



**One Hundred Eighteenth Congress**  
**Committee on Homeland Security**  
**U.S. House of Representatives**  
**Washington, DC 20515**

October 5, 2024

The Honorable Deanne Criswell  
Administrator  
Federal Emergency Management Agency  
500 C St SW  
Washington, DC 20472

Dear Administrator Criswell:

Following the landfall of Hurricane Helene on September 26, 2024, communities across the Southeast have endured unprecedented flooding and utterly devastating destruction. As Chairman of the House Committee on Homeland Security's Subcommittee on Emergency Management and Technology, I have heard reports that many Southeastern communities were underprepared and unaware of the potential for destructive flooding in the region. The heartbreaking stories and the stark images of destroyed homes, roads, and businesses have captured the attention and the sympathy of the Nation.

At least 220 people have died, with many who remain missing and vulnerable.<sup>1</sup> In North Carolina, where the devastation has been especially acute, residents have reported that the severity and scope of the flooding took them by surprise. A local sheriff in Asheville, North Carolina, Quentin Miller, declared: "To say this caught us off-guard would be an understatement."<sup>2</sup>

It is understood that forecasting may fluctuate as a storm progresses; however, underestimations and inaccurate forecasts may harm those communities that are unknowingly vulnerable within the storm's path. In a natural disaster like Hurricane Helene, the rapidly changing and dynamic conditions prove to be a challenge in emergency management.

The situation in North Carolina highlights the critical importance of storm tracking and advance forecasting to provide timely emergency alerts and warnings to residents. Timely warnings and accurate emergency communications by federal, state, and local emergency managers are vital to ensuring that residents have ample time to prepare for and evacuate during a natural disaster. As such, on Wednesday, September 25, 2024, the National Weather Service warned residents in Western North Carolina to "prepare for catastrophic, life-threatening

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/weather/live-blog/hurricane-helene-live-updates-rcna173973>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2024/oct/02/hurricane-helene-destruction-timeline>

flooding.”<sup>3</sup> Governor Roy Cooper and local governments then issued states of emergency and warned residents of the potential for flash flooding and the need to seek safety. The emergency declaration for North Carolina was granted two days after the emergency declaration for Florida, on September 26, 2024.<sup>4</sup>

Nevertheless, the unexpected damage that followed the next day, Friday, September 27<sup>th</sup>, highlighted the unique challenges to emergency response operations in rural, mountainous regions, where cellular service is spotty, and residents are unprepared for historic flooding and severe weather events like that of Hurricane Helene.

Regarding FEMA’s pre-positioning efforts, homeland security advisor, Liz Sherwood-Randall, stated earlier this week that FEMA prioritized pre-positioning resources and supplies to Florida before pivoting to North Carolina.<sup>5</sup> As you know, community resiliency depends on accurate forecasting and the pre-positioning of resources in advance of a natural disaster. Buncombe County Manager, Avril Pinder claims that water was requested at the state level, “even before the storm started,” yet had been delayed, further exacerbating the water shortage present in Asheville, North Carolina.<sup>6</sup>

Therefore, the Committee asks that you provide information regarding FEMA’s advanced forecasting models, its pre-positioning of resources, and its coordination with federal, state, and local partners in response to Hurricane Helene. Please respond in writing to the following questions no later than 5:00 p.m. on Friday, October 18, 2024:

1. How did advance forecasting and rainfall modelling impact FEMA’s pre-positioning of assets in North Carolina?
2. How does FEMA assess the accuracy of its advance forecasting and rainfall modelling after the occurrence of storms, and how has FEMA adjusted its forecasting and modelling techniques after Hurricane Helene in particular?
3. Western North Carolina’s mountainous terrain has compounded the impact of flooding and proven to be difficult for emergency response operations. Were there inaccuracies or environmental factors that were not fully considered in advance forecasting?

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.citizen-times.com/story/news/local/2024/09/26/hurricane-helene-western-nc-catastrophic-life-threatening-flooding/75390965007/> ; <https://www.washingtonpost.com/weather/2024/09/30/helene-north-carolina-evacuation-flooding/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.fema.gov/about/news-multimedia/press-releases>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/wake-hurricane-helene-questions-emerge-government-warnings-response-rcna173347>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/wake-hurricane-helene-questions-emerge-government-warnings-response-rcna173347>

4. What modelling technology did FEMA use to predict the movement of Hurricane Helene and any subsequent damage or flooding in North Carolina?
  - a. How did FEMA make use of the modelling techniques of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration and the National Weather Service in devising its own assessments of Hurricane Helene's movements and subsequent damage?
  - b. Please include a list of any modelling technology used and if the Department of Homeland Security's (DHS) "Artificial Intelligence Roadmap" was utilized to help state and local governments prepare for Hurricane Helene.<sup>7</sup>

Please contact the Committee on Homeland Security Majority staff at (202) 226-8417 with any questions about this request.

Sincerely,



ANTHONY D'ESPOSITO  
Chairman  
Subcommittee on Emergency  
Management and Technology

Encl.

cc: The Honorable Troy Carter, Ranking Member  
Subcommittee on Emergency Management and Technology

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<sup>7</sup> <https://www.dhs.gov/news/2024/03/18/department-homeland-security-unveils-artificial-intelligence-roadmap-announces>