

DR-4806-FL/4828-FL/4834-FL ECONOMIC RECOVERY SUPPORT FUNCTION

Federal Interagency Resource Exchange (FIRE) Listening Session and Economic Recovery Workshop

IN PARTNERSHIP WITH SOUTHWEST FLORIDA REGIONAL PLANNING COUNCIL

Wednesday, February 19, 2025

Overview

On Wednesday, February 19, 2025, the Southwest Florida Regional Planning Council (SWFRC), Coastal and Hearland National Estuary Partnership (CHNEP), and the DR-4806-FL (Debby), DR-4828-FL (Helene), and DR-4834-FL (Milton) Economic Recovery Support Function (Econ RSF) hosted a Federal Interagency Resource Exchange (FIRE) Listening Session and Economic Recovery Workshop at the Charlotte Harbor Event and Conference Center in Punta Gorda, Florida. Representatives of local governments from the Southwest Florida region were invited to share their communities' persistent hurricane recovery needs with SWFRC, CHNEP, and the Econ RSF and discuss ideas for potential resilience-building projects. Also in attendance were state, regional, and federal resource partners to share programs and resources available to support Southwest Florida's communities' recovery and resiliency-building needs.



Figure 1: Margaret Wuerstle, Executive Director, Southwest Florida Regional Planning Council, addresses audience.

Key Takeaways

Infrastructure Resilience is a Critical Priority

- Stormwater system failures are recurring issues across the region and cause severe flooding.
- Many drainage systems are outdated and require upgrades to handle future hurricanes.
- Local representatives emphasized the need for federal and state funding to improve drainage, retention ponds, and flood mitigation measures.

Housing Recovery and Affordability Remain Major Concerns

- Many homes remain unrepaired or uninhabitable due to funding gaps and delays.
- Mobile home parks and low-income communities face significant risks from future storms.
- FEMA's base flood elevation adjustments may have unintended consequences.

Delays in Debris Removal Worsened Storm Damage

- Debris removal policies are unclear and inconsistent, especially for private roads and mobile home parks.
- Third-party haulers failed to respond quickly, leading to delays and increased hazards.
- Uncollected debris became projectiles during Hurricane Milton, causing secondary damage.

Economic Recovery Requires Better Small Business Support

- Many small businesses struggled to access disaster funding due to complex application processes.
- Permit delays from regulatory agencies slowed down rebuilding efforts.
- Businesses lack continuity planning, leaving them vulnerable after storms.

Emergency Power Infrastructure Needs Improvement

- Prolonged power outages caused food loss and slowed economic recovery.
- Grocery stores and essential businesses lacked backup power solutions.
- Improving energy resilience was identified as a key strategy for disaster preparedness.

Coastal and Natural Resilience Must Be Prioritized

- Loss of mangroves, wetlands, and dunes is worsening storm surge impacts.
- Nature-based solutions (e.g., living shorelines, mangrove restoration) can improve long-term coastal resilience.
- More funding is needed for coastal erosion mitigation and wetland protection.

Broadband and Digital Infrastructure are Essential for Disaster Response

- Many rural areas still lack reliable internet, which hampers emergency coordination.
- Digital resilience programs are needed to enhance disaster communication and recovery efforts.



Figure 2: Jennifer Hecker, Executive Director of Coastal and Heartland National Estuary Partnership (CHNEP), presents about CHNEP's work to attendees.supports recovery and resiliency building.

Coordination Between Agencies Needs Improvement

- Multiple agencies offer disaster recovery funding, but local governments struggle to navigate complex programs.
- Permit approvals are slow and bureaucratic, delaying critical rebuilding projects.
- Communities lack the dedicated staff and expertise to apply for funding efficiently.

Meeting Recap

Background & Purpose

The Economic Recovery Support Function (RSF), Southwest Florida Regional Planning Council (SWFRC), and Coastal and Heartland National Estuary Partnership (CHNEP) collaborated to deliver a Federal Interagency Resource Exchange (FIRE) Listening Session and Economic Recovery Workshop to support economic recovery following the 2024 hurricane season in the Southwest Florida region.

