



**Senator Peter Welch  
Remarks as Delivered  
September 18, 2024  
On the Bipartisan Support for Disaster Funding**

Madam President, climate change, as we all know, has caused major disasters all across America:

From Vermont's catastrophic flooding in July of 2023, and again, exactly one year later, this past July, to the devastating wildfires in Hawai'i, to hurricanes in Texas, floods in San Diego and Southern Minnesota, tornados from Mississippi to New York. And just this week, Louisiana was hit by a hurricane, and North Carolina was hit by historic flash flooding.

And North Carolina earlier this week saw 18, 18 inches of rain in 12 hours—with the National Weather Service in Wilmington called a "once-in-1,000-year" event.

That's not normal.

From 2023-2024, there were 48 climate disasters that incurred losses of billions of dollars and more. These events were devastating for the communities. Many demolished homes and businesses washed away, roads destroyed, fields and barns, and the loss of life. And while we can count 48 from the NOAA today, we know that this list will only grow as storm damage is assessed from Vermont, and Louisiana, and North Carolina.

Disasters literally, from coast to coast, hit the United States: 35 severe storms; four floods, including Vermont's flooding; three tropical cyclones; three winter storms; two wildfire events; and one drought.

This is just going on, and on, and on, and it's not even the full picture. We've had 125 [Major Disaster Declarations] from the same period.

Madam President, I've shared the pain and anguish of Vermont's homeowners, farms, and businesses. And for over 430 days they've waited for Congress to act when it comes to supplemental relief for the disaster relief fund. Vermonters need that help. As do folks in Hawai'i. As do folks in North Carolina.

And there's bipartisan support for this effort because it is obviously a bipartisan crisis. These weather events don't have any favorites. Whether you're in a red state or blue state means nothing. It's the weather, and it'll do what the weather decides to do.

This week, I joined with Senator Brian Schatz of Hawai'i, and our colleagues from Louisiana, Maryland, Mississippi, North Carolina, California, and Alaska in sending a letter to Senate leadership urging them to quickly pass disaster funding so our states can recover.

We've got a solid bipartisan group, and regrettably, it's a growing group. The need is immense.

So, we do need more financial support immediately—through FEMA's Disaster Relief Fund. It's depleted, and it needs to be replenished.

One critically important program for long-term disaster recovery is through the Department of Transportation's Disaster Relief program.

Senator Sanders and I have seen the damage in Vermont. We've suffered brutal damage to our transit system:

More than 6,000 tons of debris were removed by the State of Vermont; 409 miles of rail have been closed; 149 miles of rail trail closed; 64 bridges in Vermont closed; and 46 state roads in Vermont closed.

As of last fall, Vermont incurred \$150 million in damages related to transportation alone.

Then, more flooding came.

Both Senator Sanders and I have traveled across Vermont and talked with community leaders about the financial stress they face right now.

We've also talked with my colleagues about the needs of our community leaders in their states, and their needs as they rebuild, and recover, and plan for the next climate disaster.

The reality is: the numbers don't paint the full picture. But we do need that relief to get people moving ahead.

But when your town, and your street, and your home, and your lives; the lives of the people you represent are so devastated—you really can't articulate a number. It doesn't capture it.

We need the Disaster Relief Fund replenished. We need transportation funding to reimburse our state governments for the costs they pay upfront when a disaster hits. We need more money for the highway emergency fund.

Our need is extreme. Our states and communities cannot do this alone. And that's no less true for every other colleague's state than it is for Vermont.

Madam President, today I'd also like to voice Vermonters' continued frustration—and this is on a slightly different topic but related to the flooding—is that 14 months after our post office was in Montpelier, the capital of the State of Vermont, we still do not have a fully functional post office.

After the July 2023 floods, the Postal Service shifted its Montpelier Post Office operations to a series of temporary locations, and that included parked trucks, miles away from where the old post office was. These were unsafe for the Postal Service workers, and they failed to ensure anything close to reliable service. There was air conditioning in the summer months, or heat in the fall, and no lighting—people literally were using, like, their iPhones to try to read what labels were. That's unacceptable.

After public outcry and demands from Senator Sanders, me, and our congressional colleague, Congresswoman Balint, the USPS moved postal operations to another temporary location.

We thought that was progress when the Postal Service signed a new lease downtown in April. And they said it would be open by summer—it's September—the location is still not open, and reportedly little progress has been made.

The capital city of the State of Vermont has not had a functioning post office for over a year. It's not a distinction we value. The Postal Service has an internal benchmark of restoring retail service within 180 days of a natural disaster. They are now 256 days overdue.

This failure is real and has very practical impacts on our constituents. Right now, Vermonters who live in Montpelier—they have to drive 7 miles if they want to buy a stamp or mail a package. And, it's obviously very burdensome for our businesses.

The United States Postal Service and Postmaster General Louis DeJoy, let me be frank, they've really failed to deliver. And it's shocking to me, but we've had instances where Senator Sanders and I and Congresswoman Balint have tried to interact with the Postal Service, and he's silent, nonresponsive. That's really an insult to the people of Vermont when they need this and can't even get an answer about what's going on.

So, this is not your standard, run-of-the-mill management failure of the USPS. No, this is really a dereliction of duty, in my view, by Postmaster General DeJoy. He is choosing to not open a Post Office—a task his agency has done thousands of times, quickly, in their 250-year history.

And while the Postal Service may be independent, it is not without oversight. It does not have the authority to disregard the input of the public—who so needs the services—or

Congressional representatives. And it does not have the authority to act contrary to its statutory obligations.

I want to close by saying again that I stand ready and willing to work with any of my colleagues to get this disaster relief done. We cannot recover or rebuild without the federal assistance that all of us in every state that has had a catastrophe weather event—we need the help. And we all need to help one another.

Not only for Vermont, but for every community that needs help—and will need help—in the future.

Madam President, you know we can get this done. We've done it before for our constituents. But the delay is going on too long. It's that simple.

Madam President, I yield back.

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