



Transcript: Senator Peter Welch's Testimony

Appropriations Committee Transportation, Housing and Urban Development, and Related Agencies Subcommittee

Communities in Crisis: What Happens When Disaster Recovery Funds are Delayed
December 12, 2023, 10:00am

Thank you, Chairman Schatz and Ranking Member Hyde-Smith for the time to speak today about the importance of providing federal support to communities quickly after a disaster.

In July, Vermont experienced several days of nonstop, extreme rainfall. We had nearly nine inches of rainfall in just a few days, causing flash flooding, washouts, and mudslides across our state. Rivers overflowed. Homes, businesses, and farms were destroyed. One community, Cabot, Vermont, had damage to every road in town. And our capital—Montpelier—was completely under water. Many businesses still haven't reopened, and there's still no functioning Post Office.

In total almost 3,000 homes were damaged. There were almost 90 road closures. The Vermont Severe Weather and Flooding Loss & Damage Survey Results estimates that 28,000 acres of agricultural land were impacted. Hundreds of small businesses have filed claims for losses with the Small Business Administration.

President Biden and his Administration acted quickly to provide support—the President quickly declared a major disaster declaration that enabled FEMA to provide on-the-ground lifesaving assistance to Vermonters. FEMA Administrator Criswell toured the damage within days of the storm, as did Transportation Secretary Buttigieg.

Meanwhile, Governor Phil Scott, state and local leaders and FEMA officials got to work on the ground. And our delegation got to work fighting to replenish FEMA's Disaster Relief Funds, which were dangerously low and necessary to support Vermont and other states, like Hawaii, grappling with other natural disasters.

While I am grateful we were successful in supplementing the DRF, more must be done to give our communities the support they need to rebuild. The DRF is far from enough

for the farmers, small businesses, and communities in my state and across the United States that have faced disasters.

When I toured the damage in Vermont, I saw firsthand the way my community came together to support and rescue individuals whose homes and livelihoods were underwater.

Six months after the flood, the waters have receded. Thanks to the hard work of the first responders, community leaders, neighbors, FEMA, and the generosity and kindness of strangers, Vermont is getting back on its feet.

Across the state, folks are in the early stages of rebuilding. But Vermont is made up of small towns and communities that don't have millions of dollars to rebuild dams without diverting from other needs like housing and health care. That's why the Community Development Block Grant Disaster Recovery and Community Development Block Grant Mitigation funds are so critical.

These funds give communities that need it the most the flexibility needed to rebuild now and prepare for the next flooding disaster.

Vermont needs substantial CDBG- DR money to help low- and moderate-income communities fill in the gaps of insurance and state assistance. This money will help the state repair wastewater treatment plants and drinking water systems that suffered substantial damage. It will take over \$50 million to repair five dams in Ludlow, Vermont, that were damaged by the floods. And the Johnson, Vermont, wastewater treatment plant, which was washed out during the flood, is now running on "Frankenstein mode" and "could fail at any time."

CDBG-DR will also help impacted homeowners. Vermont was already struggling with some of the lowest vacancy rates in the U.S. Many working families impacted by the flood haven't been able to find new housing and are forced to live with mold and damaged housing. In Barre City, where many homes were lost, residents are living on the streets or in RVs because their homes are unsafe. The number of homeless students in the local school district reportedly more than quadrupled.

Vermont has relied on CDBG-DR funds in the past to recover better from natural disasters. After Tropical Storm Irene in 2011, the Town of Waterbury secured CDBG-DR money to move buildings that had a history of flooding and elevate homes in the community. As a result of this flood mitigation work, the Town was able to better withstand the flooding in July.

Mitigation funding can help prevent future disasters. For example, Vermont would use mitigation funding to repair the 27 high-hazard dams, remediate areas impacted by the landslides, and create resilient spaces for communities impacted by the floods.

Severe weather will continue to happen in Vermont and across the country. Just this year, there have been over 50 disasters that have led to a Major Disaster Declaration. This is happening as far away as Florida and Hawaii, and as nearby as New Hampshire. For instance, New Hampshire communities in Sullivan and Cheshire counties also are in need of resources as they recover from flooding.

Communities that experience weather disasters turn to the federal government for help. And we in Congress always come through, because we know it could just as easily be our state. In fact, one of the first Senators to approach me on the floor after the flooding and offer his support for getting Vermont the federal resources it needed was Senator Kennedy from Louisiana. Senator Kennedy and I don't share a lot of policy priorities. But we share a commitment to the hardworking folks in our states who are putting everything they have into rebuilding their communities and their lives. We know the importance of coming through for them.

Failing to prioritize disaster funding now will leave our constituents feeling that their government has abandoned them to play partisan games. I urge this Committee to approve appropriations funding that includes both CDBG-DR and mitigation funding.

Thank you again for hosting this hearing. And Chairman Schatz it has been great working with you and your office under these unfortunate circumstances and ensuring our constituents have the resources to rebuild.

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