



Hurricane Helene: Support and Uncertainty for Small Family Farms during Early Response and Recovery

Part 2: A snapshot assessment from Western North Carolina farmers on financial supports and assistance.

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ASAP Local Food Research Center
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Snapshot Findings

In spring 2025, ASAP released a report on the immediate aftermath of Hurricane Helene on farms in Western North Carolina (WNC)¹. This second report offers a snapshot of the early phase of recovery (the first six-to-nine months) after Hurricane Helene. To gather insights, ASAP followed the subset of small farms that received immediate needs grants to continue to gauge and support the changing needs and challenges. The goal of this snapshot is to offer some perspective on trends and findings for the type of support that may be most needed for early intervention, as well as identify gaps and continued areas of uncertainty over the next phase of recovery.

As a reminder, on September 27th, 2024 Hurricane Helene brought historic rainfall and devastating winds leading to catastrophic damage and took the lives of more than 105 people in WNC. The storm damaged roads and bridges, displaced topsoil impacting soil composition and fertility, and caused significant equipment and infrastructure damage across the region, including impacts across Appalachian Grown (AG) certified farms—a group of nearly 900 small-scale, family-owned farm businesses growing food for local market outlets. The President declared this event a Major Disaster, and the NC Office of State Budget and Management estimated in December 2024 the comprehensive damage and needs assessment for the state was \$59.6B.

Within the 23 Helene disaster-designated counties of WNC there are 9,425 farms, with more than half of the farms operating on fewer than 36 acres. Thus, the recovery and response needs of these small, mountain farms are somewhat unique to the region. In general, small farms face challenges including accessing capital, low profit margins, land access, market access, infrastructure, and labor. In responding and recovering from this scale of disaster it is not only the farm business that is impacted, but these challenges are exacerbated and layered with storm impacts across homes, markets, and community infrastructure and institutions (e.g., schools, restaurants) as well.

In addition to the storm compounding existing challenges facing small farm viability and rural communities, uncertainties have been amplified in 2025 with delays and cuts to federal disaster assistance as well as factors such as tariffs and the disruption and closure of federal and state local programs ranging from benefits to procurement.

Understanding the needs and challenges faced by these small farms also requires the context for which these farms operate and key points of intervention to support recovery. Roughly half of the farms in WNC grow and sell products other than food (e.g., hay, forest products, nursery plants, or cow-calf operations that don't produce finished beef). Farms in the AG producer survey (2024) report an estimated contribution of nearly \$56 million annually to the local economy and are critical connection points for community resilience.

¹ <https://asapconnections.org/local-food-research-center/>

This snapshot assessment on early recovery focused on the 133 farms who grow food for local markets and received ASAP's Appalachian Grown Farmer Immediate Needs Grant (AGFING) in the weeks following the storm. AGFING farmers were sent an online survey in April 2025. In addition to offering insight on immediate damages, these farms were asked about the types of support and assistance requested, barriers to receiving support, and remaining needs approximately six months after the storm. The survey findings were augmented by one-on-one consultation information obtained by ASAP Local Food Campaign staff in spring and summer 2025.

Six months after Helene, ASAP's survey found that WNC farmers sought financial support across state and federal programs, with a majority applying for Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) (68 percent) and Farm Service Agency (65 percent) support/programs. Over 35 percent applied for federal crop insurance, and similarly, 35 percent applied for the USDA Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) programs. One-third (36 percent) applied for NC Dept. of Agriculture crop loss or infrastructure damage support.

Among those that applied for federal crop insurance, at the time of survey, 40 percent had received funds, 30 percent were awaiting decision on funding and 30 percent had been denied. Among farmers that applied for FSA, 23 percent had received funds, 23 percent had received a contract but no funding yet, 43 percent were awaiting a decision, and 11 percent had been denied. A majority, 59 percent, of farmers that applied for FEMA were denied whereas 13 percent had applied and were awaiting a decision, and 28 percent had received funds.

With physical storm damage varying widely across farms, and program eligibility influenced by a number of factors, there are few generalized statements one can make about the impact of Helene and the support farmers received at the six-month mark or even a year after the storm. Yet, there are some key trends and indicators to note as we begin to see longer term impacts and ripple effects in the region, as well as key intervention points for preparedness, response, and recovery for future natural disasters.

Key highlights and themes included:

- More than half of the subset of farms surveyed met the USDA definition of small and limited resource. All are family owned and/or operated.
- Challenges specific to regional farms included: not qualifying or being denied support based on small scale and/or diversified business models; confusion around what losses were covered by what program; compensation rates based on commodity pricing versus direct market sales; insufficient replacement costs for mature plants/trees, and if/how lost revenue would be considered.

A multi-generational family orchard business shared about their lost market opportunities, *“With Helene, we actually were very blessed. None of our structures were hurt. We had a few apple trees that blew over, but we were able to straighten them back up. Our problem was our road. We had a lot of people come to visit us, but both sides of our road were destroyed and people could not get here. So, we had to close for four weeks in October, our busiest time of the year. It was very painful and greatly impacted our revenue.”*

- System challenges reported included the burdensome and slow process of applying for state and federal support including duplicate forms, necessary farm or office visits, as well as issues with online forms when power and internet were not available.

One farmer shared the issues of applying for grants in the aftermath with no and reduced services such as power and internet *“Several grants required multi step processes and constant monitoring which was very difficult when power, internet, and cell service were out for almost two months.”*

- Ongoing supports that were needed included manual labor (e.g., tree and debris removal, streambank restoration, grading); funding for infrastructure repair and material contributions (e.g., backhoe time, compost, topsoil; soil testing); counseling including physical and mental health.
- Responsive, community based support was vital in the months after the storm, particularly because of the delay and uncertainty of federal and state disaster support. Community and regional support was strong and the majority of farmers included mention of critical and timely support of volunteers, nonprofits, and local customers. The importance of small, immediate grant funding was noted as key support for short term relief.

“It took state agencies too long to help us. Two months elapsed before we were allowed to start any kind of work on the site, costing us thousands of dollars in production due to no winter gardens.”

