



Office of the Secretary
Washington, DC 20250

November 1, 2024

THE HONORABLE ANDY HARRIS, M.D., *Chairman*
THE HONORABLE SANFORD BISHOP, JR., *Ranking Member*
Committee on Appropriations
Subcommittee on Agriculture, Rural Development,
Food and Drug Administration, and Related Agencies
U.S. House of Representatives
1036 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

THE HONORABLE MARTIN HEINRICH, *Chairman*
THE HONORABLE JOHN HOEVEN, *Ranking Member*
Committee on Appropriations
Subcommittee on Agriculture, Rural Development,
Food and Drug Administration, and Related Agencies
United States Senate
129 Dirksen Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Chairmen Harris and Heinrich and Ranking Members Bishop and Hoeven:

In the aftermath of the devastation wrought by Hurricanes Helene and Milton, I write 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. 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.

In my own travels to the affected areas, I witnessed firsthand the magnitude of the destruction left behind by Hurricanes Helene and Milton. During my stops in Florida and Georgia in early October, I saw the devastating impact the storms had on communities. Just north of Valdosta, GA, I visited a farm with the President, where we saw damaged pecan trees, land recovering

from floods, and buildings in need of massive repairs. We also had a chance to hear from farmers who were just beginning to come to terms with the long road to recovery ahead of them.

Last week, I travelled to Western North Carolina for additional meetings with producers and local officials, to assess the full extent of the damage in some of the hardest hit communities. They called for the swift financial support they need to jump start their recovery, restart operations, support their workforce, and rebuild their infrastructure. In addition to visiting with farmers who sustained unfathomable losses, we saw historic impacts and mortality affecting the region's forests, which is fueling worries about future wildfires. In addition to my travel, several USDA leaders have been to Florida, Georgia, South Carolina, North Carolina, Tennessee, and Virginia over the last few weeks to meet with impacted producers and communities.

USDA has wasted no time in responding to these disasters and is putting to use all available tools at our disposal. The Department immediately implemented various flexibilities in its disaster assistance programs to support farmers, ranchers and private forest landowners, the details of which can be found at farmers.gov/hurricane. We are expediting support through existing limited funding for programs such as the Emergency Conservation Program and the Emergency Forest Restoration Program and are arranging for a surge capacity of staff across the relevant parts of the Department to handle the influx of new applications. In addition, the Food and Nutrition Service has worked closely with States to issue waivers and implement flexibilities for many nutrition programs in affected areas and worked with five States to date to make assistance available through USDA's Disaster Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (D-SNAP). Even with this level of responsiveness, however, more needs to be done to address the needs on the ground of farmers, workers, and people living in these affected communities.

In response to prior major disasters, for example, Congress provided the Department with additional resources to address the needs of agricultural producers, rural communities, and others affected. Following Hurricane Katrina, USDA received more than \$3 billion in funding to assist farmers, producers, and rural communities to recover from that historic event. Due to the level of devastation resulting from Hurricanes Helene and Milton, the Department will likely need additional tools to comprehensively address the challenges producers and rural communities are facing. For instance, without additional funding for Emergency Watershed Protection, assistance to local communities to clear debris and restore culverts bridges and other infrastructure will be delayed. In recent disasters, Congress provided additional funding to support farmers and ranchers with crop losses; without this funding, uninsured producers will not get any assistance.

Absent new tools or resources from Congress, USDA is already executing on a comprehensive, across-the-Department response to help agricultural producers in the interim, using every option available to respond to these hurricanes. Two weeks ago, 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 begun issuing payments for more than \$233 million in

indemnities for hurricane-related losses across Alabama, Florida, Georgia, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Virginia. Earlier this week, USDA announced the issuance of more than \$235 million in payments to agricultural producers impacted by natural disasters, including \$143 million in crop insurance indemnities for Florida producers impacted by Hurricane Milton and more than \$92 million for livestock producers nationwide, who faced increased supplemental feed costs as a result of forage losses due to qualifying drought and wildfire occurring in 2022. These payments will directly help farmers and rural communities recover.

Thank you for your attention to the important issues outlined in this letter. USDA is working expeditiously on needs estimates from the recent hurricanes and looks forward to working with Congress to speedily implement the aforementioned programs and secure the requisite additional resources to help agricultural producers and rural communities recover from these unprecedented disasters.

Sincerely,

THOMAS J. VILSACK
Secretary

cc: House and Senate Agriculture Committees