Key objectives of the workshop included:

- Identifying unmet long-term recovery needs,
- Connecting stakeholders to state and federal programs,
- Developing regional partnerships, strategies, and actions to implement to achieve economic and long-term recovery and resilience,
- Identifying and developing implementable and fundable local & regional projects, and
- Work collaboratively and cross-jurisdictionally.



Figure 3: EDA's Milton Cochran, Economic RSF Field Coordinator, addresses attendees.

Opening Remarks

Margaret Wuerstle, Southwest Florida Regional Planning Council (SWFRC)

- Opened the meeting and welcomed all participants.
- Highlighted the importance of collaboration between local, state, and federal agencies in addressing recovery and long-term resilience following Hurricanes Milton and Helene.
- Encouraged stakeholders to share their needs and concerns actively.

Jennifer Hecker, Coastal and Heartland National Estuary Partnership (CHNEP)

- Explained CHNEP's role in disaster recovery, focusing on natural resource restoration, water quality, and habitat protection.
- Mentioned CHNEP's participation in the U.S. EPA National Estuary Program, covering 10 counties and 27 cities.
- Stressed the importance of federal resource coordination and CHNEP's role in conveying local needs to federal agencies.
- Announced the creation of an online hub for recovery resources on CHNEP's website, containing information on grants and recovery programs.

Unmet Needs and Project Discussion

Sarasota County

Needs Identified:

- Stormwater and Drainage Infrastructure:
 - There is a need for comprehensive assessment and upgrades to stormwater systems to prevent future flooding.
- Debris Collection Challenges:
 - Concerns with debris removal policies, particularly for private roads, mobile home parks, and condominiums.
 - Mobile home parks are classified as commercial entities, leaving residents responsible for debris removal costs.
 - Regulations regarding private road debris removal eligibility are unclear, impacting 50% of Sarasota's road network.
- Housing Affordability and Resilience:
 - Lack of affordable housing options for low- and moderate-income households.
- FEMA Base Flood Elevation Concerns:
 - FEMA's revised flood maps have lowered base flood elevations, increasing potential flood risk for structures on barrier islands.
 - Need to re-evaluate and adjust flood maps to reflect increasing flood risks.

Proposed Projects:

- Stormwater Management Improvements:
 - Invest in flood mitigation projects and drainage upgrades.
- Debris Removal Reform Advocacy:
 - Advocate for policy changes to allow debris removal coverage for private roads and mobile home parks.
- Housing Resilience Planning:
 - Develop new policies to encourage elevated construction in flood-prone areas.

City of Venice

Needs Identified:

- Stormwater Drainage System Upgrades:
 - Outdated drainage infrastructure is unable to manage increased flooding.
 - There is a need for the expansion and modernization of stormwater channels.
- Debris Management System Improvements:
 - The city's reliance on third-party haulers for disaster debris removal failed during recent storms.
 - There is a need for city-owned debris removal equipment to ensure immediate response.
- Coastal Resilience and Shoreline Protection:
 - Loss of mangroves and shoreline erosion worsening hurricane impacts.
 - Need for living shorelines and mangrove restoration projects.

- Affordable and Resilient Housing Solutions:
 - Mobile home parks and low-income communities are especially vulnerable to storm damage.

Proposed Projects:

- Municipal Stormwater Drainage Project:
 - Conduct Flamingo Ditch feasibility study to assess flooding mitigation solutions.
 - Upgrade existing floodwater outfall systems to prevent road and property flooding.
- Debris Collection Equipment Investment:
 - Purchase roll-off containers, claw trucks, and haulers to expedite debris cleanup after storms.
- Mangrove and Living Shoreline Initiative:
 - Hire a living shoreline expert to identify mangrove planting sites.
 - Install wave attenuation structures to reduce coastal erosion.
- Resilient Housing Initiatives:
 - Incentivize elevated manufactured homes for mobile home park residents.
 - Secure matching grants for homeowners to rebuild using hurricane-resistant materials.
- Humphreys Park and Jetty Restoration:
 - Restore storm-damaged park and jetty.
 - Consider proposal for mitigation and resilience-based redesign to ensure long-term durability.



