

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20510

November 26, 2024

The Honorable Chuck Schumer
Majority Leader
United States Senate
S-221, The Capitol
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Mike Johnson
Speaker
United States House of Representatives
H-232, The Capitol
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Patty Murray
Chair
Senate Committee on Appropriations
H-232, The Capitol
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Tom Cole
Chair
House Committee on Appropriations
H-307, The Capitol
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Mitch McConnell
Minority Leader
United States Senate
S-230, The Capitol
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Hakeem Jeffries
Minority Leader
United States House of Representatives
H-204, The Capitol
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Susan Collins
Vice Chair
Senate Committee on Appropriations
S-128, The Capitol
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Rosa DeLauro
Ranking Member
House Committee on Appropriations
1036 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Majority Leader Schumer, Minority Leader McConnell, Speaker Johnson, Leader Jeffries, Chair Murray, Vice Chair Collins, Chair Cole, and Ranking Member DeLauro:

As work begins on a supplemental appropriations bill to respond to recent natural disasters, we write to express our strong support for the inclusion of substantial funding to support recovery efforts for public lands in our states that were impacted by these disastrous storms. Public lands across the Southeast – and our constituents whose livelihoods depend on them – were severely affected by Hurricane Helene. It is imperative that any disaster supplemental appropriations package include robust funding for the agencies that manage these public lands, including the United States Forest Service (USFS) and the National Park Service (NPS).

When Hurricane Helene brought torrential rainfall and severe winds through our states in late September, catastrophic flooding resulted in hundreds of deaths and billions of dollars in damage. Homes, businesses, and livelihoods were devastated as many communities were left without power, potable water, and cell service – some remain without these critical resources to this day. While thousands of our constituents are beginning to rebuild their lives, many of these communities are simultaneously contending with the fallout that large segments of federally

owned public lands that anchor these local economies are closed, not fully opened, or are simply inaccessible to visitors due to Hurricane Helene's destruction.

Public lands are critical economic engines for many of our communities impacted by Hurricane Helene. For example, the Blue Ridge Parkway, the most visited national park in the U.S. which spans 469 miles through Southwest Virginia and North Carolina, serves as the primary driver of economic activity for many of the communities in Helene's path. In 2023, the Parkway saw over 16.7 million visitors who spent nearly \$1.4 billion in surrounding communities. Visitor spending connected to the Parkway supports over 19,000 jobs in communities throughout Virginia and North Carolina and results in a cumulative economic impact of \$1.8 billion to local economies. Hurricane Helene caused catastrophic damage to the Blue Ridge Parkway that has resulted in indefinite closures of large segments of the roadway and many trails and historical sites. Substantial federal funding is needed for the Parkway to rebuild its infrastructure to support the millions of visitors the park hosts each year, which supports dozens of Appalachian communities.

Other NPS assets that sustained significant damage due to Hurricane Helene include Great Smoky Mountains National Park, which straddles the border of North Carolina and Tennessee, and the Appalachian National Scenic Trail, which crosses 14 states – including substantial portions of Virginia, Tennessee, and North Carolina. These assets attract millions of visitors into our states each year, which support numerous small businesses and gateway communities across Central Appalachia. The timely and comprehensive rehabilitation of these units and others impacted by Helene is essential to the long-term recovery of the surrounding communities, which is only possible with supplemental appropriations.

In addition to iconic NPS units, our states contain significant Forest Service assets that were severely impacted by recent storms. This includes the Virginia Creeper Trail, a 34-mile recreational trail located in Southwest Virginia that is co-managed by the George Washington and Jefferson National Forests, which sustained catastrophic damage from Hurricane Helene. The storm devastated 18 miles of the Creeper Trail from Damascus to Whitetop, Virginia, destroying 18 trestles and washing away extended segments of the trail itself, including trailheads, access points, and signage. The trail is the lifeblood of the town of Damascus and a vital economic engine for all Southwest Virginia. The indefinite closure of this significant section of the Creeper Trail threatens the economic well-being of the entire region. Robust and immediate supplemental funding is needed to ensure the full and timely reconstruction of the Virginia Creeper Trail.

Beyond the George Washington and Jefferson National Forests, several other national forests in our states experienced significant damage due to Helene. This includes the Cherokee National Forest in Tennessee and North Carolina, where large segments of the Appalachian Trail were wiped away and many other trails, recreational areas, and access roads sustained major damage. Similarly, the Nantahala and Pisgah National Forests in western North Carolina, which attracts millions of visitors each year and generates millions in visitor spending, experienced heavy damage and widespread closures due to the storm. Each day these assets remain in disrepair is another day countless small businesses and gateway communities will feel the impact of lost tourism revenue. Our national forests require significant supplemental funding to help rebuild

from this horrific storm event and continue to serve these communities and the millions of visitors they host each year.

While we were pleased to see the Biden administration's November 2024 Disaster Supplemental Request contain funding for critical disaster relief efforts including the Federal Emergency Management Agency's (FEMA) Disaster Relief Fund and the Small Business Administration's (SBA) Disaster Loans Program, we are deeply concerned that the President's request did not include funding for recovery efforts on public lands. Any disaster supplemental appropriations package considered by Congress must include robust funding for recovery efforts on public lands so our communities that rely upon these natural assets can continue to sustain their essential tourism industries.

Thank you for your continued efforts to support communities devastated by natural disasters, including Hurricane Helene. We appreciate your attention to this request. We look forward to working with you on a disaster supplemental appropriations bill that adequately addresses the needs of our constituents impacted by recent catastrophic storm events.

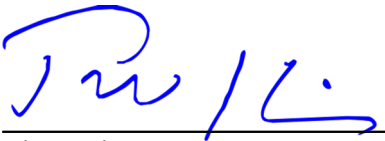
Sincerely,



Mark R. Warner
United States Senator



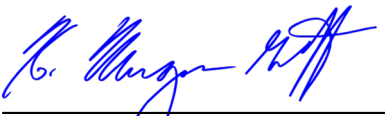
Thom Tillis
United States Senator



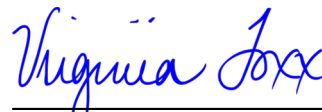
Tim Kaine
United States Senator



Ted Budd
United States Senator



H. Morgan Griffith
Member of Congress



Virginia Foxx
Member of Congress