

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

August 9, 2023

The Honorable Joseph R. Biden, Jr.
President of the United States
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20500

Dear Mr. President:

Farming and rural communities across New England suffered catastrophic flooding in July 2023. The region sustained significant crop losses and infrastructure damage, with many small businesses now facing the difficult decision of whether to shutter their operations.¹ We write to thank you for your administration's support for our communities in recent weeks and to request that you continue to address the ongoing needs of those communities in any upcoming disaster supplemental appropriations request to Congress.

In mid-July 2023, torrential storms and subsequent flooding destroyed farmland across much of New England at arguably the worst possible time in the season — before many crops could be harvested, yet after the point at which they could have been replanted.² In Massachusetts, floods impacted 2,700 acres across an estimated 110 farms, destroying over \$15 million in crops.³ In Vermont, floods are estimated to have impacted anywhere between 10% and 50% of all farmland in the state.⁴ Meanwhile, Connecticut producers lost more than 1,500 acres of crops, resulting in nearly \$21 million in lost sales revenue.⁵ Farming communities in New

¹ Vermont Public, “The Difficult Choice Facing Some Vermont Small Business Owners: Rebuild, Or Close for Good?,” Mikaela Lefrak, Andrea Laurion, and Eric Ford, July 14, 2023, <https://www.vermontpublic.org/show/vermont-edition/2023-07-14/the-difficult-choice-facing-some-vermont-small-business-owners-rebuild-or-close-for-good>

² Associated Press, “Northeast Floods Devastate Farmers as Months of Labor and Crops Are Swept Away,” Steve LeBlanc, July 21, 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/floods-northeast-vermont-farms-crops-577818980a7c1db0e67ff1cf3df51156>

³ Commonwealth of Massachusetts, “Governor Healey, Members of Congress Highlight USDA’s Disaster Declaration for Seven Massachusetts Counties,” press release, August 1, 2023, <https://www.mass.gov/news/governor-healey-members-of-congress-highlight-usdas-disaster-declaration-for-seven-massachusetts-counties>

⁴ U.S. Department of Agriculture, Natural Resources Conservation Service, “Estimates of Potential Impacts on Agricultural Fields,” July 2023, pp. 4-6, on file with the Office of Senator Peter Welch; Vermont Agency of Agriculture Food and Markets, “Agricultural Water Quality,” <https://agriculture.vermont.gov/water-quality#:~:text=More%20than%201.2%20million%20acres,essential%20part%20of%20Vermont's%20identity>

⁵ Connecticut Department of Agriculture, “Resources Available to Connecticut Farmers Affected by Flooding,” press release, July 21, 2023, <https://portal.ct.gov/DOAG/Press-Room/Press-Releases/2023/July/Resources-available-to-Connecticut-farmers-affected-by-flooding>

York, Rhode Island, and New Hampshire were also impacted.⁶ Meanwhile, throughout the region, many roads, bridges, and rail tracks were partially washed out or completely destroyed. Some dairy farmers were forced to dump milk when impassable roads prevented them from reaching processing plants.⁷

The flooding was the worst New England has seen in over a decade, and in some areas the worst in almost a century.⁸ Many small businesses in the region are now struggling to reopen. It will take the impacted communities months, if not years, to fully recover, with significant costs associated with rebuilding. Many of these small and rural communities that were impacted do not have the resources available to immediately and adequately respond to the recent devastation. Instead, in the weeks since the storms, towns across the region have relied on residents to take time away from their jobs and families to clean up roads, downtowns, farmland, small businesses, and homes.

In response, on July 14, 2023, you declared a major disaster in Vermont and ordered the provision of federal aid, including unlocking federal funds from the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and direct loans from the Small Business Administration (SBA), for the state to support affected communities and small businesses.⁹ FEMA assistance has enabled the state to quickly remove debris and make emergency but short-term repairs. Yet additional assistance will be needed. Additionally, though crucial to helping communities recover, SBA loans can pose challenges for small businesses that are still paying loans originating from the coronavirus pandemic.

Then on July 31, 2023, U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Secretary Vilsack designated seven Massachusetts counties as natural disaster areas.¹⁰ Several other counties in Massachusetts, Connecticut, Vermont, Rhode Island, New York, and New Hampshire were named as contiguous disaster areas.¹¹ This designation will allow impacted farmers to access emergency assistance from the Farm Service Agency (FSA) in the form of Emergency Farm

⁶ Boston.com, “Video and photos: What the flooding looks like across New England,” Susannah Sudborough, July 10, 2023, <https://www.boston.com/news/local-news/2023/07/10/video-photos-flooding-vermont-massachusetts-rhode-island-connecticut-new-hampshire/>; New York Times, “Flooding Closes Roads and Threatens Towns Through Much of Vermont,” Liam Stack, Jesse McKinley and Kristin Chapman, July 10, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/07/10/nyregion/flooding-ny-vermont-new-england.html>

⁷ Associated Press, “Northeast Floods Devastate Farmers as Months of Labor and Crops Are Swept Away,” Steve LeBlanc, July 21, 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/floods-northeast-vermont-farms-crops-577818980a7c1db0e67ff1cf3df51156>

⁸ *Id.*; New York Times, “Northeast Flooding Water Still Rising as Vermont Reels From Flash Floods,” July 10, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/live/2023/07/10/us/flooding-ny-vermont-new-england#vermont-flooding-hurricane-irene>

⁹ The White House, “President Joseph R. Biden, Jr. Approves Vermont Disaster Declaration,” July 14, 2023, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/presidential-actions/2023/07/14/president-joseph-r-biden-jr-approves-vermont-disaster-declaration-3/>

¹⁰ Letter from USDA Secretary Thomas J. Vilsack to Governor Maura Healey, July 31, 2023, on file with the Office of Senator Elizabeth Warren.

