

Breaking: Helene in Georgia: More than 400,000 still without power, VP Harris to visit



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The South can grow stronger and safer after Hurricane Helene

Smarter rebuilding can mitigate future disasters.



Credit: Miguel Martinez-Jimenez

An aerial view shows the Vinings area and the Lovett School on Sept. 27, after the Chattahoochee River flooded in the aftermath of Hurricane Helene. (Miguel Martinez/AJC)

By Tom Kiernan

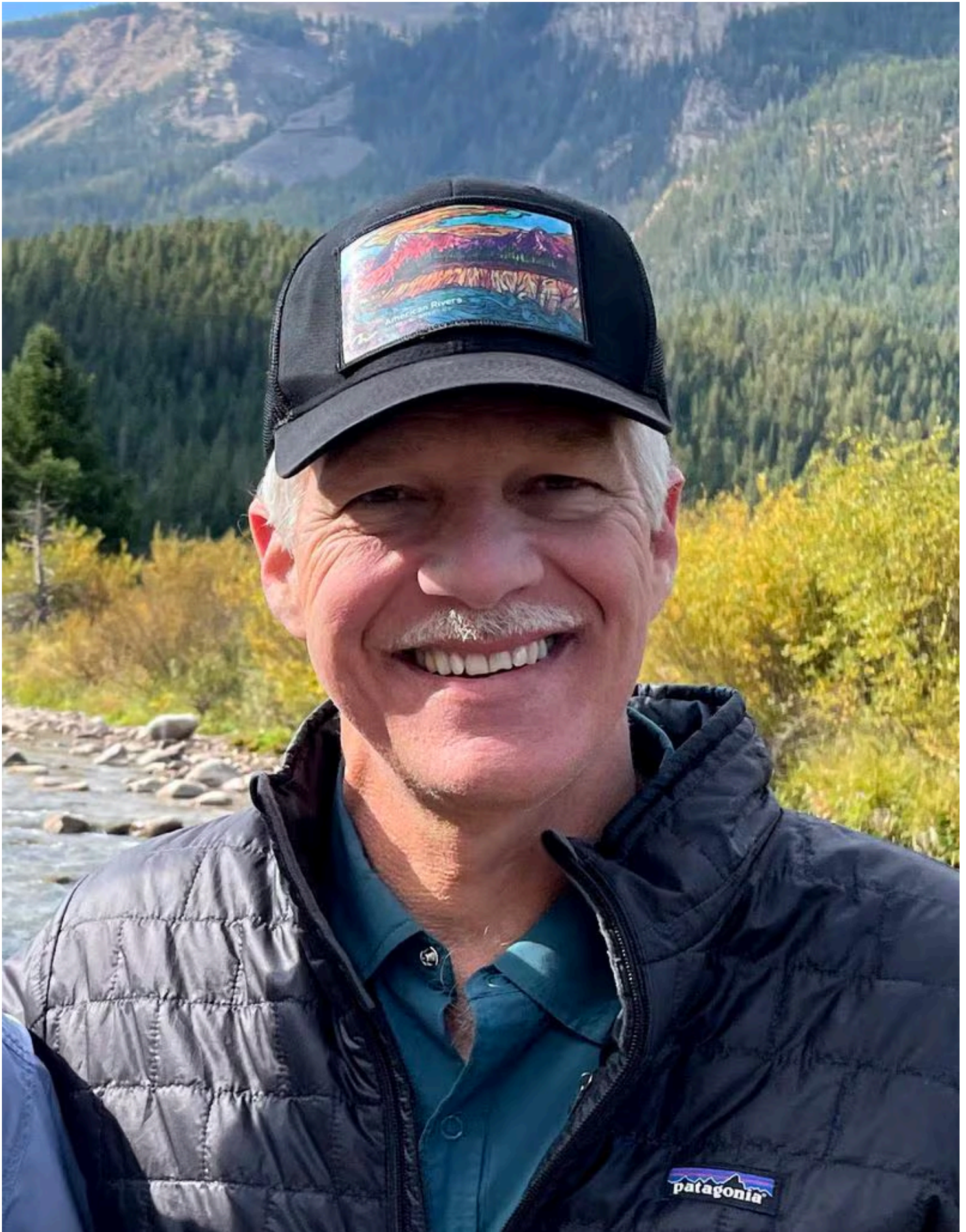
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Hurricane Helene left a [heartbreaking trail of destruction across the Southeast](#) after it came ashore in the Big Bend region of Florida late Sept. 26. The hurricane and related flooding have [claimed more than 150 lives](#) to date, and destroyed homes and businesses. Evacuation sirens sounded as [dams threatened to fail](#) after [historically heavy rains](#). [Landslides cut off many communities](#) from travel, and many remain without power or water.

This powerful storm underscores how river communities throughout most of the United States are on the front lines of the worst impacts of climate change — and how the climate crisis is a water crisis. Hurricanes bring flooding, not only from storm surge along the coast but also from extreme precipitation that affects river communities many miles inland.

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Credit: Handout

Tom Kiernan, American Rivers

Though it might be difficult to see now, the region can be a model for natural flood protection solutions — and can prove to the nation and the world how to make communities safer and stronger in the face of climate change. Communities across the Southeast will be making decisions in the coming days and weeks about how to move forward and rebuild. There are proven ways to keep people and property safe along rivers while reaping all of the benefits a healthy river offers. That is why American Rivers is calling on the Biden administration and governors across the region to take emergency actions in support of people and healthy rivers.

Here are three steps the administration can take right now to support river communities:

- Improve access to disaster relief: Congress must pass a supplemental appropriations bill that funds the Federal Emergency Management Agency's disaster relief fund. The [fund was already depleted](#) before Helene, which restricts FEMA's ability to help communities rebuild after the initial threat has passed. The administration also needs to [eliminate the barriers](#) that often prevent low-income communities and communities of color from accessing assistance.
- Help people move to safer ground: Several repeatedly flooded communities have made the decision to relocate to higher ground. Many want to but lack the resources. The administration should require [FEMA](#) and the [U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development](#) to better integrate programs for affordable housing with healthy flood plain management to meet the housing needs of families and communities that need to relocate to higher, safer ground. Programs helping people rebuild after a storm should provide sufficient financial support to buy a similar property outside of the flood area, not just the cost of rebuilding an existing property that remains in harm's way.
- Strengthen natural defenses: Flood plains are the low-lying lands along a river that hold and absorb floodwaters during a storm. Too often, houses and business are allowed to be built right next to a river or stream, yielding a high risk of flooding over the life of a home loan or business investment while lessening the ability of the flood plain to absorb water. We must restore and reconnect flood plains that are communities' natural

defenses against flood damage. In addition, thousands of outdated, unsafe dams are ticking time bombs on rivers across the country. We must repair or remove outdated, unsafe dams to prevent catastrophic failure and downstream destruction. An investment in the “natural infrastructure” of a healthy river is an investment in a community’s long-term health and safety.

As communities across the region recover and rebuild, we have an opportunity to break the devastating cycle of flood damage. By advancing smart, natural solutions along our rivers, we can make communities safer and stronger.

Tom Kiernan is president of American Rivers.

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