



FLORIDA DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE AND CONSUMER SERVICES  
COMMISSIONER WILTON SIMPSON  
THE CAPITOL

October 17, 2024

The Honorable Tom Vilsack  
Secretary  
United States Department of Agriculture  
1400 Independence Avenue N.W.  
Washington, D.C. 20250

Dear Secretary Vilsack,

It is with great urgency that I write again on behalf of Florida's farmers and agricultural producers with another request for you to issue a U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Disaster Declaration for counties impacted by Hurricane Milton on October 9, 2024. I also request you make any and all assistance under the Farm Service Agency and other USDA programs available to farmers to help them recover.

Hurricane Milton made landfall near Siesta Key, Florida, as a Category 3 hurricane with maximum sustained winds of 120 mph. This historic storm brought surge and coastal inundation, destructive hurricane-force winds, tornadoes, as well as extreme heavy rainfall and flash flooding for both coastal and inland Florida communities.

Hurricane Milton caused catastrophic damage to livestock, nurseries, crops (including devastating damage to citrus), inland aquaculture facilities and coastal leases, storage facilities, equipment, infrastructure, and farm labor housing across the state. In response, I deployed resources from the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services to survey the destruction to this vital sector of Florida's economy and the nation's food supply chain.

This major hurricane follows several years of above average rainfall, severe storms and winds, other tropical cyclones, hard freezes, and the significant economic disruption to all sectors of the economy caused by supply chain issues and mounting inflationary pressures, which may hinder access to necessary resources these farmers need. As you know, Florida has been hit by four major hurricanes in the past thirteen months: Hurricane Milton (October 2024), Hurricane Helene (September 2024), Hurricane Debby (August 2024), and Hurricane Idalia (2023). Three of the last four hurricanes impacted communities within the same twenty-mile section of the Taylor County coastline, which are home to many of our agriculture operations.

Damage assessments for the agriculture industry for Hurricane Helene, Hurricane Idalia, and Hurricane Debby were valued at more than \$1.5 billion. The initial damage assessments for the agriculture industry for Hurricane Milton is a staggering \$1.5 - \$2.5 billion. Agriculture is vital not only to the state of Florida but to the entire nation. We are a major agricultural producer and exporter, with \$8.88 billion in agricultural products sold annually as of the latest USDA agricultural census. Agriculture makes up one of the largest portions of Florida's \$1.2 trillion gross domestic product, and it is critical that this engine of our economy has the resources they need to continue to operate.

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I ask that the USDA move quickly to review and respond to this request and approve all assistance programs available under the USDA and other federal agencies. In addition, I urge you to look at assistance opportunities that are within your authority to grant. There are no words to describe the devastation to these family farms that have been impacted by multiple storms. Many are still waiting on relief from previous disasters. If immediate action is not taken, we are at risk of losing significant agriculture, aquaculture, and silviculture operations in this region due to circumstances beyond our farmers' control.

We are still waiting on declarations from the past three storms.

I look forward to working with your team to ensure Florida's farmers have access to all available funding and resources during this difficult time. Please do not hesitate to contact my office for any additional information.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Wilton Simpson', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Wilton Simpson  
Commissioner of Agriculture