Figure 4: Leda Khoury, Federal Disaster Recovery Coordinator, explains to the audience how FEMA supports recovery and resiliency building.

Charlotte County

Needs Identified:

- Housing and Infrastructure Recovery:
 - Lack of direct CDBG-DR funding is limiting recovery efforts.
 - Greater access to the Rebuild Florida initiative following Hurricane Ian.
- Mental Health Services Gaps:
 - Closure of one of the county’s two mental health treatment facilities after storm damage.
- Flood Mitigation and Resilience Upgrades:
 - There is a need for storm-resistant infrastructure to protect vulnerable neighborhoods.
- Economic Development Needs:
 - Small businesses are still struggling with hurricane-related losses.

Proposed Projects:

- Resilience-Based Housing Recovery Program:
 - Advocate for direct CDBG-DR allocations to Charlotte County.
 - Ensure that the Elevate Florida Program prioritizes vulnerable homeowners.

- Mental Health Infrastructure Investment:
 - Develop a new regional mental health center to replace the destroyed facility.
- Stormwater Infrastructure Projects:
 - Shift Tier 2 hazard mitigation projects under Ian funding to the Milton-Helene funding round for eligibility.
- Small Business Support Programs:
 - Expand small business assistance centers and provide revolving loan funds for disaster-impacted businesses.

City of Cape Coral (Lee County)

Needs Identified:

- Stormwater Management System Failures:
 - South Cape Coral's outdated stormwater system caused severe flooding.
 - There is a need for larger retention areas and canal system retrofits.
- Permit Approval Delays:
 - U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and DEP permitting backlogs delay recovery projects.
- Food Security and Power Resilience:
 - Grocery stores lost inventory due to a lack of backup power after power outages.
- Small Business Resiliency Planning Gaps:
 - Small businesses need improved disaster preparedness and risk mitigation.

Proposed Projects:

- South Cape Coral Stormwater Infrastructure Revamp:
 - Increase capacity of stormwater drainage systems.
- Portable Generator Initiative for Grocery Stores:
 - Purchase and distribute mobile generators to prevent food spoilage.
- Business Resilience Grant Program:
 - Provide funding for small businesses to retrofit their buildings for storm resistance.

Bonita Springs Water District (Lee County)

Needs Identified:

- Severe flooding caused by increased development.
- High volumes of stormwater runoff are exceeding the district's retention capacity.
- Lack of funding for retention pond deepening and water management improvements.
- There is a need for wetland preservation efforts.

Proposed Projects:

- Stormwater Retention Expansion:
 - Convert dry retention ponds into wet retention ponds to absorb excess water.
- Wetland Protection Plan:
 - Secure funding to preserve undeveloped cypress wetlands and prevent further urbanization.
- Infrastructure Expansion for Stormwater Flow Control:
 - Upgrade canals and retention weirs to improve flood mitigation.

Hendry County

Needs Identified:

- Support for the agricultural economy and diversification of industry.
- Rural broadband expansion to improve connectivity for economic growth.

Proposed Projects:

- Agricultural Innovation and Economic Diversification Study:
 - Conduct feasibility study for new industry opportunities in agriculture.

FYI:

- Broadband Infrastructure Deployment:
 - Federal funding enables the launch of Hendry County's first broadband zones next month.

Glades County

Needs Identified:

- Lack of healthcare and mental health services.
- Transportation limitations for rural residents.
- Affordable housing shortage.
- There is a need for infrastructure hardening against hurricanes.

