

## MISINFORMATION

# FEMA is battling rumors surrounding Helene recovery

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WASHINGTON>> The rumors surrounding Hurricane Helene are many. There are false claims that people taking federal relief money could see their land seized. Or that \$750 is the most they will ever get to rebuild. Or that the agency's director — on the ground since the storm hit — was beaten up and hospitalized.

As the U.S. agency tasked with responding to disasters, the Federal Emergency Management Agency has been fighting misinformation since Helene slammed into Florida nearly two weeks ago and brought a wide swath of destruction as it headed north. The false claims are being fueled by former President Donald Trump and others just ahead of the presidential election, and are coming as the agency is gearing up to respond to a second major disaster: Hurricane Milton struck Florida on Wednesday.

FEMA Administrator Deanne Criswell told reporters Tuesday that she has never seen the disinformation problem as bad as it's been with Helene, which hit hard in North Carolina, a state key to winning the election.

"It's absolutely the worst that I have ever seen," an uninjured Criswell said.

She said the online rumors are demoralizing for staff or volunteers who have left family behind to deploy to a disaster zone. And she said there's a real risk that local residents will hear these rumors and be too afraid to apply for the help they're entitled to.

Drew Reisinger, a Democratic registrar of deeds in Buncombe County, N.C., said part of the problem is that the affected regions have been largely without means of communication, so outside voices have an easier time setting the narrative.

"It's almost easier to let misinformation happen when all of our phone lines and internet lines have been down for so many days that we can't refute it," he said.

For days after Helene hit, his office did wellness checks when relatives or friends reached out to say that they hadn't been able to get in touch with people in the area. The vast majority of people were OK. But at one point, his office said it had done 15,000 wellness checks and that was mistakenly interpreted as meaning 15,000 people were missing.

He pushed back on suggestions that relief supplies weren't getting to people.

"Even in my office and the registered deeds office, we are taking so much stuff out into every holler, and we're finding that there's already so much food and water at every local Baptist church ... at the Elks Club and at the homeless shelter," he said.



U.S. Rep. Chuck Edwards, a North Carolina Republican, put out a statement Tuesday debunking “outrageous rumors” that FEMA is halting trucks from bringing in supplies, abandoning rescue efforts to bulldoze the mountain town of Chimney Rock, is running out of money and more. FEMA also has set up a website debunking conspiracy theories.

But others questioned where FEMA and other help has been. Pete Loftin and Crystal Pierce Clontz were talking Monday outside a donation center set up in Sunny View, N.C. They compared notes about how many bars they had been able to get on their cellphones — not many. Loftin had spent two days trying to cut his way out of his damaged driveway but wasn't sure how he could even apply for FEMA help.

“We all come together and are fending for ourselves,” he said.

FEMA said Tuesday that federal assistance for survivors of Helene, which has killed 236 people across six states, has hit \$286 million. It's also sent about half a million tarps, 210 generators, more than 16 million meals and other supplies to the affected regions.

This is not the first time that rumors have run rampant following a disaster, although experts say social media has supercharged the phenomenon. Criswell said they ran into similar problems in 2023 after a massive wildfire in Maui, Hawaii.

During Helene, false claims have swirled that residents will only get \$750 from FEMA and nothing more. That amount specifically refers to one-time payments that people can receive for immediate needs like buying medicine or baby food. People also can apply for a host of other types of assistance, like money for rent while they're displaced or money to store their belongings while they repair their homes.

The agency also has been falsely accused of confiscating donations intended for Helene and pivoting those supplies to Ukraine. Those are separate pots of money distributed by Congress.

The Institute for Strategic Dialogue has tracked the disinformation and misinformation circulating in Helene's wake. The London-based think tank that tracks online hate, disinformation and extremism said it found 33 posts on the platform X containing claims already debunked by FEMA or others that had generated 160 million views as of Monday.

After a disaster, there's usually a period where residents work together to dig out and get supplies to strangers and friends alike, said Jeannette Sutton, an assistant professor at the University of Albany who studies how best to communicate with people during a disaster.

But at some point, there is often a transition where that altruism is replaced by a feeling of competition for resources. She's concerned about what disinformation could do to push communities into competition even faster.

“You can imagine that if people started to come in from the outside kind of stirring things up, that that could help to kind of push people into that more corrosive environment,” she said.

Agency officials have said repeatedly that they can respond to multiple disasters at once — a message that Criswell hammered home Tuesday.

“FEMA has done this before. We manage complex incidents. We've managed multiple complex incidents,” she said.

Craig Fugate, who was FEMA administrator during the Obama administration and before that was Florida's director of emergency management, reinforced that message.

He said the agency historically has been designed to be able to respond to two major disasters at any one time as well as a number of medium to small disasters.

