



Central Council of the Tlingit & Haida Indian Tribes of Alaska

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September 18, 2024

**REQUEST FOR PRESIDENTIAL DISASTER DECLARATION
CENTRAL COUNCIL TLINGIT & HAIDA INDIAN TRIBES OF ALASKA
REQUEST COVER LETTER FOR MAJOR DISASTER DECLARATION**

The Honorable Joseph R. Biden, Jr.
President of the United States
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue NW
Washington, D.C. 20500

Through:
Mr. Willie G. Nunn
Regional Administrator
Federal Emergency Management Agency, Region X
130 228th Street SW
Bothell, WA 98021-9796

Dear President Biden,

Dear President Biden,

Pursuant to Section 401 of the Robert T. Stafford Disaster Relief and Emergency Assistance Act (42 U.S.C. § 5121–5207) and Title 44 of the Code of Federal Regulations (CFR) § 206.36, the Central Council of Tlingit & Haida Indian Tribes of Alaska (Tlingit & Haida), in collaboration with the State of Alaska, submits this request for a major disaster declaration as a subrecipient following the catastrophic Mendenhall Glacier Outburst Flood (GLOF) that occurred on August 5-6, 2024. The flood caused widespread destruction in Juneau, Alaska, the traditional lands of the Tlingit and Haida peoples, severely impacting both tribal and non-tribal citizens. As a sovereign tribal nation, Tlingit & Haida responded immediately to mitigate damage and provide relief, but the magnitude of this disaster requires federal assistance to support long-term recovery and future mitigation efforts.

Incident Overview and Tribal Response

The Mendenhall Glacier Outburst Flood (GLOF) released approximately 15 billion gallons of water on August 5-6, 2024, overwhelming the Mendenhall River, which crested at record levels, flooding homes, destroying critical infrastructure, and wiping out subsistence resources. The City and Borough of Juneau (CBJ) and surrounding areas were unprepared for the extent of the devastation, prompting the National Weather Service (NWS) to issue emergency flood warnings and evacuation orders.

Tlingit & Haida immediately activated its Tribal Emergency Operations Center (TEOC), working closely with the State of Alaska to coordinate shelter operations, emergency response efforts, and mobilization of resources. We utilized our Everbridge alert system to issue critical communications to our citizens, ensuring rapid emergency communications and coordination of relief efforts. Despite these swift actions, the scope of the flood caused extensive displacement and damage to our

community.

Previous Tribal Emergency Responses and COVID-19 Impact

Tlingit & Haida has a history of leading effective disaster response efforts across Southeast Alaska, regularly assisting neighboring communities and demonstrating strong regional leadership during emergencies. However, the cumulative toll of these disasters, combined with the ongoing recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic, has strained our resources and infrastructure.

1. COVID-19 Pandemic Response:

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, Tlingit & Haida played a pivotal role in protecting tribal and non-tribal citizens. We quickly established a comprehensive response plan that included distributing personal protective equipment (PPE), deploying COVID-19 testing and vaccination sites, and supporting access to critical healthcare in remote areas. The pandemic has had long-lasting effects on our community, with economic losses, increased unemployment, and elevated public health concerns that continue to impact our ability to respond to new disasters.

2. Wrangell Landslide (2023) – Technical Assistance:

In November 2023, when a landslide struck Wrangell, claiming lives and destroying homes, Tlingit & Haida provided technical assistance to the Wrangell Cooperative Association. Our team facilitated emergency communication, supported displaced residents, and assisted in coordinating recovery efforts, demonstrating our capacity for disaster response across the region.

3. Haines Landslide (2020) – Dewatering, Heavy Equipment, and Sheltering:

Following the devastating 2020 landslide in Haines, Tlingit & Haida responded by deploying dewatering equipment to restore the Haines Airport, providing heavy machinery for debris removal, and contributing sheltering resources to displaced residents. This collaborative effort helped restore critical infrastructure and ensured the safety of the community.

4. Water System Failures – Water and Purification Assistance:

During water system failures caused by frozen pump houses in Angoon and Hydaburg, Tlingit & Haida provided water supplies and water purification units to ensure access to clean drinking water. Our proactive response to these infrastructure emergencies reflects our commitment to safeguarding not only our tribal citizens but also the broader community.

These past responses demonstrate Tlingit & Haida's ongoing leadership in addressing regional crises. However, the cumulative toll of these disasters, compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic, has left our community vulnerable and in urgent need of federal assistance to fully recover from the Mendenhall GLOF.