- With the delay and uncertainty of what losses would be compensated, many farms had to plan and start the 2025 season with a different baseline or expectations. How this impacts 2025 production and sales will be examined with the end of year 2025 producer survey, but farmers mentioned delayed or reduced production, loss or reduction of reliable markets such as restaurant and agritourism, higher costs and pivots across market outlets reducing efficiencies and profits.

“We’re holding steady with last year’s sales. This is good, but we’re also working hard to make ourselves more visible. We believe if nothing had changed, we would be in a growth phase, so we are simply working hard to outpace the downturn in the market, which is very hard work.”

Proposed solutions for recouping lost revenue included additional stable markets and marketing assistance to expand sales and reach customers for purchasing products. Other considerations for financial support could include mortgage or debt forgiveness.

Reflecting on what type of support was most valuable, as well as what is needed to support small farms and local food economies through future disasters, themes that emerged included:

- Streamlined application processes across programs
- Clarity around types of assistance available for different farm business models
- Assistance programs tailored for small-mountain farms
- Farm assistance for diversified business models, e.g., value-added products or agritourism
- Farm production and infrastructure to mitigate risk and extend seasonal production, e.g., tunnels, greenhouses
- Marketing assistance to expand outlets and revenue streams
- Fair replacement costs, e.g., perennial plants, mature fruit-bearing trees, fish
- Timely financial assistance
- Efficient communication methods
- Preparedness and resiliency business planning

Like farmers in the region, ASAP continues to assess impacts and changing needs in the aftermath of the storm to support farm stability and a more resilient food system. This is part of ongoing research and learning that informs strategies for helping local farms thrive, linking farmers with markets and supporters, and building healthy communities through connections to local food.

ASAP continues to focus on creating responsive support for small farm viability and local food system development through farmer training and assistance, local food and farm promotions, consumer education and engagement, and key food system connections that illustrate the value and impact of local food in supporting strong farms and healthy communities.



ASAP will combine 2025 data and reflection gathered through the annual Appalachian Grown producer survey and consultations with longitudinal data across farm sales and local market outlets in a phase 3 report to be released in 2026. This report will examine longer term impacts of Helene on small farms and local food economies in the Southern Appalachians as well as identifying key areas for support.

Appendix

Context

On September 27th, 2024 Hurricane Helene brought historic rainfall, strong winds and tornadoes leading to widespread damage in Appalachia and took the lives of more than 100 people in Western North Carolina (WNC). The storm damaged roads and bridges, displaced topsoil impacting soil composition and fertility, and caused significant equipment and infrastructure damage across the region, including impacts across Appalachian Grown (AG) certified farms—a group of nearly 900 small-scale, family-owned farm businesses growing food for local market outlets. The President declared a Major Disaster. The North Carolina Office of State Budget and Management estimated in December 2024 the comprehensive damage and needs assessment for the state was \$59.6B and since then damages, lost revenue, and repair estimates for agriculture run as high as \$5 billion.

Appalachian Sustainable Agriculture Project (ASAP), a nonprofit supporting family farms and communities in the Southern Appalachians, has been monitoring the impacts of Helene on small-scale farms and the implications for local food economies. Working with a network of nearly 900 family-owned farms growing food for local market outlets, ASAP's work augments other state and regional research in ensuring the unique perspective and challenges of the mountain farms. Through surveys, phone calls, and facilitated meetings, ASAP staff estimated the immediate scope and cost of the hurricane on the farming community and local food economy of the Appalachian Grown (AG) regions in the Fall of 2024. Initial findings were released as a report in May of 2025, including 86 percent of farms reporting physical damage and estimated cleanup and recovery costs from physical damage averaging \$40,000. This is significant and was combined with lost 2024 sales due to product loss and closed market outlets. The full report can be found on ASAP's website asapconnections.org/local-food-research-center.

Farming the French Broad River region of the Southern Appalachians has always been challenging. A land of fertile and loamy river valleys and craggy inhospitable highlands, the landscape plays a major role in determining suitable farming locations along the French Broad River Region of the Southern Appalachians. As a result, the majority of farms are confined to small parcels in low-lying river valleys and are highly susceptible to flooding. Within the 23 disaster-designated counties of WNC there are 9,425 farms covering 839,433 acres according to the 2022 USDA Census of Agriculture. The average farm size is small however –86 acres compared to the national average of 463 acres; more than half of the farms operate on fewer than 36 acres.

Methodology

ASAP certifies nearly 900 farms, two-thirds of which are in WNC, as Appalachian Grown (AG). AG certified farms are a subset of the farms identified by the Census of Agriculture. They are small-scale, family-owned farms growing food for local market outlets.

The timing of the survey—sent more than 6 months after the storm—helps provide information relevant to assess the experience of farmers beyond just initial impacts. With the fully-realized cost and impact of the storm unfolding, Part 2 of this ongoing assessment includes early-phase data on farmer’s experience accessing financial support and technical assistance after the storm as well as identifying ongoing needs for supporting small farms and local food economies.

The survey was sent to the 133 farmers who received ASAP’s Appalachian Grown Farmer Immediate Needs Grant (AGFING) funds following Hurricane Helene through an email link. Results were captured through SurveyMonkey. It was open from April 11 to May 9, 2025. Fifty-nine of the 133 farms completed the survey for a response rate of 44 percent (59 of 133). As ancillary information, through outreach and case support, ASAP’s Local Food Campaign staff followed up with farmers through 1:1 phone calls regarding sources of support and assistance.

Financial Supports and Technical Assistance

Within days of the hurricane, ASAP opened the Immediate Needs Grant in order to provide a small, but immediate infusion of funds to support farms with significant losses. This funding was available to new and existing Appalachian Grown (AG) farmers impacted by the storm and also offered the opportunity to connect impacted growers to broader resources and support.

