needed most. This work is complex and demands a lot of time and effort, but USDA's team is committed to helping every producer and community navigate their recovery.

Looking Forward

USDA and the Biden-Harris Administration are executing on a comprehensive, across-the-department and Administration response to help agricultural producers, forest landowners, families, and rural communities in the short and long term, using every option available to respond to these hurricanes.

In disasters, our job is to be there for everyone, and to do all we can to keep this from being the straw that breaks the back of operations doing all they can to hold on. The “get big or get out” model of agriculture encouraged large farms to expand and consolidate, often pushing many small and mid-sized operations out of the market. Disasters exacerbate this trend. We have lost 155.6 million farming acres and nearly 545,000 farms since 1981—a reality that is only compounded by the increasing frequency of extreme weather events. It is essential that our producers, no matter how small and what they produce, have an equitable opportunity to secure resources they need to rebuild and move forward.

Due to the level of devastation resulting not only from Hurricanes Helene and Milton, but also from historic droughts, flooding, and wildfires over the past several years, USDA needs additional tools and flexibilities to comprehensively address the challenges being experienced across the country. Without these additional tools, agricultural producers and forest landowners who are already dealing with incredible hardships will face even more uncertainty and it will become even more likely that additional crop and livestock producers are forced out of the industry. As you consider these tools and resources, I urge you to consider policies that will support the many and the most so that we can keep folks in production. Thank you for your attention to the important issues outlined here today. USDA looks forward to working with Congress to support American agriculture and rural communities.