

Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20515

September 17, 2024

The Honorable Tom Vilsack
Secretary
U.S. Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Avenue SW
Washington, D.C. 20250

Dear Secretary Vilsack:

On August 4, Tropical Storm Debby hit South Georgia with devastating rain and wind that caused widespread harm to crops and property. Over four days, farms sustained flooding and wind damage that will undoubtedly result in serious financial losses for many Georgia growers. We implore you to take every possible step to help these growers recover from this storm by ensuring they receive the maximum support possible under the insurance they have purchased from the Federal Crop Insurance Program.

To protect against damage from hurricanes and tropical storms, our constituents proactively purchased supplemental insurance coverage under the Hurricane Insurance Protection-Wind Index (HIP-WI) Endorsement and Tropical Storm Option for more than 70 percent of their insured acres in Atkinson, Berrien, Coffee, Echols, Lanier, and Ware Counties. While USDA indicated that Echols and Ware counties were triggered as secondary counties for Hurricane Debby, USDA's Risk Management Agency (RMA) did not include Ware County, Echols County, or Lanier County as counties with a primary trigger. This has left the adjacent counties — Coffee, Atkinson, and Berrien — without payments following this devastating storm.

According to the Hurricane Data Provisions published by the Federal Crop Insurance Corporation, a tropical storm county trigger under HIP-WI occurs when “a 34-knot [tropical storm] corridor intersects the county” and “precipitation in the county equals or exceeds 6 inches during a four-day interval.”¹ Counties adjacent to those receiving a primary trigger also receive indemnities from the policy. The provisions also note that the NOAA Climate Prediction Center (CPC) is the sole source for the precipitation dataset used for this determination, which is calculated using a grid system.

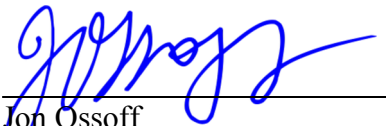
RMA published a map showing that all counties in South Georgia were within the tropical storm wind corridor.² Unfortunately, the NOAA CPC data and grid system resulted in a four-day rainfall calculation of only 5.86 inches for Ware County, 5.45 inches for Echols County, and 2.54 inches for Lanier County. In contrast, the director of the University of Georgia (UGA) Weather Network provided our offices with data from the U.S. Geological Survey, UGA, and the Community Collaborative Rain, Hail, and Snow Network (CoCoRAHS) network showing four-day rainfall totals of 7.38 inches for Ware County, 7.2 inches for Echols County, and 6.38 inches for Lanier County. These totals, which also reflect information provided by NOAA representatives to some of our staff, are well above the trigger for a primary tropical storm designation.

In light of this information, we respectfully request responses to the following questions by September 25:

1. How can RMA incorporate additional verifiable sources of precipitation data during the quality control process to ensure that HIP-WI indemnity payments are being made on the basis of holistic and accurate information?
2. What efforts does USDA undertake to verify that crop insurance agents are providing growers with accurate information about the conditions under which their indemnity payments will be made?
3. Will RMA commit to providing our staff with weekly briefings until this issue is resolved?

We thank you for your continued assistance in providing the resources necessary to support Georgia growers, whose family farms are the backbone of our State's economy.

Sincerely,



Jon Ossoff
United States Senator



Raphael Warnock
United States Senator



Earl L. "Buddy" Carter
Member of Congress



Austin Scott
Member of Congress

¹ <https://www.rma.usda.gov/sites/default/files/topics/Hurricane-Data-Provisions-2-2023.pdf>

² https://www.rma.usda.gov/sites/default/files/2024-08/Hurricane%20Debby%20RY%202024%20Rainfall%20Only%20Totals%208x11%20Port%20Map__8_19_2024.pdf