

WRITTEN TESTIMONY

OF

THE HONORABLE CHUCK EDWARDS
MEMBER OF CONGRESS
11TH DISTRICT OF NORTH CAROLINA
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

BEFORE

THE

COMMITTEE ON TRANSPORTATION AND INFRASTRUCTURE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT, PUBLIC BUILDINGS, AND
EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT

UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
WASHINGTON, DC

“In the Eye of the Storm: Oversight of FEMA’s Disaster Readiness and Response”

November 19, 2024

Chairman Perry, Ranking Member Titus, and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today regarding FEMA's response to Hurricane Helene in North Carolina's 11th Congressional District.

I have the unique pleasure of being a former Member of this very subcommittee and am heartened by your willingness and interest in having me testify ahead of FEMA's Administrator, The Honorable Deanne Criswell, to give you an alternate perspective to FEMA disaster response that I gained by being on the ground during one of the most recent and deadliest storms to hit the mainland United States in the last 50 years.

Before diving into FEMA response, I want to briefly take a moment to put this disaster into perspective for you. Hurricane Helene took 230 lives across seven states. 102 of those lives were from my home state of North Carolina, and 80 of those 102 were direct constituents of the community I represent, North Carolina's 11th Congressional district.¹ Only three storms since 1950 have surpassed the death toll from Hurricane Helene, and only one of those storms, Hurricane Katrina, has taken place since 2000.²

In the days prior to the storm's arrival in Western North Carolina on September 27, the National Weather Service's Greenville-Spartanburg team were deeply concerned by the 10-15 inches of rain that had already swelled rivers and creeks in the mountains to dangerous levels, and issued numerous dire warnings for individuals to evacuate well before conditions became catastrophic.

In my view, the men and women of the National Weather Service (NWS) saved many thousands of lives by getting critical warnings into the community as early as possible. In a statement posted to X on September 28, the NWS team characterized Helene as "the worst event in our office's history."

Helene not only ravaged our people, but nearly 30-foot flooding crests absolutely destroyed our communities too. It was not quick flooding like you might expect on the coast where water comes in and goes out in one fell swoop. Water swelled over 20-30 feet in areas, forming rapids as the water got caught between mountains and rushed to funnel out at singular flow points, picking up and taking homes, cars, and entire roadways, with it.³

In American history, only **eight** hurricanes have reached the \$50 billion damage threshold across the multiple states they impacted.⁴ For Hurricane Helene, the NC Office of State Budget and Management has calculated *at least \$53 billion* in damage in North Carolina **alone**, not including the six other states of impact. Even worse, Aon Edge Insurance Agency, which specializes in flood coverage, estimates an average of 44% of all hurricane damage being insured. In the case of Helene, a generous 5% of damage has been estimated as insured, though the company believes that estimate is high.⁵ Also, according to Census Bureau and National

¹ <https://www.ncdhhs.gov/assistance/hurricane-helene-recovery-resources/hurricane-helene-storm-related-fatalities>

² <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1356183/deadliest-us-hurricanes-since-1980/>

³ <https://climate.ncsu.edu/blog/2024/09/rapid-reaction-historic-flooding-follows-helene-in-western-nc/>

⁴ <https://www.ncei.noaa.gov/access/billions/dcmi.pdf>

⁵ <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/helene-milton-losses-50-billion-each-hurricanes-rare/>

Flood Insurance Program data, only 0.7% of residences of NC-impacted counties had flood insurance.

FEMA's response was bound to be a bit clunky; the mountains are not a traditional location for flooding of this magnitude. And while I would like to applaud FEMA for their overall response to Helene, there are quite a few sticking points that I think, with the help of this committee, could be improved.

First and foremost, the Federal Emergency Management Agency's core responsibility following a hurricane is to coordinate federal emergency management efforts and provide support, resources, and expertise to state and local emergency managers. Within this responsibility is the distribution of pre-staged resources like water and food to hard-hit communities.

Hurricane Helene hit on September 27, 2024. Immediately following the storm, local governments were focused on emergency services. Contracted FEMA teams, called Urban Search & Rescue, were there on day one alongside county folk, conducting search and rescue operations, providing emergency medical services, and the like; however, by day two, local folks started to turn their attention to the greater community's basic needs, beginning with food and water.

During a FEMA briefing on hurricane response on September 29, 2024, FEMA stated that they had delivered 400 pallets of water to Western North Carolina. When pressed about *where* in Western North Carolina those truckloads were delivered, Federal Emergency Management personnel could not name **one single location** where **one single pallet** had been delivered. Instead, FEMA kicked the bucket to the state, sharing that they had provided the pallets to North Carolina Emergency Management who was then responsible for distribution.