Proposed Projects:

- New Healthcare Facility Construction:
 - Expand mental health and medical care access in the county.
- Affordable Housing Expansion:
 - Develop affordable housing solutions to support displaced residents.
- Critical Infrastructure Hardening:
 - Strengthen public buildings and business facilities to withstand hurricanes.

Top Proposed Regional Project Ideas

- Stormwater infrastructure upgrades in nearly every county due to rising flood risks.
- Resilient housing and affordable home development to address displacement and rebuilding challenges.
- Debris management and emergency response coordination to reduce post-storm delays and hazards.
- Coastal and wetland restoration to use natural defenses against future hurricanes.
- Small business training in economic resilience to help local businesses recover and diversify the local economy.
- Emergency power infrastructure to prevent food loss and improve recovery operations.
- Broadband and digital access to enhance disaster communication and economic opportunities in rural areas.

Federal and State Partner Feedback

Resource partners shared the available programs to support the identified needs and projects. Highlights from their feedback include:

Greg Vaday, EDA

- Explained EDA's role in long-term economic recovery.
- Emphasized that EDA focuses on economic revitalization, infrastructure improvement, small business support, and workforce development.
- Discussed EDA's funding programs and competitive grant processes, prioritizing projects that generate job creation and economic growth.
- Highlighted past EDA-funded projects in Florida, such as infrastructure upgrades, stormwater system improvements, and workforce training centers.



Figure 5: A local representative speaks during a portion of the meeting facilitated by Margaret Wuerstle, Executive Director of the Southwest Florida Regional Planning Council.

Milton Cochran, EDA

- Explained the Economic RSF's role in coordinating federal agencies for disaster recovery.
- Stressed the importance of aligning federal resources with local needs.

Leda Khoury, FEMA

- Discussed the Interagency Recovery Coordination (IRC) team's role in disaster recovery efforts for Hurricanes Milton and Helene.
- Emphasized FEMA's role in supporting economic and infrastructure recovery in coordination with the EDA and other agencies.
- Acknowledged the challenges communities face in navigating FEMA funding and regulations.

Paul Myers, U.S. Department of Health & Human Services (HHS)

- Spoke about HHS's role in disaster recovery, particularly healthcare infrastructure, behavioral health, and public health services.
- Highlighted five key focus areas:
 1. Behavioral health support.
 2. Environmental health programs.
 3. Healthcare system restoration.
 4. Human services coordination.
 5. Education sector assistance.

Bri McGuffie, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers

- Discussed infrastructure recovery, particularly flood control projects and cost-sharing programs.

- Shared how the Army Corps has funding opportunities for flood management, erosion control, and stormwater system improvements.

Dr. Brinnen Carter, National Park Service

- Focused on natural and cultural resource recovery.
- Highlighted the Land and Water Conservation Fund, which provides matching grants for park restoration.
- Discussed storm resilience strategies to protect parks, trails, and public lands from future hurricanes.



Figure 6: EDA Florida Representative Greg Vaday explains the importance of collaboration as discuss potential resiliency-building projects that will support economic development in the area.

Jim Corbin, FEMA

- Explained FEMA’s Community Assistance program, which supports long-term recovery planning and technical assistance for local governments.
- Addressed stormwater infrastructure and permitting concerns.

Tauheedah Mateen, Small Business Administration (SBA)

- Discussed SBA’s disaster recovery loans for businesses, homeowners, and renters.
- Encouraged communities to apply for mitigation loans to fund improvements like hurricane-proof windows and elevated structures.

Joe Labadie, U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA)

- Highlighted USDA’s role in rural economic recovery, including agriculture, housing, and infrastructure improvements.
- Mentioned programs for farmers, rural homeowners, and small businesses.

Garnet Nevels, FloridaCommerce

- Explained FloridaCommerce’s management of CDBG-DR and CDBG-MIT funds.
- Announced the allocation of \$900 million for disaster recovery from recent storms, focusing on housing and infrastructure.
- Encouraged communities to submit project proposals for state action plan funding.