Applications opened on October 1 and nearly 200 farmers applied. Three quarters of those resided in seven counties—Buncombe (29 percent), Henderson (13 percent), Haywood (8 percent), Watauga (8 percent), Yancey (8 percent), Madison (5 percent), and McDowell (5 percent). Some farmers were in their first year of farming when the storm hit, while others had been farming more than 50 years. On average, applicants reported farming for 15 years. **Over half of the applicants reported meeting the USDA definition of a limited resource farmer, and 56 percent reported that more than half their household income was derived from their farm business.**

State and Federal Financial Support

The survey found that there were a variety of sources of state and federal financial support that were considered by WNC farmers with a majority applying for Federal Emergency Management Agency or FEMA (68 percent) and Farm Service Agency or FSA (65 percent). Over 35 percent applied

for federal crop insurance, and similarly, 35 percent applied for the USDA Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) programs. One-third (36 percent) applied for North Carolina Department of Agriculture (NCDA) crop loss or infrastructure damage support, reflected in the table below.

Among those that applied for federal crop insurance, 40 percent had received funds, 30 percent were awaiting decision on funding (pending) and 30 percent had been denied. Among farmers that applied for FSA, 23 percent had received funds, 23 percent had received a contract but no funding yet, 43 percent were awaiting a decision, and 11 percent had been denied. A majority, 59 percent, of farmers that applied for FEMA were denied whereas 13 percent had applied and were awaiting a decision, and 28 percent had received funds, Figure 1.

It should be noted that the survey did not explore in-depth nuances of FEMA assistance, in particular that FEMA is primarily providing financial assistance to households that have experienced loss and that when individuals live in a home on their farm property there can be confusion by both parties related to whether assistance is for the homestead or for the farm business. We were also not able to fully assess whether a specific farm met application criteria and thus was eligible to apply for a type of support, impacting the interpretation of data.

Figure 1. State and Federal Financial Support reported by Farmers (excluding “Did not apply”) (n=59)

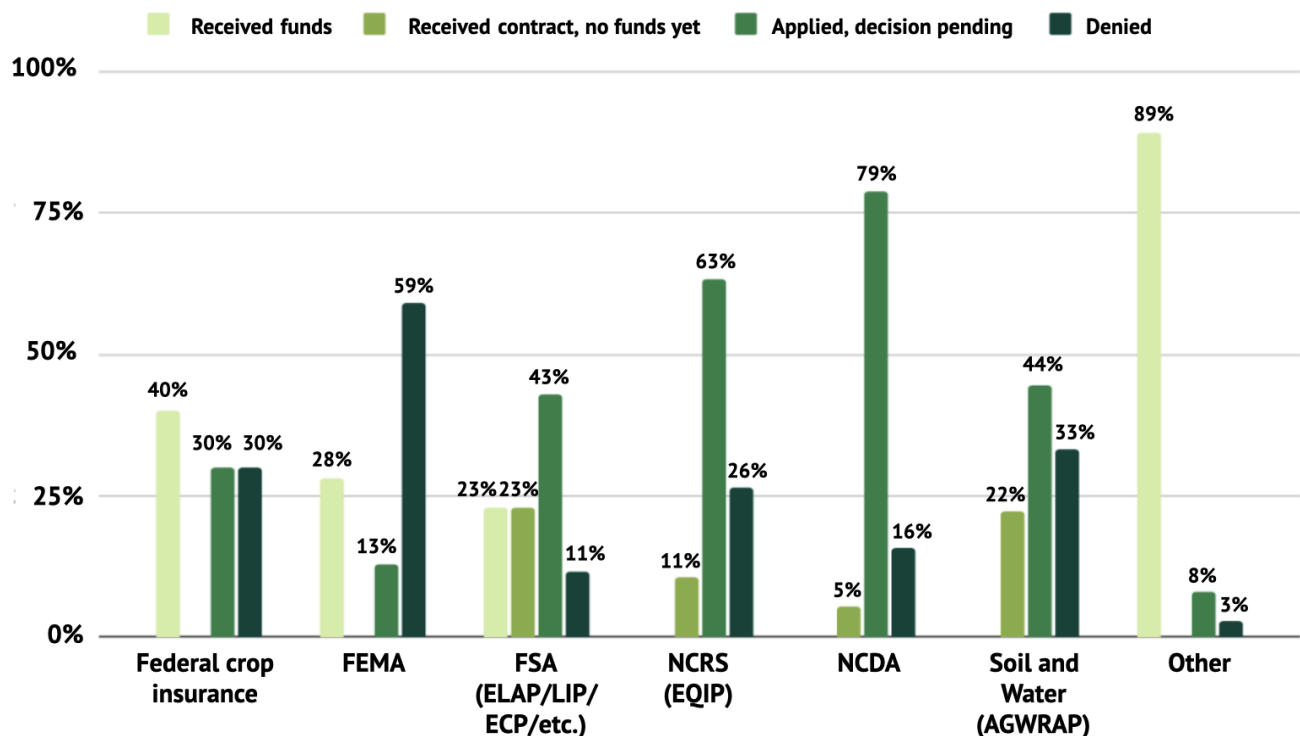


Table. State and Federal Financial Support reported by Farmers (n=59)

	Received funds	Received contract, no funds yet	Applied, decision pending	Denied	Did not apply	Total
Federal crop insurance	8 14.5%	0 0%	6 10.9%	6 10.9%	35 63.6%	55
FEMA	11 19.3%	0 0%	5 8.8%	23 40.4%	18 31.6%	57
FSA (ELAP/LIP, ECP/EFRP, TAP, etc.)	8 14.8%	8 14.8%	15 27.8%	4 7.4%	19 35.2%	54
NRCS (EQIP)	0 0%	2 3.7%	12 22.2%	5 9.3%	35 64.8%	54
NCDA	0 0%	1 1.9%	15 28.3%	3 5.7%	34 64.2%	53
Soil and Water (AGWRAP)	0 0%	2 3.8%	4 7.5%	3 5.7%	44 83%	53
Other	33 68.8%	0 0%	3 6.3%	1 2.1%	11 22.9%	48

Local and Regional Financial Support

Next the survey asked about regional and local WNC organizations that were providing immediate financial support. In addition to ASAP's immediate small grant, WNC farmers commonly applied to organizations such as WNC Communities (61 percent) as well as received funds from family/friends (45 percent). Roughly one-quarter applied to EmPOWERing Mountain Food Systems, Appalachian Community Capital (ACC)'s WNC Small Business Initiative, and/or raised funds through crowdfunding sites.

