

# Helene leads to push for disaster relief funding in Congress

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Members of Congress saw Hurricane Helene coming.

Last week, they had planned to be in Washington through Friday, and then recess for the month of October to focus on the election. But as Helene strengthened while approaching Florida, they announced an early dismissal to get home ahead of the storm.

Now, lawmakers from the states devastated by Helene are asking for help from congressional leadership, including the possibility of coming back in October to fund the relief efforts.

And costs could be high.

"I've heard numbers in the \$150 billion range, particularly in North Carolina," said Sen. Ted Budd, a Republican from Davie County, who spoke to McClatchy Tuesday night. "If you consider the volume and the velocity of water in the mountains, it's devastating."

Both Budd and Sen.

Thom Tillis signed a letter

Tuesday to Majority Leader Chuck Schumer, Minority Leader Mitch McConnell, Appropriations Chair Patty Murray and Vice

Chair Susan Collins asking for help.

"Although the true level

of devastation is still un-

folding, it is clear that

Congress must act to meet

the unmet needs in our

states and address the

scope and scale of de-

struction experienced by

our constituents," the

senators wrote. "This may

even require Congress to

come back in October to

ensure we have enough

time to enact legislation

before the end of this

calendar year."

## GOVERNMENT SHUTDOWN

Congress recessed

Wednesday and instead of

passing 12 appropriation

bills to fund the govern-

ment, members approved

a continuing resolution to

keep the government

operating at its current

levels until Dec. 20. Con-

gress isn't scheduled to

return until after the elec-

tion to take up the budget



Residents and volunteers clean up on Tuesday, Oct. 1, 2024, after the French Broad River flooded downtown Marshall. The remnants of Hurricane Helene caused widespread flooding, downed trees and power outages in western North Carolina.

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## BEGGING FOR EMERGENCY RELIEF

The reality wasn't lost on lawmakers on the Senate and House floors as they had to make that decision.

Both Rep. Rosa DeLauro, a Democrat from Connecticut, and Sen. Brian Schatz, a Democrat from Hawaii, expressed their concerns that they were once again voting on a bill at the last minute; and neither liked that it lacked funding for relief efforts.

But to vote against the bill had catastrophic consequences.

For Schatz, it was personal. The Democrat from Hawaii is still fighting for additional relief for his constituents whose lives were ripped apart in the fire that tore through Maui in August 2023.

"All across the country, in more than 20 states and territories, millions of Americans are reeling from disasters," Schatz said on Sept. 12, on the Senate floor. "Wildfires, hurricanes, droughts, floods. And having lost their homes, their communities, and their livelihoods, they're counting on the federal government for help."

Schatz told his colleagues that that was one of their basic jobs in Congress.

Edwards said that

should be enough of a wake-up call for Congress that it needs to get work done ahead of time.

Tillis joined Schatz and

eight other senators who

wrote to leadership Sept.

13 asking for additional

disaster relief funding

through a supplemental

appropriations package.

But when the bill was signed, it excluded billions in requested dollars for emergency relief.

On Tuesday, Speaker Mike Johnson told reporters that the CR replenished funds for the Federal Emergency Management Agency, and that that money could address the immediate response needed for Helene, The Hill reported.

His remarks come just

two days after Biden said he may call back Congress to fund Helene relief, and less than 24 hours after

Budd and Tillis sent their

letter to Senate leadership

along with the every senator from South Carolina, Georgia, Florida, Tennessee and Virginia.

All of those states expe-

rienced devastation from

the storm, and Budd said

that added an extra comp-

lication to relief efforts.

He said typically neigh-

boring states would come

to each other's aid, but

right now they're dealing

with rough terrain and

downed trees.

Budd said state law-

makers had been fiscally

responsible and main-

tained a rainy day fund of

\$5 billion, but the cost to

rebuild will surpass that by

leaps and bounds.

He said money is need-

ed to repair Interstate 40,

Interstate 26, bridges,

roads and other infrastruc-

ture.

"That's what we need

support in, and we want to

make sure that it's as

clean as possible," Budd

said. "That no one's tak-

ing advantage of anybody,

and that the money gets to

repair what we say it's

doing. That it's not doing

some sort of social justice

program, but it's really

just helping rebuild West-

ern North Carolina, and of

course the other states:

eastern Tennessee, North

Georgia, southwest Virgin-

ia."

**MISSING AND HURTING PEOPLE**

Budd said it will take

years to rebuild, but for

now, North Carolina is

still in a search and recov-

ery phase.

"The search and rescue

is still going on," Budd

said. "People are still

being extracted. There are

people that need oxygen,

they need diabetic med-

icine, insulin, they need

critical care, they're elder-

ly."

**DAMAGED CROPS**

Then there's the state's

farmland.

"In regard to agriculture, so much of the fertile ground that we have in North Carolina is in riverbeds, creek beds, or floodplains," Budd said. "It doesn't get flooded that often, but when it does, it's usually not this bad, and it's just devastating."

Budd said everything from tomato crops to orchards were affected.

"There's so much produce that comes out of Henderson County," Budd said.

On Tuesday morning,

Rep. Deborah Ross, a Democrat from Wake County, helped lead a group of 33 members from both chambers and parties in sending a letter to Schumer, McConnell, Johnson and House Mi-

nority Leader Hakeem Jeffries

saying it is "imperative that Congress make appropriations as soon as possible upon the completion of damage assessments to fully fund unmet agricultural disaster relief needs in our states and across the nation."

The lawmakers added:

"Farmers and growers nationwide, not only those damaged by Helene, have now faced multiple growing seasons without sufficient federal support. Our constituents are counting on us to act swiftly."

Tillis, Edwards, Murphy, Bishop and Reps. Don Davis, Kathy Manning, Alma Adams, Wiley Nickel and Jeff Jackson also signed onto the letter.

## COMING BACK TO CONGRESS

Budd told McClatchy he wasn't sure whether Congress would need to return in October to help with relief efforts, but he was ready to respond to whatever North Carolina needs.

"I'm pushing for funding," Budd said. "How that happens and the timing of it, I don't know."

Budd said that in the past, funding was able to be provided through unanimous consent.

But he wants to see any legislation before he casts his vote.

"You want to hold the government accountable, while having excellent use of taxpayer dollars," Budd said. "So I think we need to see the bill and see where the money would be appropriated."

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## UNC Asheville, App State extend class cancellations for weeks due to Helene's impacts

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As Western North Carolina continues to grapple with the destruction and

devastation left by Hurricane Helene, classes at

some of the region's uni-

versities won't resume for

several weeks.

UNC Asheville Chancellor Kimberly van Noort announced Tuesday that

classes will be suspended

at least until Oct. 28 as a

result of the storm and its

lingering impacts. Appala-

chian State University

announced Wednesday

that classes won't resume

on that campus until after

Oct. 15.

Both campuses had

originally planned to re-

main closed for about a

week, but then extended

their respective closures

and cancellations as re-

covery efforts in the area

continued.

## UNC ASHEVILLE

UNC Asheville first canceled classes on the morning of Thursday, Sept. 26, as Helene approached the area, and the university has remained closed since then.

"A very small number of students" were relocated to another UNC System campus.

The university was

housing about 1,600 stu-

dents on-campus prior to