Next Steps & Action Items

The meeting identified urgent regional priorities and highlighted critical funding and policy gaps to address to improve disaster resilience in Southwest Florida.

Immediate Next Steps:

- Local governments will submit formal project proposals for funding consideration.
- Federal and state agencies will review funding eligibility and provide guidance.
- Subsequent meetings may be arranged to monitor the advancement of proposed projects.

Conclusion of Meeting

Greg Vaday and Milton Cochran reaffirmed EDA's commitment to supporting Southeast Florida's economic resilience and emphasized the importance of a coordinated, proactive approach to disaster resilience. Local leaders were urged to prioritize projects that would have long-term benefits for their communities.

Attendees

The following is a partial list of in-person and virtual attendees of the Southwest Florida event.

Local Representatives

Bianca Babbit, American Safety
Amber Bankes, Mote Marine Laboratory & Aquarium
Walt Buchholtz, Immokalee Foundation
Chris Byrne, City of Marco Island
Rita Capello-Clark, Coldwell Banker Sunstar Realty
John Cellucci, San Carlos Estates Water Control District
Rich Collins, Sarasota County
Kevin Cooper, Mote Marine Laboratory & Aquarium
Keitha Daniels, Hendry County
Patty DeVost, Patty's Place
John Ferrell, City of Venice
Patrick Fuller, Charlotte County
Solemi Hernandez, Sierra Club
Rowdy Howard, Hendry County
Stefan Kalev, City of North Port
Joe Kilraine, City of Cape Coral
Sue Lang, Flamingo Ditch Steering Committee
William Lang, Collier County
Richard Lehmkuhl, City of Punta Gorda
Stephan Meinsen, City of Venice
Andrianna Moustakas, Patty's Place
Mark Odell, Charlotte County
Jennifer Rainey, Collier County
Johnny Rigney, Sarasota County
Christina Rimes, City of Venice

Tonia Selmeski, Collier County
Mark Smith, Sarasota County
Phil Stokes, City of North Point
Sandra Tapfumaneyi, Sarasota County
Bailey Taylor, Glades County
Evelyn Trimino, Collier County
Bob Twinem, Sarasota County
Brenda Westlake, City of Venice
Julie Wilkins, City of LaBelle
Sharon Woodberry, City of Cape Coral

State, Regional, and Federal Partners

Matthew Applegate, U.S. Housing and Urban Development
Julie Bankston, Southwest Florida Regional Planning Council
Meghan Blancher, Tampa Bay Regional Planning Council
Dana Brewer, EDA Contract Support
Aja Brown, SBA
Alysia Cancel, Americorp VISTA
Brinnen Carter, National Park Service
Brian Cartwright, FEMA
Henry Cassetta, SBA, Office of Disaster Recovery and Resilience
Milton Cochran, EDA
James Corcoran, FEMA
Rick Cornell, FEMA IRC
LaTina Denson, FEMA Community Affairs
Karima Habity, CareerSource Suncoast

Jennifer Hecker, Coastal and Heartland National
Estuary Partnership
Emily Young Hinton, FEMA
Steven Kardys, FEMA
Leda Lhory, FEMA
Joe Labadie, USDA
David Leiva, FEMA Academic Advisor
Priscilla Linores, FEMA
Robin Malone, FEMA
Tauheedah Mateern, SBA
Brianna McGuffie, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers
Shay McKellar, FEMA
Lee Mertins, EDA
Edna Mincey, FEMA
Vanessa Morgan, SBA
Paul Myers, U.S. Health & Human Services
Garet Nevels, FloridaCommerce
Asmaa Odeh, Southwest Florida Regional
Planning Council
Hunter Patrick, FEMA
Catherine Peralta, Southwest Florida Regional
Planning Council