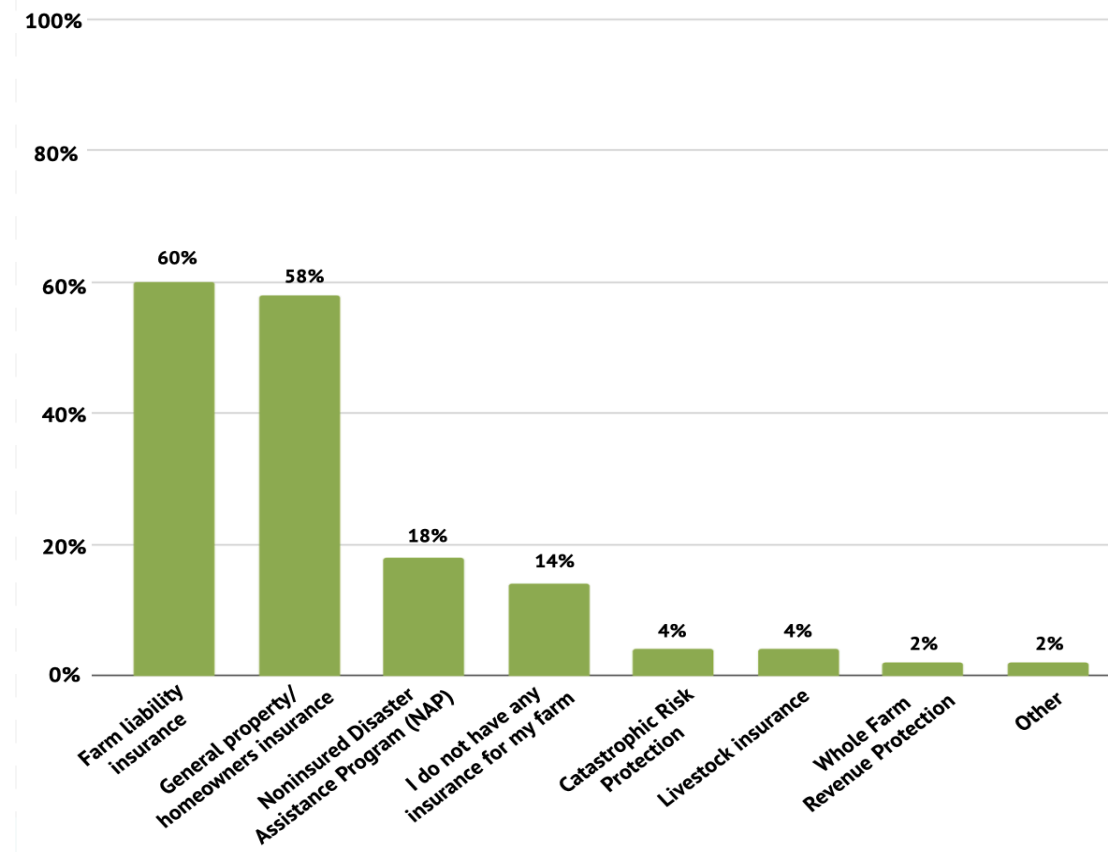
Technical Assistance and Support

The Survey next asked farmers to report on whether they received technical assistance/support from agencies/organizations for their farm business. A smaller sample answered this question (n=26). In addition to all participants receiving support from ASAP, the majority received technical assistance/support from Extension (75 percent), FSA (69 percent), and OGS (55 percent). Other groups providing support of farmers with assistance included WNC Communities (38 percent), Soil and Water (29 percent), and Blue Ridge Women in Agriculture (BRWIA) (29 percent).

Type of Insurance

Farmers were also asked about the type of insurance they had for their farm or farm business. Only 1 in 7 or 14 percent reported not having any type of insurance. Having general property/homeowners insurance or farm liability insurance were common with 58 percent and 60 percent respectively, Figure 2.

Figure 2. Types of insurance for your farm/farm business



Beyond the quantitative measures, the AGFING follow-up survey also provided space for farmers to describe in their own words other support they received, how they thought about the 2025 growing season, barriers in getting support, why a farmer may have not requested support, and ongoing needs.

Other Types of Support

Additional named support that participants shared included information that fit within domains such as manual labor (50 percent) including tree removal, debris removal, streambank restoration, grading, trash removal; physical and material contributions (9 percent) including backhoe time,

compost; counseling (9 percent) including physical and mental health, and other financial support including customers purchasing products (9 percent).

Community Support

As part of outreach and individual support for farmers, ASAP staff conducted 1:1 phone calls and asked specifically about the role of community in supporting farmers and many shared the importance of individuals and nonprofit organizations. One farmer stated, *“Our community came together to help us. We had several folks volunteer to help with sawing trees that had fallen on fences. Helped move animals to other pastures. Brought generators and fuel to help keep the farm open and running. Brought us cooked meals and coffee.”*

Other notes shared included that farm patrons volunteered their time in helping with limbs, tree removal. As example: *“A tree crew volunteered a whole day for free with an excavator to clear about 100 trees from our farm roads and pastures. It would have cost tens of thousands of dollars for that work and they donated it.” In addition to volunteer time, farm patrons also provided financial support with one farm reporting that “Several donations came in from CSA members and market customers”.*

Another farm shared the multitude of support provided by the community, *“100 percent it was our community that uplifted us and carried us on their shoulders including extension, the health department, Appalachian State, Blue Ridge Women in Agriculture - interns and students and their families got involved as well”.*

