



U.S. NEWS

Some in Hurricane Helene-ravaged North Carolina embrace Trump's push to abolish FEMA

1 of 23 | President Donald Trump has threatened to dismantle the Federal Emergency Management Agency. Some in flood-ravaged western North Carolina say they wouldn't miss it. (AP Video/Allen Breed)

BY [MAKIYA SEMINERA](#)

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SWANNANOA, N.C. (AP) — Emily Russell remembers feeling hopeful after she managed to get an appointment with the [Federal Emergency Management Agency](#) not long after [Hurricane Helene](#) ripped through her home in [Swannanoa, North Carolina](#).

But after several assistance requests were denied or left pending, Russell says [the agency](#) has been of "no help" to her family after the late September storm. Still reeling in a world turned upside-down by the most damaging storm in state history, she finds herself open to President Donald Trump's suggestion about ["getting rid of" FEMA](#).

That is a common sentiment in the mountains of western North Carolina, where living in a trailer with limited supplies for months can try anyone's patience. Russell, who like many others did not have [flood insurance](#), endured those stresses as she prepared for the birth of her son, but then volunteers stepped up to rebuild her home. Back there now, she can cradle her tiny infant in her arms on her newly constructed front porch — overlooking a heaping pile of rotting debris and two Trump-Vance signs posted to a pole in her yard.



Emily Russell holds her infant son on her front porch, which was built by volunteers, in Swannanoa, N.C. on Thursday, Feb. 6, 2025. (AP Photo/Melvin Simon)

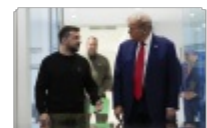
Frustration with stopgap relief efforts has been exacerbated by confusion over where long-term help should come from. FEMA is meant to be a first line, providing temporary housing and funding for repairs while insurance foots most of the bill. It is not the message residents heard initially, when politicians, including then-President Joe Biden, who [toured the damaged area](#), promised residents they would have whatever they needed.

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As more time passes, the reality of long-term recovery has gotten complicated.

To Russell and many others, Trump saying he would consider eliminating FEMA made sense. To some experts and officials, however, that could cause more problems than it would solve.

Days after Trump took office on Jan. 20, he surveyed the fallout from wildfires in California and the hurricane in North Carolina and suggested that states primarily manage the response to natural disasters. As a candidate, he had [disparaged](#) FEMA's work in the southern states hit by Helene. That criticism, which began almost as soon as the wind stopped blowing, [has not stopped](#).



A piece of debris with an American flag and inspirational message stand along a riverbank in Swannanoa, N.C. on Friday, Feb. 7, 2025. More than four months after the remnants of Hurricane



Garbage and debris sit in a heap in front of Emily Russell's home in Swannanoa, N.C., on Thursday, Feb. 6, 2025. (AP Photo/Making Sense)

More recently, FEMA was criticized by Trump adviser Elon Musk over [payments to reimburse](#) New York City for hotel costs for migrants. [Four FEMA employees](#) were fired, accused of circumventing leadership to make the transactions, which have been standard for years through a program that helps with costs to care for a surge in migration.

North Carolina's government estimated that Helene caused a record \$59.6 billion in damages. FEMA has contributed almost \$380 million through public assistance grants to the state and local governments, as well as approximately \$372 million directly to North Carolinians as of Feb. 11, according to the agency. [FEMA's responsibilities](#) include direct financial assistance to individuals and reimbursements to governments for recovery tasks like debris removal and rebuilding roads.

Russell was confused when she was denied on her FEMA application, especially after she said an inspector told her the home was a complete loss. Rushing floodwaters tore off the side of her house, and heavy mud seeped inside, warping the floorboards and rendering most things unsalvageable.

She thought the home she grew up in would be bulldozed.



Emily Russell sits on the newly constructed staircase leading up to the front of her home in Swannanoa, N.C., on Thursday, Feb. 6, 2025. (AP Photo/Melvin Simon)

Russell called FEMA and spoke with representatives in-person about her denied request. She said they told her she needed receipts for certain personal items, which she did not have.

"To keep being told it's pending or not approved, it's just, it's just a devastating feeling," Russell said. "I mean, you just feel lost."