For days, seemingly nobody in Western North Carolina was receiving supplies and nobody with the State or Federal government could share where the resources they were promoting had been sent. NC Emergency Management had their own hiccups in this whole process, but if the federal government is going to use taxpayer dollars to purchase recovery resources for impacted communities, does it not feel prudent to follow those resources to their final location so the government can ensure resources are making it to the people they were meant to support?

In the past 5 years, FEMA has been activated to respond to 911 disasters and other declarations.⁶ How much fraud, waste, and abuse and do you think has or could take place if FEMA is dishing out resources and not following up on final delivery to the final recipient? It is not unreasonable to think that FEMA should know where the resources they are providing get delivered, and it's my belief that this committee can and should address this issue for future disasters.

A major concern my staff and I have encountered through our local government counterparts is the inconsistency of both delivery of services and reliability of information provided by FEMA officials to the community, especially in the early and most dire weeks following the storm.

⁶ <https://www.fema.gov/disaster/declarations>

I'd like to use Transylvania County as an example. County leadership, thanks in large part to the early warnings of the National Weather Service, issued a first-ever mandatory evacuation order and conducted over 60 swift-water rescues, underscoring the catastrophic nature of Helene's impact on the community.

However, county officials were frustrated that it took FEMA over a week to get boots on the ground in their area, and it took until October 17 for a Disaster Recovery Center to be opened in the county. This delay in direct assistance on the ground, particularly in an area where internet capability was severely lacking, only served to slow the delivery of much-needed benefits.

On October 16, officials in one of the counties in my district were provided by FEMA with confirmation that a Disaster Survivor Assistance (DSA) crew was going door-to-door in the county, but that was not the case – FEMA representation in the area that day was at a fixed location. Every day counts in the wake of a major disaster, and we can't afford lapses in accurate communication like what occurred that day.

On October 21, we encountered a prime example of how FEMA miscommunication can sow confusion in the community, both among the public and local governments. That day, FEMA sent a media advisory that a DRC will be temporarily closed without informing the County manager, County liaison managing the facility or the County emergency Management Director. After a barrage of emails and calls, including from my office, FEMA retracted the press release and kept the facility open, all in the span of about three hours.

This issue is compounded by the fact that FEMA, in their staff's own words to me at a DRC visit I made on that exact same day, relied in part on my office to spread the word about FEMA information, shifting disaster center sites, and the like. As my staff and I work to keep constituents informed through daily newsletters for over a month after the storm and once a week currently, we must be able to trust the information we receive from FEMA as factual, and instances like this are a cause for concern in that regard.

As we moved from relief to recovery in Western North Carolina, my office has seen see a massive influx of FEMA-related casework. I hear a lot of the same things from my casework team and folks in the community – the correspondence they receive after filing their applications are not well-written and cause confusion, especially related to initial denials.

FEMA inspections, a crucial component of the application process for individuals, are also in need of fine-tuning. On October 18, a constituent in Waynesville asked if the FEMA inspector that was coming to conduct a neighbor's inspection for their Individual Assistance application could do all of the applicants on their private road that day, as all of their applications related to clearing their road. FEMA told my office that the inspections are issued to the inspector's tablets and worked accordingly in the order they are received, and they have no control over inspection scheduling.

This issue has also been proven frustrating in congregate living facilities, where multiple individuals are denied just because they are applying from the same address, and there is no

ability in the application process to explain the situation, and the time-consuming appeal process is the only path forward.

I also want to touch on a newer aspect of the FEMA assistance regime, the \$750 in Serious Needs Assistance (SNA) program has served to help a lot of folks in my district with immediate needs, but it is evident that FEMA can learn from this disaster for improving the program's administration in the future.

Based on my office's experience on the casework side, some people applied for just the SNA program and received it immediately while others applied for it and waited weeks. Others received a denial letter and then received the \$750 afterward.

Another prominent issue with SNA is that FEMA does not notify an individual when they deposit this into your account. One must constantly check their bank to know if they've received it.

I share this report from the front-line not to disparage FEMA and the tireless work that thousands of its employees have carried out in Western North Carolina and other states. However, Congress, through rigorous oversight responsibilities, must hold the Agency accountable. To do so, we must delve deep into the good, the bad, and the ugly of FEMA's responses in impacted areas.

I'll be frank – the folks back home are worn-out, and the frustration and grief that result from the unnecessary difficulties that FEMA's adjudication of their applications is stress that they do not need.

I hope that in her testimony and through the question-and-answer that Administrator Criswell will face in the next panel, she lays out a clear and well-developed plan to remedy the shortfalls in their response that have held back the recovery of many in Western North Carolina.

Chairman Perry and Ranking Member Titus, I thank you again for this opportunity and I welcome any of your questions.