

OUTDOOR ALLIANCE

November 19, 2024

Senator Patty Murray
Chair Committee on Appropriations
154 Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

Senator Susan Collins
Ranking Member, Committee on Appropriations
413 Dirksen Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

RE: Disaster relief supplemental request for public lands and outdoor recreation resources affected by Hurricane Helene.

Dear Chair Murray, Ranking Member Collins, and members of the Committee,

On behalf of the human-powered outdoor recreation community, we write to encourage you to include funding for federal public lands and outdoor recreation in a supplemental disaster appropriations bill, including for the area of the southern Appalachians affected by Hurricane Helene. This area, in particular, contains a high concentration of federal public lands, outdoor recreation opportunities, and recreation and tourism-focused businesses that are recovering from a historic natural disaster. This letter summarizes input that Outdoor Alliance has received from our member organizations, as well as their local partners and affiliates in the affected area with the goal of informing your work to pass a disaster-relief supplemental funding package before the end of the year. Based on their input, we recommend that a disaster supplemental include direct investments in federal public lands infrastructure and natural resources, provide support to outdoor recreation and tourism-focused businesses, and aid partner groups in their critical work to reopen safe public access to the region's recreation sites.

Outdoor Alliance is a coalition of ten member-based organizations representing the human powered outdoor recreation community. The coalition includes Access Fund, American Canoe Association, American Whitewater, International Mountain Bicycling Association, Winter Wildlands Alliance, The Mountaineers, the American Alpine Club, the Mazamas, Colorado Mountain Club, and Surfrider Foundation and



OUTDOOR ALLIANCE

represents the interests of the millions of Americans who climb, paddle, mountain bike, backcountry ski and snowshoe, and enjoy coastal recreation on our nation's public lands, waters, and snowscapes.

On September 27th, Hurricane Helene (then a tropical storm) brought historic flooding and high winds to the southern Appalachian mountains, causing extensive damage to communities, businesses, and landscapes throughout the region. The affected region includes an extensive network of federal public lands, including portions of six national forests, a large portion of Great Smoky Mountains National Park, a large section of the Blue Ridge Parkway, and five units of the National Park System (NPS).¹ Several of these public land units regularly rank among the highest in the country in terms of annual visitation. An analysis by Outdoor Alliance's Geographic Information Systems lab found that the region includes at least:²

- 8,098 miles of trails available for hiking and running, including nationally significant trails like the Appalachian National Scenic Trail, the Art Loeb Trail, and the Virginia Creeper Trail.
- 1,517 miles of rivers that are ideal for whitewater paddling, including some of the most challenging and well-known whitewater runs in the eastern United States.
- 126 rock climbing and bouldering areas, including 3,233 routes, that are open to public access.
- 3,917 miles of mountain bike accessible trails, as well as an extensive road system used for gravel riding.

These recreation resources help support a diverse and growing outdoor recreation economy. In western North Carolina alone, outdoor recreation visitor spending supports \$4.9 billion in economic output, \$1.48 billion in labor income, and \$197.4 million in county-level tax revenue.³ More broadly, outdoor recreation accounts for

¹ NPS-managed units in the affected area include the Appalachian National Scenic Trail, the Blue Ridge Parkway, the Carl Sandberg Historic Site, the Andrew Johnson Historic Site, the Kings Mountain Military Park, the Cowpens National Battlefield, and Great Smoky Mountains National Park.

² Outdoor Alliance identified the affected area using the initial federal disaster declarations in early October within the southern Appalachian Mountains. The area covers 45 counties in North Carolina, South Carolina, Virginia, and Tennessee.

³ Ash Morgan, Melissa Weddell, and John Whitehead, Made X Mtns Partnership, Western North Carolina Outdoor Recreation Participation Survey (Feb. 27, 2024), *available at* https://madexmnts.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/WNC-Survey-Report-FINAL-5_28_24.pdf.



OUTDOOR ALLIANCE

2% of state GDP in North Carolina, 2.4% in Tennessee, 2.6% in South Carolina, and 1.7% in Virginia.⁴ In addition to the direct benefits of the outdoor recreation economy, the area's compelling access to outdoor recreation helps attract employers and high-skill workers across a range of industries who are attracted to the quality-of-life amenities that outdoor recreation provides. These benefits are at distinct risk without adequate, targeted resources for public lands and recreation infrastructure recovery.

