

DISASTER RELIEF

FEMA chief condemns false claims about Helene response

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WASHINGTON>> The U.S. government's top disaster relief official said Sunday that false claims and conspiracy theories about the federal response to Hurricane Helene — spread most prominently by former President Donald Trump — are “demoralizing” aid workers and creating fear in people who need recovery assistance.

“It’s frankly ridiculous, and just plain false. This kind of rhetoric is not helpful to people,” said Deanne Criswell, who leads the Federal Emergency Management Agency. “It’s really a shame that we’re putting politics ahead of helping people, and that’s what we’re here to do. We have had the complete support of the state,” she said, referring to North Carolina.

Republicans, led by the former president, have helped foster a frenzy of misinformation over the past week among the communities most devastated by Helene, promoting a number of false claims, including that Washington is intentionally withholding aid to people in Republican areas.

Trump accused FEMA of spending all its money to help immigrants who are in the U.S. illegally, while other critics assert that the government spends too much on Israel, Ukraine and other foreign countries.

“FEMA absolutely has enough money for Helene response right now,” Keith Turi, acting director of FEMA’s Office of Response and Recovery said. He noted that Congress recently replenished the agency with \$20 billion, and about \$8 billion of that is set aside for recovery from previous storms and mitigation projects.

There also are outlandish theories that include warnings from far-right extremist groups that officials plan to bulldoze storm-damaged communities and seize the land from residents. A falsehood pushed by Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene, R-Ga., asserts that Washington used weather control technology to steer Helene toward Republican voters in order to tilt the presidential election toward Democrat Kamala Harris.

Criswell said on ABC’s “This Week” that such baseless claims around the response to Helene — which caused catastrophic damage from Florida into the Appalachian mountains and a death toll that rose Sunday to at least 230 — have created a sense of fear and mistrust from residents against the thousands of FEMA employees and volunteers on the ground.

“We’ve had the local officials helping to push back on this dangerous — truly dangerous narrative that is creating this fear of trying to reach out and help us or to register for help,” she said.

President Joe Biden said in a statement Sunday that his administration “will continue working hand-in-hand with local and state leaders — regardless of political party and no matter how long it takes.”

In the meantime, FEMA is preparing for Hurricane Milton, which rapidly intensified into a Category 1 storm on Sunday as it heads toward Florida.

"We're working with the state there to understand what their requirements are going to be, so we can have those in place before it makes landfall," she said.