In Buncombe County, where Russell lives, about 70% of homeowners who registered with FEMA received some level of assistance, according to the agency's data. Approximately 91% of those approved received up to \$10,000, while about 3.6% got between \$25,000 and a maximum payment that would likely top out at a little over \$40,000.

Danny Bailey, a 61-year-old Buncombe County retiree, said he received \$42,500 after losing practically everything from flooding, including the trailer he lived in, his sister's double-wide mobile home and a barn. His family had moved to the property in 1968.

Bailey already spent some of his money on necessities, such as propane to make it through the winter. He lives in a donated trailer on his property, now a muddy, rutted expanse, and said FEMA "should've done more."

"If this is the way they are, he ought to do away with them," Bailey said of Trump, whose win in North Carolina helped propel him to [victory in November](#).



Danny Bailey, 61, stands in front of the trailer he lives in with his pet dogs in Swannanoa, N.C., on Thursday, Feb. 6, 2025. (AP Photo/Melvin Simon)



A row of propane tanks sits along the side of Danny Bailey's trailer in Swannanoa, N.C., on Thursday, Feb. 6, 2025. (AP Photo/Melvin Simon)

Bailey ran into issues getting the money. A few days after Helene, he said a FEMA inspector came to his property and told him to go online to apply for disaster assistance, but Bailey had no computer or reliable cell service. He traveled almost 100 miles east to Statesville to use his nephew's computer, Bailey said, and then had problems getting clear answers from FEMA on his application status. Eventually, he received his money.

"Their attitude was, you know, this happened to you, but it's up to you to fix it. And I ain't the one who caused it," he said with a laugh.

Complaints about FEMA's application process are common because of the administrative hurdles in place to ensure applicants' eligibility, said Miyuki Hino, a city and regional planning professor at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. People may also believe FEMA should provide more assistance when its role is mainly to meet immediate needs such as shelter, Hino said.

There always has been an underlying tension on the federal government's role in natural disaster response, but Hino said the agency's increasing politicization could be attributed to the rising frequency of expensive disasters caused by climate change. Dissolving FEMA could create issues when disasters extend beyond state lines or localities need expertise on disasters they are not used to confronting.

Overall, eliminating FEMA would likely slow the recovery process for future disasters, she said.

FEMA's potential eradication worries Dalton George, the mayor pro tempore of Boone, a mountain town in Watauga County that was ravaged by Helene. Despite understandable frustrations, he said the agency moved quickly to help. It has contributed money for home restorations, as well as keeping several families in hotels under its transitory sheltering program, he said.

"It feels like people are more anti-FEMA than they are about actually solving some of these problems," George said.

Responsibilities would be partly shifted onto local governments, and George said towns such as Boone do not have resources for that. Private organizations would need to step up more than they have, George said, and they already are overextended.

Vickie Revis relies heavily on private entities such as churches to supply almost everything on her property, including the trailer she stays in with her husband along the Swannanoa River. Her home of eight years was completely swept away by the river — something she used to associate with beauty and peace but now ties to "terror."



Vickie Revis and her granddaughter, Addisun Cole, 8, stand outside the trailer on Revis' property where she's currently living, after her home was destroyed by Hurricane Helene. Wednesday, Feb. 7,



Addisun Cole, 8, plays with Little Bit, her grandmother's cat, outside the trailer of her grandmother, Vickie Davis, whom Davis is living after her home was destroyed by Hurricane Helene, Wednesday.



Vickie Davis holds one of several mud-stained family photographs that were recovered after her home was destroyed by Hurricane Helene, Wednesday, Feb. 5, 2025, in Swannanoa, N.C. (AP)



A view of a building and damaged waterfront destroyed by Hurricane Helene as seen from across the Swannanoa River adjacent to Vickie Revis' property, Wednesday, Feb. 5, 2025, in Swannanoa, N.C.

"It's like a friend that came in and robbed you of everything you have," Revis said.

Her restoration process, however, will largely be funded by FEMA, as Revis said she received more than \$40,000. She said she had no issues with how the agency handled her situation.

Instead, Revis talked at length about the grief she still lives with: lost pets; meaningful possessions that disappeared; home expansion plans to accommodate more family members that will not happen. She said she rarely left her trailer until recently because she could not bear to face the devastation.

Now, it is the rebuilding that keeps Revis going. How long will that go on?

"However long it takes," she said.

___ Associated Press data journalist Larry Fenn in New York contributed to this report.



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