Extensive rehabilitation and restoration work is required to reopen public access to outdoor recreation opportunities on federal lands. The region's transportation system—critical for accessing these recreation sites—was severely damaged by Helene, including the Forest Service road system and the Blue Ridge Parkway. Additionally, hundreds of miles (or more) of trail are currently blocked by fallen trees, and resources are needed to cover the cost of labor, gas, chainsaws, blades, fuel, and training to address this damage. In many cases, trails need to be restored, re-signed, rebuilt, or rerouted, and outdoor infrastructure like campgrounds, kiosks, and viewing platforms need to be rebuilt or cleared of fallen trees. The region's rivers, which support thriving whitewater guiding businesses, need to be cleared of trash and large debris and require ecological restoration to provide for future flood resilience, aquatic habitat, and recreational use.

Given these wide-ranging restoration needs, it is essential that Congress include funding for public lands and outdoor recreation in a disaster relief supplemental before the end of the year.

Key elements of this funding include:

- *Federal Public Lands:* Direct support is needed for federal land managers to repair infrastructure, assess conditions on the ground, and reopen access to the public. While we are still awaiting the estimates of damage from the Administration and the land management agencies themselves, we ask that Congress not overlook this critical need as you develop a supplemental disaster appropriations bill. Additionally, the U.S. Forest Service's current hiring freeze for seasonal workers should be lifted in the affected areas so

⁴ U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis, BEA 23-54, Outdoor Recreation Satellite Account, U.S. and States, 2022 (2023).



OUTDOOR ALLIANCE

that the agency can expeditiously hire staff needed to rehabilitate public lands.

- *Partner Organizations:* A large amount of recovery work on public lands is being conducted by partner organizations with a close connection to affected communities and landscapes. A disaster funding package should provide opportunities for these organizations to access federal funds. In these cases, matching fund requirements should be waived so that partner groups can act quickly to restore safe, sustainable public access to the region's recreation sites. Additionally, federal funds should allow for non-profit organizations to pay programmatic staff salaries so that organizations with staff capacity and qualifications can better contribute to the recovery effort. Funding for programs like the National Park Service's Rivers, Trails, and Conservation Assistance program can help these groups accomplish this critical work.
- *Recreation Businesses:* A large number of businesses in the affected area rely on tourism and access to public lands and waters for their livelihoods. Investments in the Small Business Administration Disaster Loan Program and the Economic Development Administration's Economic Adjustment Assistance Program are needed to support recovery. Congress should also pass the EXPLORE Act (H.R. 6492), which would simplify the permitting process for outdoor guides.

Thank you for considering our community's request. We offer our assistance as you develop a disaster relief supplemental appropriations bill.

Best regards,



Louis Geltman
Vice President for Policy and Government Relations
Outdoor Alliance

cc: Senator Chuck Schumer, Majority Leader
Senator Mitch McConnell, Minority Leader
Representative Mike Johnson, Speaker of the House
Representative Hakeem Jeffries, House Minority Leader



OUTDOOR ALLIANCE

Senator Jeff Merkley Chair, Appropriations Subcommittee on Interior,
Environment, & Related Agencies

Senator Lisa Murkowski, Ranking Member, Appropriations Subcommittee on
Interior, Environment, & Related Agencies

Representative Kay Granger, Chair, Committee on Appropriations

Representative Rosa DeLauro, Ranking Member, Committee on
Appropriations

Representative Mike Simpson, Chair, Appropriations Subcommittee on
Interior, Environment, & Related Agencies

Representative Chellie Pingree, Ranking Member, Subcommittee on Interior,
Environment, & Related Agencies

Adam Cramer, Chief Executive Officer, Outdoor Alliance

Heather Thorne, Executive Director, Access Fund

Beth Spilman, Executive Director, American Canoe Association

Clinton Begley, Executive Director, American Whitewater

Kent McNeill, CEO, International Mountain Bicycling Association

David Page, Executive Director, Winter Wildlands Alliance

Tom Vogl, Chief Executive Officer, The Mountaineers

Ben Gabriel, Executive Director, American Alpine Club

Rebekah Phillips, Executive Director, the Mazamas

Madeline Bachner Lane, Chief Executive Officer, Colorado Mountain Club

Chad Nelsen, Chief Executive Officer, Surfrider Foundation