Yanina Rosario, Florida SBDC, University of
South Florida
Philip Saputo, EDA Contract Support
Emily Stecher, EDA Contract Support
Lamishia Terrell, SBA
Miguel Tirado, FEMA
Ron Uba, Minority Business Development
Agency, U.S. Dept. of Commerce
Esther van Geloven, Netherlands Consulate
Greg Vaday, EDA
Brandon Von, FEMA
Greg Wease, FEMA
Sarina Weiss, Coastal and Heartland National
Estuary Partnership
Joy Wilkins, EDA Contract Support
Steven Wood, FloridaCommerce
Barbara Wolf, FloridaCommerce
Margaret Wuerstle, Southwest Florida Regional
Planning Council

*Eight additional people joined the virtual
session, but their identities could not be verified.*

APPENDIX

Event Agenda



*The Southwest Florida Regional Planning Council &
The Coastal & Heartland National Estuary Partnership*

2024 HURRICANE SEASON LISTENING SESSION FEDERAL INTERAGENCY RESOURCE EXCHANGE

DATE: Wednesday, February 19, 2025 • 9:00 AM - 4:00 pm

LOCATION: CHARLOTTE HARBOR EVENT AND CONFERENCE CENTER
75 Taylor Street, Punta Gorda, FL 33950

JOIN ZOOM MEETING: Meeting ID: 896 0036 8752
Passcode: 617505

Meeting Link:

<https://us06web.zoom.us/j/89600368752?pwd=faoySOM6bEnAlRgSrua3br5FShMaa6.1>

AGENDA:

Purpose: The Federal Economic Recovery Support Function Team, in partnership with the Southwest Florida Regional Planning Council and the Coastal and Heartland National Estuary Partnership, is hosting this listening session to gather and validate information regarding the impacts of Hurricanes Milton and Helene, recovery challenges of affected entities, and enable strategic conversations between local, state, and regional stakeholders and federal agencies to advance recovery and mitigation projects. This workshop is designed to set the framework for the implementation of goals, strategies, and actions the region may want to pursue to achieve economic recovery and resiliency.

Come prepared to engage in collaborative and end-goal conversations aimed at developing implementable and fundable projects.

9:00AM Welcome and Introductions

Margaret Wuerstle, Executive Director, SWFRPC

Jennifer Hecker, Executive Director of the Coastal & Heartland National Estuary Partnership

Greg Vaday, U.S. Economic Development Administration, Florida Economic Development Representative

Milton Cochran, U.S. Economic Development Administration, Econ RSF Field Coordinator/Economic Development Integrator

Federal and State Partner Introductions

9:20AM Today's Workshop Purpose

U.S. Economic Development Administration; Greg Vaday

9:45AM Moderated Discussions

a. County Introductions & Critical Unmet Needs

A county round robin overview on impacts from Hurricanes Milton and Helenes, unmet needs, and recurring impacts to critical infrastructure (roadways, stormwater, sewer, etc.), economic and businesses sector, housing, etc.

b. Infrastructure

Participants will list projects to address infrastructure and needs to assist with economic resiliency.

c. Fisheries and Agriculture

A discussion on the value of commercial and recreational fishing industries, as well as agriculture to community resilience and economic development efforts.

d. Tourism and Historic Resources

Participants will discuss the value of tourism and historic resources to the regional economy and identify projects that can further climate and economic resiliency.

e. Workforce Development & Training

Participants will discuss training and development to remain competitive and advance economic resiliency.

f. Housing

A discussion on impacts to housing stock and projects that can advance housing recovery and future resiliency to flooding, storm surge and other factors.

g. Economic Development/Small Business

A discussion on economic and business impacts in our communities and identification of projects to assist business sector recovery and economic resilience.

**12:15PM Working Lunch - (A box lunch will be provided)
and Federal and State Partner Report Out and Q&A**

State and Federal Partners will discuss what they heard and an opportunity for questions.

**1:15PM Review of Potential Project Ideas with Federal & State
Partners**

2:15PM Closing Comments and Discussion

2:30PM – 4:00PM Networking