Regional Support

As part of outreach and case support, farmers were also asked about help provided by regional support organizations and nonprofits. Regional sources of funding were brought up by a number of farms. One farmer shared that small infusion funding from regional groups was critical, for example *“the local grants helped - as an immediate use of funding example, money was used to help remove the silt that covered the field - half a day’s work/man with a bulldozer for immediate help”.* Another farmer shared they were *“Definitely overwhelmed by the information that people were sending out, but it was super helpful once we had the internet and time to pursue and apply for opportunities. ASAP, RAFI, and WNC Communities all acted quickly to distribute smaller emergency grants to producers, which helped us make payroll in the initial cleanup phase when we no longer had any income. With the next phase of recovery, managing information, reporting and documentation became a full-time job.*

The importance of small, immediate grant funding (versus loans) was noted including that beyond the financial aspect, this outreach helped provide hope, one farmer shared *“ASAP was the first on the scene with info and the quick grant and RAFI wasn’t far behind with the quick grant. Both of these smaller grants helped us to begin to plan our recovery and gave us hope!”*

Barriers in Getting Support

Another important assessment in the follow up survey among the farmers was on barriers in getting support. About 2 out of 3 (66 percent) of participants provided information on barriers. Many identified challenges with not qualifying or being denied support, the burdensome and slow process of applying for state and federal support and inadequate insurance coverage. In contrast, the immediacy of grants and support issued by regional nonprofits like ASAP were highlighted as early critical places to apply for funding and for support.

One farmer shared the issues of applying for grants in the aftermath of no and reduced services such as power and internet *“Several grants required multi step processes and constant monitoring which was very difficult when power, internet, and cell service were out for almost 2 months.”*

Among those farmers reported being denied support included those growing medicinal herbs (non-food farms) and farmers whose main enterprise is agritourism. Among shared experiences was the statement from farms that they were “too small to qualify” and that their “loss of revenue” versus physical and immediate loss of farm infrastructure didn’t allow them to qualify for support.

Quotes from individual farmer participants on barriers included:

Lack of resources for timely & thorough soil testing, missing application opportunities and deadlines, follow-thru from contractors

Flooding, damage to property, fencing, infrastructure, roadways. NO aid from insurance company as they claim we don't carry flood insurance.

We would like to see agritourism covered in agriculture disaster programs, it currently is not. Much of our "damage" from Helene was revenue loss.

We cannot take on anymore loans after our losses in Tropical Storm Fred and then Helene. Also what the state and federal government value a fish at is less than half its actual cost (Trout Farmer).

Barriers with State and Federal Agencies

Through 1:1 phone calls in the Spring of 2025, farmers were also asked *“Do you feel state or federal agencies were helpful following the storm? (FEMA, FSA, NCRS, Extension, etc.) Can you provide some examples?”*

A number of farmers mentioned their engagement with Extension and with local NRC and FSA office staff. However, the slowness and lack of tailoring to WNC farms was a common theme in

responses. One farmer shared *“The response from state and federal agencies felt slower and less tailored to farmers’ needs. FEMA provided some assistance, but the process was overwhelming and not very agriculture-specific—I spent hours navigating paperwork that didn’t account for crop losses or livestock issues. The Extension office was more helpful, offering practical advice on soil recovery, but their resources seemed stretched thin.”* The slowness and uncertainty of whether financial support would come through in the long term was echoed by others pointing to greater need for expectation setting from agencies regarding eligibility, processes, timing, and limitations.

A number of farms had mixed experiences with FEMA with a common issue being related to the homestead versus the family farm business in seeking assistance. One farmer shared this aspect and their experience with working with a number of agencies. *“FEMA came out [three times], and said we can’t help you here because it’s a farm and not a personal home.”*

Another shared the duplication of paperwork, multiple phone calls and office visits possibly representing issues regarding eligibility *“The agencies I interacted with were not very helpful; it was a series of office visits and calls that resulted in filling out the same forms we had already filled out.”*

Another farmer shared aspects related to being classified as a small farm versus a large commodity producer. They shared *“I feel like our local civil servants do what they can with the resources, autonomy and authority they are allowed to have. It’s very tough because the needs of small farms are different from commodity growers and the larger legacy farms that are operating from an entitlement place as their businesses depend on various programs. For one program as an example, we are required to participate to access a loan, a significant paperwork burden, but the payout for participation was about \$500. Our agents are helpful but we are not their target customer per se.”*

One farmer shared the following, *“It took agencies too long to help us. Two months elapsed before we were allowed to start any kind of work on the site, costing us thousands of dollars in production due to inability to have winter gardens.”*

2025 Growing Season Impacts

An important assessment in the follow up survey among the farmers was on how the 2025 growing season is being impacted by the aftermath of the storm (i.e., related to production, market outlets, or general economic impact) (n=44). Three out of four participants provided information including the themes of reduced/delayed planting and/or loss of crops (32 percent) including loss of equipment, acreage loss, and destruction of spring crops; loss of sales/reduced sales (23 percent) including reduced customers, reduced tourists and markets; Infrastructure/ equipment loss/damage (21 percent) including lost equipment, fixing equipment, silt and rocks in fields, and overall rebuilding.

It is important to note that programs covering farm losses, even including market losses and future economic losses planned as part of various block grants and assistance, will only include 2024 losses. ASAP hopes to capture a fuller picture of lost markets and sales in 2025 as part of the annual producer survey, as well as their implications for farm recovery.

Related to loss of sales, one farmer shared *“My business is at about 40 percent of what it was at this point last year. Our crops are doing well, but the sales have dropped significantly.”* Additionally, the storm hit at the end of the 2024 growing season and at the time for winter planting for 2025 spring harvests which impacts future revenues to some farmers. Another farmer explained *“Helene hit at the time of year I usually make substantial revenue to get me through the winter and make spring purchases. Without that revenue buffer I've had to go without purchasing many farm essentials like packaging, amendments and seed.”* Another anticipated they have *“delayed spring sales due to loss of tunnels”*.

Additional shared notes of growing season impact from farmers included:

“I am still cleaning up from Helene while attempting to prepare ground with limited equipment, no greenhouse or irrigation well, but enough compost to start with a 1/4 acre.”

“Having to start over completely- the storm washed our entire produce fields, all infrastructure, etc.”

