

Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20515

October 4, 2024

The Honorable Tom Vilsack
Secretary
U.S. Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Avenue SW
Washington, D.C. 20250

Dear Secretary Vilsack:

We write to request that the U.S. Department of Agriculture to take swift action to support our farmers and rural communities affected by Hurricane Helene. Specifically, we request that the USDA deploy Farm Service Agency (FSA) strike teams to the hardest-hit areas, providing much-needed personnel to assist with recovery efforts. Additionally, we urge the Risk Management Agency (RMA) to collaborate with local stakeholders and utilize regional rainfall data to ensure more accurate assessments for damage and crop insurance claims. Finally, we request that USDA disaster aid be provided to affected states through block grants. This will allow states the flexibility to administer relief tailored to the specific needs of their producers and communities. These actions will be critical to ensuring a swift and effective recovery for our agricultural communities.

Farm Service Agency Strike Teams

As you know, Hurricane Helene affected agricultural production throughout the Southeast. We do not know the extent of the damage to agricultural producers yet. However, based on preliminary reports and assessments, there will be significant crop, livestock, farm equipment, and infrastructure losses throughout Florida, Georgia, South Carolina, North Carolina, Tennessee, and Virginia. These losses pose a threat to both local economies and our nation's food supply.

As such, we request immediate support from FSA for agricultural producers that were affected by Hurricane Helene. Specifically, we request additional FSA personnel to be deployed to affected areas to help agricultural producers navigate USDA's disaster programs and processes. These requirements for these programs and processes can be lengthy and complex, and we want to ensure our constituents are able to complete all necessary forms and processes to access the assistance they need.

Additional FSA staff can provide on-the-ground assistance, assess the extent of the damage, offer technical expertise, and guide farmers and ranchers through the process of applying for USDA relief programs. We believe deploying additional FSA personnel would make a significant difference in expediting recovery efforts, ensuring that those most affected by this disaster receive the support and resources they need to rebuild their livelihoods.

RMA Rainfall Data

We also wanted to bring to your attention a concern many of our producers have expressed regarding the rainfall data being utilized by RMA. We have heard concerns from producers about RMA rainfall data conflicting with other local rainfall measurements, like rainfall data from local Water Management Districts

particularly in Florida. We are concerned about these inconsistencies because farm programs rely on rainfall data. Inaccurate rainfall measurements can result in miscalculations of payments, unfairly penalizing those who have been hardest hit by these disasters.

We urge RMA to work with local entities to collect rainfall data. By involving additional stakeholders in the process, USDA may be able to more accurately reflect conditions on the ground. By adopting a more localized and precise approach to assessing damage, we can help provide the necessary support to ensure these farms can rebuild and continue operating.

Block Grant Disaster Aid

Lastly, we urge USDA to deliver current and future aid to communities affected by Hurricane Helene using block grants to states. Successful recovery efforts rely on a combination of sufficient resources and the expedient delivery of aid. FSA can easily become overwhelmed with agricultural disaster relief due to the current ad hoc nature of disaster assistance, where USDA must create a new disaster program each time funds are appropriated by Congress. State block grants for agricultural disaster programs would expedite the delivery of assistance, free up personnel at FSA to carry out routine farm programs, and provide flexibility for states to match the unique needs of their producers and communities.

We appreciate your attention to these urgent matters and are confident that with your leadership, the USDA can provide the necessary support to help farmers recover from these unprecedented challenges. We look forward to working with you and your team to ensure the continued vitality of our nation’s agricultural sector during this critical time.

Sincerely,



Kat Cammack
Member of Congress



Aaron Bean
Member of Congress



Gus M. Bilirakis
Member of Congress



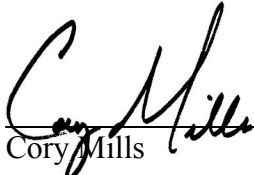
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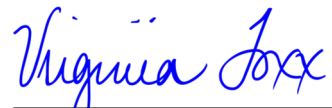
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