

Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515-4312

October 11, 2024

The Honorable Deanne Criswell
Administrator
Federal Emergency Management Agency
500 C Street, S.W.
Washington, D.C. 20024

Dear Administrator Criswell,

As disaster relief efforts for Hurricanes Helene and Milton progress, the American people have legitimate concerns regarding the availability of FEMA funding to respond to these hurricanes and future events in the near term. FEMA is rapidly spending billions out of the Disaster Relief Fund (DRF) on non-immediate needs, including billions in unnecessary funding for COVID-19, which threatens to deplete the fund despite there being nearly two months left in hurricane season.

As you are aware, on August 7, 2024, FEMA announced immediate needs funding (INF) restrictions for the DRF, which prioritized funding for near-term relief efforts over longer-term projects.¹ However, on October 1, 2024, FEMA lifted INF restrictions just a few days after Hurricane Helene made landfall and days before Hurricane Milton began to form.²

As a result of FEMA's questionable decision to lift INF restrictions, FEMA spent \$9 billion of the \$20.26 billion Congress recently provided to the DRF in just eight days.³ Most of this funding has gone toward longer-term recovery efforts, not relief for victims of Hurricanes Helene and Milton. Indeed, as of October 9, 2024, FEMA has spent \$344 million on Hurricane Helene efforts,⁴ though I understand more funding has been obligated.

Previously, you estimated the \$20.26 billion provided to the DRF by Congress in September would be enough resources to fund near- and long-term recovery efforts until early January 2025.⁵ Now, you seem to be calling that timeline into question, which means Congress may be asked to borrow billions more on the backs of Americans sooner because of FEMA's misplaced priorities.

The depletion of the DRF is of particular concern considering the sheer amount of funding that has gone to COVID-19 projects nearly a year and a half after the COVID-19 emergency – which should have been terminated much earlier – was terminated. According to a FEMA document, as of October 4, 2024, nearly \$4 billion – or 45% – of the DRF funding that was delayed due to INF restrictions was for COVID-19 projects.⁶ About \$1.2 billion of that COVID-19 funding would go to the state of California alone.

¹ <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IN/IN12429/3>

² <https://www.fema.gov/about/reports-and-data/disaster-relief-fund-monthly-reports>

³ <https://www.politico.com/news/2024/10/10/fema-disaster-budget-hurricane-helene-melton-00183219>

⁴ <https://www.fema.gov/press-release/20241009/federal-assistance-hurricane-helene-exceeds-344-million-fema-expands-dual>

⁵ <https://www.politico.com/news/2024/09/30/biden-hurricane-disaster-funding-00181667>

⁶ "Disaster Relief Fund Majors Immediate Needs Funding (INF) - Delayed Obligations Reporting," FEMA, October 4, 2024

Worse still, in March 2024, FEMA estimated the DRF would fund another \$22.2 billion in COVID-19 projects from fiscal year 2025 through fiscal year 2028.⁷ This number could be much higher, as a July 2024 report from the Government Accountability Office found that FEMA has consistently underestimated its COVID-19 obligations.⁸ This means, despite the COVID-19 pandemic being long over, the DRF will continue to spend billions on COVID-19, which will jeopardize FEMA's ability to use the DRF to respond to disasters like Hurricanes Helene and Milton for years to come.

FEMA must be transparent about the decisions made using congressionally appropriated dollars and must ensure Americans who are currently suffering due to recent disasters are prioritized. As such, I request you respond to the following prompts and questions as soon as possible:

1. Please explain why FEMA decided to lift INF restrictions on October 1, 2024, a few days after Hurricane Helene made landfall and when the hurricane's devastation was readily apparent in states like North Carolina.
 - a. Does FEMA plan to reinstate INF restrictions prior to December 20, 2024? If so, when?
2. Please provide a full accounting of DRF funds obligated and spent since the Continuing Appropriations and Extensions Act, 2025 (Public Law No: 118-83) was signed into law.
 - a. Please provide totals for COVID-19 and non-COVID-19 projects.
3. Please provide the total amount of DRF funds obligated and spent on Hurricane Helene and Hurricane Milton recovery efforts.
4. Please explain how FEMA will ensure that COVID-19 projects do not continue to jeopardize FEMA's ability to use the DRF in the future to respond to disasters, absent a massive increase in congressional appropriations.
5. If Congress were to prohibit the DRF from obligating or spending any further funds on COVID-19 projects, would that give more flexibility to FEMA to use the DRF to respond to disasters?

I appreciate your attention to this important matter. If we are going to appropriate dollars for disaster relief, both FEMA and Congress should ensure the DRF prioritizes individuals impacted by disasters, which entails considering whether to prohibit the DRF from spending any further funds on COVID-19.

Sincerely,



Chip Roy
Member of Congress

⁷ https://www.fema.gov/sites/default/files/documents/fema_disaster-relief-fund-funding-requirements_fy25.pdf

⁸ <https://www.gao.gov/assets/gao-24-106676.pdf>