“Our overwintered spring crops were mostly destroyed so we're going to have a slower spring. We used the immediate needs grant to buy low tunnel supplies that helped us overwinter some of the crops that made it, and that helped us plant spring crops a few weeks early, so hopefully the impact will be minimal in that regard. We're suffering from a real labor shortage, though, as two of our three farmhands lost their homesteads and had to quit work to focus on their own projects, and it's very hard to find reliable help so we haven't really been able to replace them.”

In addition to these negative impacts, a few farmers reported glimpses of optimism including:

“We're holding steady with last year's sales. This is good, but we're also working hard to make ourselves more visible. We believe if nothing had changed, we would be in a growth phase based on these changes, so we are simply working hard to outpace the downturn in the market, which is very hard work.”

“So far, we are feeling optimistic. There are some spots of the growing area that got dumped with sand so that will take some time to mend. The compost & biochar will help. Outlets: So far, we have not completely lost any market outlets. We work with nonprofits and food hubs a lot so I know their funding is intact for 2025 but 2026 is uncertain. It seems that the nonprofits that we work with are growing & looking for more produce this year.”

Indicators to Monitor

In general, it seems that that goal for many farmers was to just stay in business in 2025. Trying to navigate disaster programs, rebuild and/or pivot, adapt to realities of recovery across communities and the local economy, and make the numbers work across increasing input costs, labor shortages, and limited market outlets, (and at the time of the survey) most farms are still waiting to see what state or federal funds may look like and/or when they may get paid. This early recovery stage captured much uncertainty and foreshadows that the true impacts on farm businesses and local food economies may not be fully seen for several more years.

While the number of farms that go out of business is one of the stark statistics many folks look to, there are other indicators of farm business viability and resilience we will be looking at in the coming years. We have heard from some farm businesses that Helene really forced them to look at their farm business, assess numbers, and make some changes to increase efficiencies and decide to support farm profitability. Examining shifts in market outlets, and the ability of farms to pivot and adapt with changing conditions and limitations will be one key indicator we will look at across annual data. Enterprise and market diversification will also be another indicator we will look at in 2025 and 2026 data. We predict that farms that had multiple revenue streams across various farm enterprises and market outlets will fair better longer term with recovery and viability, and we will look to see farms that were able to expand with new enterprises and markets in 2025 and whether that was a short term recovery strategy or if it will be maintained for long term success.

Expanding upon questions we asked in the 6 month follow up survey to the larger farmer AG network will offer insight on how widespread experiences were across small farms or if there are trends that can be pulled out across new or beginning farmers, multigenerational farms, farmers that received specific support or intervention, or other commonalities. ASAP and other entities conducting surveys and/or analysis will need to be careful about questions explored and the methodology, as there can be numerous factors at play across social, political, environmental, and economic factors that influence and effect findings and outcomes.

Survey Findings, What Is Still Needed

The follow-up survey also asked farmers what support you still need, of which half of farmers responded (n=33). Domains included the need for helpers and manual labor, funding for land/building repair, land restoration, marketing/promotion, material/building needs.

Among top themes of need included support for **manual labor**. One farmer shared, *“I would love a little more capital to hire a more full time person this summer to help me get caught up. Irrigating will*

take more time as our irrigation system was ruined and until we are approved for a well, we will have to do overhead sprinklers that we move from city water.” Another farmer shared “Another reliable farmhand would be incredible but we’re really struggling with that. Additional cash support would also be incredible (if nothing else it would help us offer a more competitive hourly rate to attract help), and we’ve kept an eye out for new grants, but there’s really not much available.”

Many identified needs related to funding for **fencing, new irrigation and water pumps, new wells, and assistance for roadways including damaged culverts, gravel, road repair, and bridge repair.** One farmer shared “*Right now, our creek (at the edge of the property) is dammed up and eventually needs to be addressed. It is not an easy job to clear the dam. Our road to access the back field is functional but we lost so much creek bank that the road is in a precarious position. I worry that more inevitable erosion will lead to loss of road / access to our back field. The only thing that we could do is add boulders to the creek bank (which is very expensive) or hire a large backhoe to widen the hillside/road.*”

Others highlighted the need for administrative assistance, market assistance and market promotion. One farmer shared “*We’re getting tremendous marketing support from ASAP, which is great.*” One farmer stated the need for “*Marketing support to drive in more customers and keeping working capital*”. Another shared “*Support building my e-commerce business shipping goods nationwide with SEO + backend support.*”

A separate domain area brought forth how other parts of a farming business could be considered during the aftermath of such an event such as mortgage or debt forgiveness “*The economic drop that we (and everyone else!) has experienced has put us behind more than a year in our business- meaning that any profit we make for the next 12-18 months is going to go to pay off debts that we have incurred just to keep operating. It is disheartening and had I not been able to borrow money from family, I really don’t know how we would have paid the bills. I have applied for two small business grants (one was denied and still waiting on another) and we also applied for a disaster loan through USDA, for which funds have been frozen until approved by Congress. Something that would be very helpful to us and our livelihood would be some sort of stimulus, a few months of mortgage forgiveness, help with debt forgiveness or something along those lines.*”

Agricultural support systems improvements for WNC small farmers

Since ASAP’s inception, the organization has focused on responsive, community-specific support to address the unique challenges faced by small-scale family farms. This support is even more crucial in the aftermath of major events like Hurricane Helene. The limitations of the farm safety net are well documented, including the mismatch that small-scale farms face when attempting to access services and support from programs designed primarily to serve large-scale and commodity crop

growers.² Some of the primary challenges that have been noted prior include the limited scope of USDA's federal crop insurance and obstacles to accessing disaster relief programs. This includes onerous paperwork and payouts that don't cover all costs and/or take months or years to be paid out, leaving many farmers feeling they are unable to continue farming.³

Farmers receiving the AGFING grants through 1:1 follow up engagements were also asked *"Do you have any suggestions for how agricultural support systems could be improved in response to natural disasters?"* The following captures key domains.

