

**STATE OF NORTH CAROLINA
OFFICE OF THE GOVERNOR**

**JOSH STEIN
GOVERNOR**

May 14, 2025

To the President's FEMA Review Council,

North Carolinians are no strangers to natural disasters. As Governor of North Carolina, my job is to do everything possible to protect the people of our state from threats manmade and natural, and when they inevitably occur, to support families, businesses, and communities as we work to pick up the pieces and rebuild.

In addition to fires, snowstorms, and tornadoes, North Carolina has weathered three "thousand year" floods since 2016. They have damaged property, ravaged communities, and killed our fellow North Carolinians. Most recently, Hurricane Helene devastated western North Carolina, killing 107 people and causing \$60 billion in damage, which is more than three times the cost of our previous most expensive storm. These weather events are getting bigger, wetter, and more damaging. We must have a dependable plan for response and recovery.

There is no doubt that FEMA could be better and faster. But let us improve it, not abolish it. As Governor of a state vulnerable to hurricanes, flooding, and other extreme weather, I know we cannot afford for FEMA to be eliminated.

As Co-Chair of the Council of Governors, I signed a bipartisan letter to provide input to Secretary Noem from a variety of states. As the FEMA Council begins its work, I also want to provide input with more North Carolina-specific context on ways to improve how FEMA works with states to serve people before, during, and after a disaster.

Fast, Flexible Funding

After any disaster, we all share a common goal of getting assistance to survivors as fast as possible. The federal funds that arrive in communities after a disaster are a lifeline for people and governments, but it is no secret that these funds often move too slowly and with too much red tape.

The Council should consider recommending that FEMA disburse an initial tranche of funding immediately after a disaster through a block grant. Rather than requiring post-event applications

that take weeks or months to review and approve, send the funding through a block grant that is triggered immediately post-event based on independently verifiable metrics.

To be eligible for such a block grant, states would need a pre-approved action plan on file with FEMA, and the money would be administered according to that action plan and meet the unique needs of the state and disaster area. This is similar to local hazard mitigation plans currently required every five years. Block grants should not be the end of the funding, though. For many disasters, especially the type we've experienced in North Carolina, more funding will be needed. Those subsequent funds could be determined based on damage and needs assessments.

No two disasters are alike, and no two states are alike. We can attest that recovering from a flood in flat, marshy eastern North Carolina is very different from recovering from a flood in rocky, mountainous western North Carolina. The current one size fits all model for initial funding is cumbersome for states with very different needs. Not only are the impacts different, but the communities that experience those impacts have different financial and technical assistance needs. We need response and recovery solutions that anticipate these differences and deliver event-specific strategies for rapid recovery. An immediate transfer of federal funding, subject to a pre-approved action plan, would not only get the money to survivors faster, but it would allow states to use that funding to solve problems unique to their situation.

Make permanent repairs immediately eligible for FEMA Funding

Right now, FEMA funds can only be used to rebuild structures to temporary or pre-storm condition. In western North Carolina, where the terrain is uneven and complex, it can be difficult to get qualified contractors to do temporary repairs and then come back for a second job to make a structure stronger and more resilient against the next storm. What is worse is that in some instances, like temporary housing assistance, the cost of temporary assistance is as much or more than a permanent solution. We should be able to use FEMA funds to finish the job in one effort, build back stronger, and save taxpayer money in the process, such as what North Carolina has endeavored to do with FEMA public assistance and state funding for private road and bridge repair.

Move Away from Reimbursement Programs to Better Support Local Governments

To reduce the ongoing burden on states and delays in payments, programs that are currently reimbursable should be changed to an advanced payment or block grant drawdown model. The current reimbursable programs such as Public Assistance (PA) and Hazard Mitigation Grant Program (HMGP) require cash-strapped local governments to put up funding or seek funding from the state to complete a project that is then subject to FEMA reimbursement. Waiting for reimbursement not only slows the recovery and rebuilding process, but it leaves local governments that are reeling from disasters to make impossible choices about how best to fund rebuilding while maintaining government services.

FEMA should require states to submit an action plan for how this money will be used, and once approved, the funding is eligible to be drawn down. Instead of approving each project one by one, FEMA can then shift to a monitoring and compliance role to ensure states spend the money according to their approved plans.

Streamline the Process for Survivors

Lastly, to improve the experience for survivors, coordination across federal programs should be improved and streamlined. This could be done through creation of a common application for survivors that can be used as a baseline for all federal agencies and programs – FEMA Individual Assistance (IA), United States Department of Agriculture, Small Business Administration, Housing and Urban Development, and more.

The Council should also consider how to consolidate federal disaster-related housing programs, such as authorizing states to use FEMA funds for permanent housing repairs as they did in response to Hurricane Harvey, so the dollars go further faster and with less red tape.

Keep What's Working

With these reforms in mind, I urge the Council to consider the critical need for federal involvement in disaster response and recovery. FEMA's expertise and ability to scale up quickly is not something that every state can afford to keep on standby at all times. Replicating this type of program in every state would be a colossal waste of taxpayer resources.

North Carolina encourages the Council to recommend that FEMA retain several key functions including Individual Assistance, PA Technical Assistance, training and local capacity building.

Additionally, the recent interruption of the Building Resilience in Communities (BRIC) program is gravely concerning as our state has been using those funds to make communities more resistant to future events. While the program can and should be improved to cut red tape, states such as North Carolina need the federal government to continue investing in their resilience efforts.

As building materials, technology, and flood mapping have improved, we know even better how to prevent future storm damage that costs lives and livelihoods, and we have real-world data to prove it. Last year, PTC-8, an unnamed storm that slammed southeast North Carolina, hit many of the same areas destroyed by Hurricanes Matthew (2016) and Florence (2018). However, the homes the state rebuilt after Matthew and Florence, which were purposefully constructed to withstand future storms, that were in the path of PTC-8 incurred no major damage.

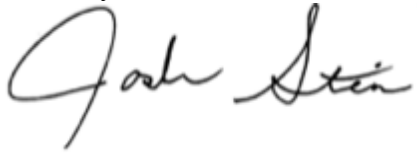
Investing in resilience and future-proofing our communities just makes fiscal sense. A recent U.S. Chamber of Commerce report found that every \$1 spent on resilience and disaster preparedness saves \$13 in economic impact, damage, and clean-up costs.¹

Nobody wants disaster to strike their state, but we know that simply hoping for the best is not a viable strategy. We must take steps to make disasters less deadly and less costly while also being ready to support survivors when storms hit. North Carolina remains committed to working in good faith with the federal government and this Council on ways to improve federal disaster

¹ <https://www.uschamber.com/security/the-preparedness-payoff-the-economic-benefits-of-investing-in-climate-resilience>

support, and we encourage the Council to keep the needs of our people at the forefront. We look forward to partnering with you to make FEMA more effective and efficient.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Josh Stein". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Josh" and the last name "Stein" clearly legible.

Josh Stein
Governor