



NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF STATE FORESTERS

444 North Capitol Street NW | Suite 387 | Washington, DC 20001 | www.stateforesters.org

November 20, 2024

The Honorable Patty Murray
Chair
Senate Appropriations Committee
U.S. Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Tom Cole
Chair
House Appropriations Committee
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Susan Collins
Ranking Member
Senate Appropriations Committee
U.S. Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Rosa DeLauro
Ranking Member
House Appropriations Committee
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Chairs Murray and Cole, and Ranking Members Collins and DeLauro:

The National Association of State Foresters (NASF) applauds your bipartisan effort to pass a comprehensive disaster assistance package before the end of the 118th Congress. As the Committees work in earnest to meet the nation's needs following two years of impactful disasters, we ask that your efforts also recognize and incorporate forestry needs in a final package.

In 2024 alone, millions of acres of public and private forestland across the country have been impacted by catastrophic hurricanes, uncharacteristic wildfires, insects, disease, flooding, tornados, and winter storms. The ability of our forests to continue to provide clean air and clean water, support rural economies, bolster wildlife habitat, and yield positive carbon sequestration remains under a constant and increasing threat. Moreover, private forest landowners, who manage the majority of our nation's forests, lack adequate tools to recover from natural disasters. Unlike other commodities, private forest landowners have no access to crop insurance or safety net programs, leaving them vulnerable after events like hurricanes, wildfires and floods.

As the primary delivery system for forest management activities on state and private forests – which encompass nearly two-thirds of all forests nationwide – as well as critical disaster response capacity, state forestry agencies respectfully request that the Committees consider the following investments.

State Forester Disaster Assistance Requests

In response to the unprecedented impact of Hurricanes Helene and Milton in 2024, Idalia in 2023, and disaster-induced beetle outbreaks in 2024, **we respectfully request that the Committees provide \$1.164 billion through USDA for timber block grant funding for private landowners** in the impacted states, to be implemented by state forestry agencies. Based off learnings from previous timber block grants provided in the wake of Hurricanes Michael and Florence, the design of these block grants should include:

- Grants to be administered by the USDA Forest Service;
- Flexibility for each state to set the parameters of its block grant to meet the needs of its landowners;
- Eligibility for all private landowners, regardless of ownership type or AGI;
- Payment cap of \$2.5 million per landowner
- Congressional direction on timeframe to operationalize state agreements (e.g., 180 days from bill passage);
- Preferential tax treatment for block grant income received by landowners; and.
- Additional administrative support funding to ensure swift implementation of block grants

In addition to critical block grant assistance, **we also request that the Committees provide the following support to Southeastern states impacted by the recent disasters:**

- Supplemental funding of no less than \$101 million through the USDA Forest Service State, Private and Tribal Forestry (SPTF) to support state agencies in delivering Cooperative Forestry Assistance Act disaster support, including:
 - Urban and Community Forestry – assist communities with re-establishment of tree canopy lost to disaster;
 - Landowner Assistance – assist private landowners to reestablish damaged forest resources, especially for those who are not able to access USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service or Farm Service Agency programs due to lack of clear title;
 - State Fire Assistance and Volunteer Fire Assistance – assist landowners and communities with preparation for, and addressing, increased wildfire risk from fuel build-up; and
 - Tree Nurseries – bolster nursery capacity to ensure adequate stock for post-disaster reforestation needs.
- Financial support modeled after concepts from S. 4251 Loggers Economic Assistance and Relief Act and the Pandemic Assistance for Timber Harvesters and Haulers (PATHH) Program.
- At least \$15 million through USDA Forest Service Research & Development for increased costs associated with Forest Inventory and Analysis in hurricane-impacted areas, damage to facilities, equipment and research sites, and critical post-disaster ecological and socio-economic assessments.

Wildfires, hurricanes and other recurring natural disasters have long-term and wide-ranging impacts on communities across the country. Some impacts, such as homes burning or roads washing out, are direct and immediate, while others, such as loss of markets, post-fire flooding and reduced tourism, can cause disastrous impacts for years after. Multiple federal agencies administer existing disaster relief programs to address the broad range of impacts. These include, but are not limited to, FEMA Fire Management Assistance Grants, FEMA Building Resilient Infrastructure and Communities Program, FEMA Hazard Mitigation Grant Program, and Small Business Administration programs. **Ensuring full funding for these programs is critically important for communities responding to disasters.**

NASF also asks the Committees to support:

- Fully funding the needs outlined in numerous Disaster Declaration Requests from Governors whose states have been impacted by wildfire.
- \$14.0 million under SPTF to restore forests affected by wildfires on Maui and Tropical Storm Ernesto.
- \$356.5 million for the Emergency Forest Restoration Program to assist landowners with recovery of forests after wildfire, hurricane, and other disasters.

- Federal assistance to combat the outbreak of spruce budworm in Northeastern and Midwestern forests.

Additional Legislative Needs

Beyond critical funding needs, the Committees should be aware of several legislative changes that would greatly aid in addressing current and future disaster needs.

- Pass the Disaster Reforestation Act (S. 217 / H.R. 655), creating tax certainty for landowners who need to reforest after a disaster.
- Enhance the Emergency Forest Restoration Program and improve its efficacy for landowners to truly capitalize on the \$356.5 million investment proposed by the Administration.
- Deliver funding through FEMA to support hazard tree removal in disaster-impacted communities, including along roads, rights-of-way and adjacent to structures.
- Expand the support available through FEMA Fire Management Assistance Grants to address fire impacts that continue beyond the date of containment.
- Waive or reduce cost-share and match requirements across all relevant disaster-related federal programming for local community applicants.

Bolstering Disaster Mitigation and Response Capacity

State Foresters utilize USDA Forest Service's SPTF to help private landowners and local governments prepare for and respond to wildfire and other forestry disasters. With over 26,000 collective employees including 12,000 wildland firefighters, state forestry agencies have the equipment and training that allow them to frequently serve in a rapid response and public safety capacity in the wake of natural disasters.

The unusual wildfires occurring across the Northeast this fall and Hurricane Helene's deep impact into the southeast speak to a need to provide sufficient investment to align with the fact that major disasters are happening where we least expect them and where we are least prepared for them. Bolstering funding for disaster preparedness and response in these existing programs is the most efficient and cost-effective way for State Foresters to help communities and private landowners prepare and respond. Key examples of SPTF programs include:

- Community Wildfire Defense Grants - financial support to at-risk local communities and tribes to create Community Wildfire Protection Plans and fund critical projects associated with those plans;
- State Fire Assistance - invests in training state and local emergency responders and in conducting land management activities that mitigate fire risk on non-federal lands.
- Forest Stewardship - the primary federal mechanism for engaging and supporting private forest owners, this program creates a financial and technical assistance connection to both mitigate disaster and assist in forest recovery following disaster.

As the Committees consider proactive natural disaster mitigation and response measures, increasing funding for SPTF programs now and in the future to ensure a ready stance towards disaster must remain a priority.

We again applaud the Committees for their commitment to delivering a bipartisan disaster assistance package, and we look forward to the thoughtful consideration of the critical priorities enclosed in this letter.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Patty Cormier". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Patty Cormier
President, National Association of State Foresters
Maine State Forester

CC: The Honorable Debbie Stabenow
The Honorable John Boozman
The Honorable Glenn "GT" Thompson
The Honorable David Scott