Support Systems: Communication

Sharings related to **communication methods** included: *"what was helpful was ASAP reached to farmers not the other way around - resource lists were so helpful - being accessible - maybe strengthening partnerships with orgs in different areas to react together - more online zoom opportunities/connections - don't forget about mental health aspect"*

One farmer shared their experience in using **social media tools**. *"As a farmer, with animals/livestock. Support needs to be immediate. If helping with funding (funding should be issued within 48 hours of disaster). Disasters unfortunately become more disastrous the longer time it takes to correct the situation. fences, trees). There needs to be better communication in general between those offering (help) and those in-need of help. Many who needed help and who offered help ended up creating Local Facebook groups with 2 sections (Give Help) (Receive Help). Many people jumped on board and networked between SW VA, NE TN, and WNC. Luckily We're Appalachian Strong, and while we had trees down and emergencies of our own we banded with other farmers and helped each other."*

Another farmer shared *"some system set up for communication - some kind of phone tree, that includes folks skills and resources - like immediate emergency response for tools and equipment."*

Supporting Government Agencies

Ideas for how to **support government agencies** were also common. One farmer shared *"They need to be flexible about hiring temporary employees for support services to the full time employees. I know a quick hire can't come and inspect a site, but they can fill out paperwork etc. There just are not enough staff members on site to handle this efficiently. Maybe a rotating staff of employees that just handle*

² National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition (NSAC). (2024). (rep.). *Unsustainable: State of the Farm Safety Net*. Retrieved April 1, 2025, from <https://sustainableagriculture.net/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/Farm-Safety-Net-Report-February-2024-Final.pdf>.

³ Wilcox, M. (2024, November 27). *Can flooded farmers count on USDA disaster relief?*. Civil Eats. <https://civileats.com/2024/11/27/will-disaster-relief-come-through-for-north-carolinas-small-farms>.

disasters. I also feel the process, forms, and paperwork were cumbersome to the people involved. A major effort should be made by agencies to reduce paperwork and make forms more intuitive to fill out.”

Application Processes from Government Agencies

A key theme related to receiving support was related to applications from agencies. A farmer shared *“One of the main suggestions I would offer is to streamline the disaster relief application processes. Many farmers and residents experienced significant delays due to the complexity and slow pace of paperwork. Simplifying the paperwork and making it more accessible would allow farmers to access aid more quickly, which is crucial in the immediate aftermath of a disaster. Another key improvement would be the creation of more localized, community-based response teams that can quickly assess the specific needs of farmers and agricultural businesses in their area. This could involve collaboration between state and regional organizations to provide faster on-the-ground support in addition to financial aid. Lastly, more proactive preparedness training/resources for farmers would help reduce confusion and enhance resilience in future storms.”*

Eligibility - Non-Food Farm Enterprises

Another aspect named by multiple WNC farmers was related to non-food producing aspects of the farming business. A key strategy for small farm viability is diversified income streams and enterprises. With some elements falling under the Small Business Administration and some falling under Agriculture and FSA, many farms feel they are falling through the gap. A farmer shared *“I am highly irritated with agencies for denying us assistance (a loan over \$50K) because agritourism is ONE of our enterprises. Agritourism is a farming enterprise in the eyes of the state and federal government yet the agency says no. Our farm would be a subdivision if we did not have agritourism. The short-sightedness is astounding!”*

Farming infrastructure and approaches to mitigate risk

Farmers also shared their **production and infrastructure thoughts** on how to mitigate possible lost income through future disasters. Solutions that came forth included - *“I am a major proponent for greenhouse growing since our crops have been able to weather these storms for the most part, and can also help to increase production and make farms more sustainable both financially and with resources. I can get 10-12 harvests a year in the same space that field production would harvest 1-3 times. Getting farmers access to high or low tech coldframe/greenhouse space is important to the future of our food production system!”* Another shared the long-term perspective for farm markets in WNC, *“Building on what we can leverage federally to support local purchasing, we don't all need recovery funds, we need a long term market... Helping with policy making to get purchasing power. .”*

Preparedness and Planning Services

Another shared delay in **eligibility for services to aid preparedness and planning** - for example, “ I would really like to see agricultural organizations be as proactive as possible about insulating farms from natural disasters. How can we get ahead of problems before they arise? I am expanding to a new property, and I just spoke to the county soil and water office, and they can't help me with any erosion issues until I've been on the property for three years. So we literally have to wait out the clock observing problems instead of fixing them upfront.”

A farmer shared a comprehensive set of action steps including “Agricultural support systems could be improved by creating a more **streamlined, farmer-focused disaster response plan**. A dedicated point of contact for farmers dealing with agencies would cut through the bureaucracy. Quicker deployment of regional grants or low-interest loans specifically for equipment and seed replacement would also help. Lastly, **pre-storm preparedness workshops**—maybe hosted by Extension or ASAP—could equip us with better tools and knowledge ahead of time.”

Another shared, “ One thing that stood out was how much we relied on informal networks—other farmers, local churches, and even social media groups—to fill gaps left by larger systems. It might be worth exploring how to formally integrate those grassroots efforts into future disaster planning.”

Finally, a farmer shared their perspective on planning, “Better preparedness. I feel all organizations should have the mentality of when the next one happens and not if the next one is going to happen. Granted this storm was of a magnitude that we hadn't seen before, if people would have been more proactive before the storm, it could have saved some lives.”

ASAP's Role in Supporting Recovery

As part of the ongoing support to farmers and market venues, ASAP has adapted its core strategies and expanded partnerships for specific services and programs to support AG farms and markets.

Farmer Consultations: ASAP offers Appalachian Grown farmers free, one-on-one consultations to discuss storm recovery, market opportunities, marketing, grants and loans, and business planning. ASAP staff also refer farmers for consulting with partner agencies on managing farm financials, accessing legal services, and mitigating risk. In addition, ASAP partners with other agriculture support organizations, including CFSA, WNC Communities, NC Cooperative Extension, and FSA, for assistance in helping farms understand and access state and federal programs.

