

COMMITTEE ON THE BUDGET  
COMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT AND REFORM  
COMMITTEE ON SMALL BUSINESS

**Congress of the United States**  
**House of Representatives**  
**Washington, DC 20515-0919**

March 14, 2022

The Honorable Joseph R. Biden  
President  
United States of America  
1600 Pennsylvania Ave., NW  
Washington, D.C. 20220

Dear President Biden:

I write today to express my support of the appeal by Florida Governor Ron DeSantis regarding Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) Administrator Deanne Criswell's decision to deny the governor's Major Disaster Declaration request for Lee County, Florida and Charlotte County, Florida following the devastating tornadoes that impacted the Sunshine State on January 16, 2022. As the Member of Congress that represents Florida's 19<sup>th</sup> District—which includes Lee County—I am deeply troubled by FEMA's decision to deny much-needed emergency relief for the City of Fort Myers because "the event was not of such severity and magnitude" to require federal assistance. After speaking with my constituents about the resulting impacts of the tornadoes, I wholeheartedly disagree with FEMA's assessment.

To emphasize, the tornadoes caused destruction and substantial damage to hundreds of homes across the two impacted Florida counties—specifically with eighty-six primary residences being destroyed and roughly 140 other primary residences being impacted in some way by the tornadoes' 110–118 mile per hour winds. Moreover, the tornadoes resulted in the accumulation of approximately 9,000 cubic yards of debris, four total injuries, and many vulnerable people being temporarily and permanently displaced from their prior living arrangements. In the impacted demographic area of Lee County alone, approximately 66.56% of the residents are over the age of sixty-five, 84% receive Social Security Income (SSI), and 93.95% of the housing units were constructed before 2000—with the average unit age being approximately forty-eight years old. This illustrates the extreme social vulnerability of the tornado survivors particularly due to their age, fixed income, and the potential external stresses on their mental and physical health.

Lee County's aging population, coupled with the long-term impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, the fact that over 1,000 individuals are moving to Florida each day, the current inflationary pressures on the American economy, and the significant increase in rental rates and home prices around the country all exemplify the dire necessity of the governor's requested assistance. The federal recovery assistance will be vital for Lee County to ensure a swift, appropriate, and meaningful response to the devastating tornadoes. Specifically, available programs under the Individual Assistance Program (IAP), as requested by Governor DeSantis, will be crucial to provide my constituents with financial aid, housing resources, mental health counseling, and other important recovery resources as they try to rebound from the traumatic impact of the tornadoes in Southwest Florida. The risk of unstable housing and the unfortunate displacement of Lee County's older population encapsulates another important reason why FEMA's wrongful denial will have lasting impacts on the majority of my constituents in the impacted demographic area.

With that being said, I strongly support Governor DeSantis' request for a Major Disaster Declaration to aid the ongoing recovery efforts in Lee County and Charlotte County, and I also believe FEMA made a miscalculated mistake when denying the governor's request for all available programs under the IAP. Every jurisdiction in the State of Florida has been impacted by at least three federally declared disaster-related events in the past five years, which further demonstrates the depletion of state and local recovery resources as well as the grave need for the governor's requested federal emergency assistance. I echo Governor DeSantis' plea for federal relief due to the overall damages sustained in Southwest Florida, coupled with Lee County's limited financial resources for disaster recovery and its depleted disaster relief capabilities.

Therefore, I urge you Mr. President to use your executive discretion as the President of the United States to overturn FEMA's emergency relief denial and provide the requested assistance to alleviate the great needs of my constituents. Simply put, hundreds of people have experienced a life-changing event caused by the tornadoes, but due to the exhaustion of state and local recovery capabilities, Floridians from FL-19 request critical and much-needed aid from the federal government. Please don't let party politics further endanger the lives of my constituents by refusing the requested federal major disaster relief, and overall, I strongly support Governor DeSantis' Major Disaster Declaration request and his subsequent appeal of FEMA's disaster assistance denial.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Byron Donalds', with a long horizontal line extending to the right.

Byron Donalds (FL-19)  
Member of Congress

cc:

The Honorable Ron DeSantis, Governor  
State of Florida

The Honorable Deanne Criswell, Administrator  
Federal Emergency Management Agency