Loans and a Disaster Set-Aside to defer payments on direct loans.¹² However, these loans are insufficient relief for struggling farmers with little ability to repay them.¹³ Many of those impacted were small rural farmers whose resources were largely destroyed by the flooding and who lack crop insurance.¹⁴ These communities are urgently in need of direct federal assistance in addition to loans.

Your administration is expected to submit a supplemental disaster appropriations request to Congress later this year.¹⁵ Since 2018, Congress has consistently issued emergency supplemental appropriations for disaster relief.¹⁶ The Bipartisan Budget Act of 2018 authorized \$2.36 billion to cover certain wildfire- and hurricane-related agricultural losses not covered by crop insurance or by the Noninsured Crop Disaster Assistance Program (NAP).¹⁷ Most recently, in December 2022, Congress appropriated, and you signed into law, \$3.74 billion to cover past crop losses from natural disasters that were not covered by other forms of USDA assistance.¹⁸ The primary vehicle for these payments was the Emergency Relief Program (ERP).¹⁹ Unlike FSA's loan programs, ERP offered farmers relief payments that did not have to be repaid. New England's farmers need this type of assistance in the wake of the catastrophic July 2023 floods. In addition, programs such as the Department of Housing and Urban Development's Community Development Block Grant Disaster Recovery program (CDBG-DR), the Federal Highway Administration's Emergency Relief (ER) program, the SBA disaster loan programs, and the FEMA Disaster Relief Fund (DRF) have all proven to be critical to recovery for communities and small businesses in past storm recovery efforts.

¹¹ *Id.* Connecticut has also submitted a disaster declaration request. Letter from Governor Ned Lamont to USDA Secretary Thomas J. Vilsack, July 24, 2023, <https://portal.ct.gov/-/media/Office-of-the-Governor/News/2023/20230724-agricultural-disaster-declaration-request.pdf>

¹² Congressional Research Service, "Federal Disaster Assistance for Agriculture," April 21, 2023, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IF/IF10565>

¹³ Boston Globe, "Flooding Ravaged Massachusetts Farms. The State Should Help Farmers Recover," Editorial Board, July 28, 2023, <https://www.bostonglobe.com/2023/07/28/opinion/flooding-farmers-state-assistance/>

¹⁴ Boston Globe, "Devastated Farms Tally Losses from Western Mass. Flooding," Sarah Raza and Brian MacQuarrie, July 19, 2023, <https://www.bostonglobe.com/2023/07/19/metro/flooding-farms-western-massachusetts-produce/>; New York Times, "Vermont Storm Exposes the Strengths, and Limits, of New Flood Defenses," Jenna Russell, Richard Beaven, and Hilary Swift, July 12, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/07/12/us/vermont-flooding-tropical-storm-irene.html>

¹⁵ Punchbowl News, "W.H. on Brink of Sending Ukraine Funding to Hill," August 8, 2023, <https://punchbowl.news/archive/8823-punchbowl-news-am/>; Roll Call, "Efforts to refill FEMA disaster fund face competing priorities," Aidan Quigley, July 5, 2023, <https://rollcall.com/2023/07/05/efforts-to-refill-fema-disaster-fund-faces-competing-priorities/>

¹⁶ Congressional Research Service, "Agricultural Disaster Assistance," April 29, 2022, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/RS/RS21212>

¹⁷ *Id.*; Bipartisan Budget Act of 2018, Public Law 115-123.

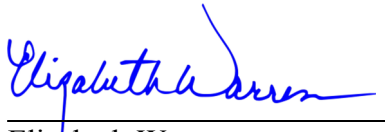
¹⁸ Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2023, Division N—Disaster Relief Supplemental Appropriations Act, Public Law 117-328.

¹⁹ *Id.*; Congressional Research Service, "Agricultural Disaster Assistance," April 29, 2022, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/RS/RS21212>

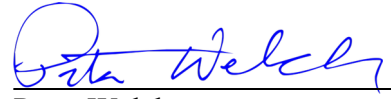
To help New England farmers, small businesses, and communities recover from the July 2023 floods, we ask that you include assistance for New England in your supplemental appropriations request. Specifically, we ask that you work closely with affected states to identify the funding sources — such as the FEMA-DRF, USDA’s ERP, SBA, and CDBG-DR — and amounts necessary to help the region recover and work with Congress to ensure those funds reach communities in need.

Thank you for your attention to this important matter.

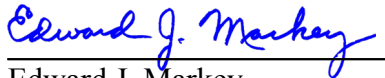
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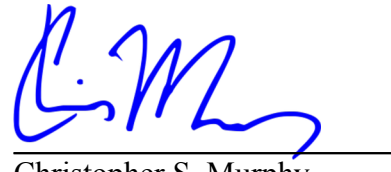
Elizabeth Warren
United States Senator



Peter Welch
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Edward J. Markey
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Christopher S. Murphy
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Richard Blumenthal
United States Senator



Bernard Sanders
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