

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

The Honorable Brooke Rollins
Secretary
U.S. Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Avenue, SW
Washington, DC 20250

The Honorable Doug Burgum
Secretary
U.S. Department of the Interior
1849 C Street, NW
Washington, DC 20240

Dear Secretary Rollins and Secretary Burgum:

We write today regarding our states' recovery from Hurricane Helene and the supplemental funding made available to the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) and Department of the Interior (DOI) by the American Relief Act of 2025 (H.R.10545). We urge you to expeditiously allocate this funding to our public lands in North Carolina and Virginia that were ravaged by this deadly storm.

Hurricane Helene devastated communities across North Carolina, Virginia, and large swaths of the Southeast. Historic flooding and high winds resulted in over a hundred deaths, damaged and destroyed thousands of homes and businesses, and decimated critical regional infrastructure in our states. Additionally, the storm caused unprecedented damage to public lands in western North Carolina and Southwest Virginia that are essential drivers of economic activity for many communities.

Public lands managed by USDA and DOI are crucial economic engines for communities throughout western North Carolina and Southwest Virginia. For example, the National Park Service's (NPS) most visited unit, the Blue Ridge Parkway, which spans 469 miles across the Blue Ridge Mountains in North Carolina and Virginia, supports the economies of dozens of communities in our states. In 2023, 16.7 million visitors spent nearly \$1.4 billion in communities surrounding the Parkway, which supported over 19,000 jobs. Helene decimated the Blue Ridge Parkway resulting in indefinite closures along large portions of the roadway and damage to many trails, historical sites, and recreational areas. The recovery effort for the Parkway will be one of the most significant and expensive infrastructure projects in the park's history, and its success will be essential for the dozens of gateway communities that rely on the Parkway.

In addition to National Park Service managed property, many of our communities in Southwest Virginia and western North Carolina contain U.S. Forest Service lands that were decimated by Hurricane Helene. This includes the George Washington and Jefferson National Forests in Virginia, the Cherokee National Forest in Tennessee and North Carolina, and the Nantahala and Pisgah National Forests in western North Carolina. These lands attract millions of visitors each year who contribute millions more in visitor spending that sustains countless small businesses and gateway communities.

Perhaps no Forest Service asset in the country suffered more damage from Hurricane Helene than the Virginia Creeper Trail, a 34-mile recreational trail that is co-managed by the Forest Service and the towns of Damascus and Abingdon in Southwest Virginia. The storm obliterated 18 miles of the Creeper Trail from Damascus to Whitetop, Virginia, destroying 18 trestles and washing away extended segments of the trail itself. The Creeper Trail is the most significant driver of economic activity in Damascus and one of the most significant tourism destinations in the entire region. The trail attracts more than 200,000 visitors annually, supporting local bike shops, restaurants, and lodging. In all, the Creeper Trail contributes nearly \$13 million annually in tourism spending to the region's economy. A prolonged closure of the trail could have devastating consequences for Damascus and the entire region. It is critical that USDA and the Forest Service move quickly to allocate appropriated funding to rebuild the Creeper Trail to ensure Damascus and other localities that depend on the trail can fully recover from Helene.

We were pleased the American Relief Act of 2025 (H.R.10545) included robust funding to address natural disaster-related damage to public lands across the U.S., including \$6.4 billion for the U.S. Forest Service and \$2.3 billion for the National Park Service. This funding is intended to support the rebuilding of iconic public attractions in our states, including the Blue Ridge Parkway, Appalachian Trail, and Virginia Creeper Trail. It will also support a broad range of other reconstruction and rehabilitation efforts on our public lands to ensure they can continue to safely provide recreational opportunities to our constituents and millions of additional visitors who help sustain these Appalachian communities. As our states continue to rebuild from Hurricane Helene, it is critical that this supplemental funding is deployed to our public lands swiftly to ensure a timely rebuild of these assets that our communities depend on.

Thank you for your attention to this matter. We look forward to working with you to support the recovery efforts in our states. Please do not hesitate to reach out if we can provide additional information or assistance.

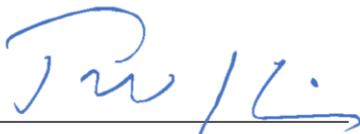
Sincerely,



Mark R. Warner
United States Senator



Thom Tillis
United States Senator



Tim Kaine
United States Senator



Ted Budd
United States Senator