Grants and cash flow resources: In late 2024, ASAP's \$500 AGFING grants provided a small, immediate infusion of funds for over 130 farms, the majority residing in seven counties in WNC. In

addition to these grants, ASAP helped support and streamline connections to other state and local grants programs and resources including those through WNC Communities, RAFI, EMPOWERing Mountain Food Systems. ASAP also implemented the Appalachian Farms Feeding Families (AFFF), a dual-benefit program designed to support both farmers and the community. The program gets fresh, locally grown food to people impacted by the storm, while at the same time providing cash flow for farms that are in the process of rebuilding or have lost market outlets.

Appalachian Farms Feeding Families—Early Care and Education (ECE)

This dual-benefit program is designed to support AG farms and partner ECE sites, pairing sites with farms in their community. Grant funding goes directly to farms. Farms work with ECE sites to plan and provide CSA (Community Supported Agriculture) shares for the families of the children at the center, or offer custom orders to be used for meal preparation at the site. Grants are between \$500 and \$1,500, depending on the number of students served. This opportunity supports farms in a time of need, builds relationships with the local farming community, cultivates a stronger awareness of where food comes from in the students, and supports a more sustainable food system. To date, more than 40 ECEs in 16 counties have taken part in AFFF-ECE.

Appalachian Farms Feeding Families—K-12 Education

This new dual-benefit program is designed to support AG farms through partnership with School Nutrition Directors (SND) in communities. Grant funding goes directly to farms and SND's receive the product as a donation following a draw-down model of spending. Farms and SND's work together to identify farm products that align with the federal nutrition requirements set by USDA and NCDPI as well as their menu and volume needs. Funding varies across districts and is calculated according to average student participation in each district's school lunch programs. This opportunity supports farms that demonstrate interest and capacity to sell to schools and that hold Good Agricultural Practices (GAP) certification; GAP certification is currently a prerequisite for farms seeking to sell to schools in North Carolina. To date (November 2025), 4 school districts have been paired with a farm or food hub with 3 remaining school districts in the dock for farm pairings.

Appalachian Farms Feeding Families—Restaurants

This dual-benefit program is designed to support AG farms and partner restaurants in recovery, providing investment in farms and fortifying relationships with partner restaurants during this difficult time. This program, serving WNC restaurants with a commitment to supporting local farms, offers grants of up to \$2,500 per restaurant. Funds can be used to either: 1) supplement the restaurant's local purchasing budget, or 2) purchase CSA shares/local food for their staff.

Workshops: ASAP facilitates workshops and networking sessions, both in person and virtual, for farmers throughout the year. Topics have included digital marketing, financial recordkeeping, navigating federal support programs, and more. ASAP also partners with NC Extension and Small

Business Center to offer production and business-planning workshops. Post-storm, ASAP has worked with experts within Extension to support land resiliency workshops, including on riparian zones and cover crops.

Farmer Working Groups: ASAP periodically convenes small cohorts or working groups of farmers around affinities or interests, including new farmers, climate resilience, and consumer marketing research. These groups are an opportunity for deeper support and peer-sharing. Findings are used to develop or adapt resources. In ASAP's post-Helene surveying and listening sessions, farmers suggested a future working group on preparedness planning. ASAP is compiling input on key topics for an upcoming set of workshops to support ongoing recovery and longer term resiliency.

Business of Farming Conference: ASAP's Business of Farming Conference, held annually in February, brings together professional farmers from across the Southeast region to network and share resources to grow their farm businesses. Farmers learn about marketing, business planning, and financial management from experts and innovative peers. The conference is designed for beginning and established farmers as well as those seriously considering farming as a profession. The February 2026 conference will feature resilience-specific workshops including preparedness planning topics to support ongoing recovery and stability if future distresses and shocks occur.

Community Access Programs at Farmers Markets: ASAP continues to support and expand its efforts to reduce barriers for all community members to purchase local. This includes SNAP incentive programs at more than 30 markets in WNC through its Double SNAP for Fruits and Vegetables program. Through a partnership with MAHEC and other healthcare providers, the Farm Fresh Produce Prescription strives to improve nutrition security and reduce related chronic disease risk through referrals of at-risk clients to a farmers market voucher. These dual-benefit programs increase sales for farmers, supporting their recovery efforts, while simultaneously increasing the purchasing power of low-income households that also experienced financial harm from the storm.

Anchor Institutions: Farm to Education: Growing Minds is the farm to education program of ASAP. The vision of Growing Minds is that children of all ages learn about and have positive experiences with local food and farms in the classroom, cafeteria, and community. ECEs and Schools also serve as stable, anchor institutions with long-standing presence in communities with the ability to procure local food and to reach and support many families.

ASAP's Local Food Research Center and Local Food Campaign plan to include additional questions on the 2025 growing season in the annual AG producer survey. From this and other assessments, a phase 3 report will be created and released in Spring 2026 to better understand ongoing needs to support farmers and help build a resilient local food system.

Acronym	
ACC	Appalachian Community Capital
AFFF	Appalachian Farmers Feeding Families
AgWRAP	Agricultural Water Resources Assistance Program
AG	Appalachian Grown
AGFING	Appalachian Grown Farmer Immediate Needs Grant
ASAP	Appalachian Sustainable Agriculture Project
BRWIA	Blue Ridge Women in Agriculture
CEFS	Center for Environmental Farming Systems
CFSA	Carolina Farm Stewardship Association
ECE	Early Care and Education
ECP	Emergency Conservation Program
EFRP	Emergency Forest Restoration Program
ELAP	Emergency Assistance for Livestock, Honeybees, and Farm-Raised Fish
EMFS	EmPOWERing Mountain Food Systems
EQIP	Environmental Quality Incentives Program
FEMA	Federal Emergency Management Agency
FSA	Farm Service Agency
LIP	Livestock Indemnity Program
NAP	Noninsured Disaster Assistance Program
NCDA	North Carolina Department of Agriculture
NRCS	National Resources Conservation Service
OGS	Organic Growers School
RAFI	Rural Advancement Foundation International
TA	Technical Assistance
TAP	Tree Assistance Program
USDA	United States Department of Agriculture
WNC	Western North Carolina