The Inevitable Nature of Future Glacial Outburst Floods

The Mendenhall Glacier Outburst Flood (GLOF) is not an isolated event. In fact, it is the second year in a row that such a flood has devastated the Juneau area. In 2023, the Mendenhall River crested at 14.97 feet—at that time a record-breaking event. This year, the river crested at 15.99 feet, exceeding last year's flood by more than a foot, causing even more widespread damage to homes, infrastructure, and subsistence resources.

The Suicide Basin, where these GLOFs originate, continues to grow as the glacier recedes due to

climate change. Scientists have warned that GLOFs from Suicide Basin are likely to recur annually or even more frequently as warming trends accelerate glacial melting. Each successive flood risks becoming more destructive as more water is released from the basin. This creates a heightened, ongoing threat to the Tlingit & Haida citizens living in the Mendenhall Valley and the broader Juneau area.

The inevitability of these floods demands urgent investment in long-term mitigation measures and improved early warning systems. Without immediate federal assistance, the tribe and the surrounding communities will continue to face repeated destruction, displacement, and loss of subsistence resources.

Impact on Tribal Citizens and Cultural Resources

The August 2024 flood has left many Tlingit & Haida citizens without homes, and the loss of subsistence resources—such as salmon, deer, seaweed, and berries—has critically impacted their way of life. These resources are not only essential for food security but are also integral to our cultural identity and traditional practices.

The destruction of homes, many of which are multi-generational, has displaced dozens of tribal families. The psychological toll on our citizens, already compounded by last year's GLOF, is immense, with many experiencing ongoing trauma, anxiety, and uncertainty about the future. This disaster has devastated our community's resilience, and the long-term emotional impact, especially on elders and children, is severe.

Specific Requests for Federal Assistance

I. Individual Assistance (IA) for Housing and Tribal Citizens' Recovery

Immediate assistance is needed to address housing displacement and long-term recovery for our tribal citizens.

1. Temporary Housing Assistance:

Many displaced families remain in temporary housing arrangements, with the onset of winter compounding the urgency for stable accommodations. We request 18 months of Temporary Housing Assistance, based on HUD Fair Market Value, to provide shelter until permanent repairs can be completed.

2. Repairs and Reconstruction Grants:

Homes that suffered flood damage require extensive repairs or total reconstruction. Federal grants are essential for home repairs, particularly for low-income households that cannot cover the out-of-pocket costs of rebuilding. Winter months are quickly approaching and if repairs are not made in a timely manner the community will continue to suffer.

3. Other Needs Assistance (ONA):

The flood destroyed household items, tools, vehicles, and subsistence equipment critical to our citizens' livelihoods. We request ONA funding to replace essential items, including tools for subsistence gathering and crafts.

II. Cultural and Subsistence Resource Restoration

The loss of subsistence resources due to the flood is a profound cultural and economic blow to our community. Many families rely on subsistence foods, such as salmon, deer, berries, and seaweed, which were lost or contaminated by floodwaters. The flood also destroyed tools essential for harvesting, processing, and storing these traditional foods, compounding the devastation. To address

these losses, we request:

1. Subsistence Resource Recovery Program:

Federal assistance is urgently needed to help replace both the lost subsistence foods and the tools required for harvesting and processing. Many households had stored large quantities of subsistence food in freezers located in garages and other areas that were inundated by hazardous, contaminated floodwaters, rendering the food unsafe. We request funding to:

- Replace freezers and food storage systems damaged by the flood.
- Provide financial support to replace contaminated subsistence foods, including salmon, wild game, berries, and seaweed, which are vital to our food security and cultural practices.
- Restore access to traditional harvesting areas, including salmon runs, hunting grounds, and gathering sites, that were damaged by the flood.
- Replace harvesting tools and equipment, such as fishing gear, hunting equipment, and traditional processing tools (e.g., dehydrators, smokehouses), which are essential for gathering and preparing subsistence resources.

2. Cultural Preservation Grants:

The flood also destroyed many ceremonial and traditional tools used in cultural practices, deeply affecting the identity of our people. These items, passed down through generations, hold immense spiritual significance and are central to our way of life. We request Cultural Preservation Grants to:

- Restore or replace ceremonial and cultural items damaged in the flood.
- Support the continuation of traditional practices by providing funds for the repair of cultural tools used in ceremonies and community gatherings.
- Preserve cultural heritage sites and protect them from future flood risks.

III. Crisis Counseling and Mental Health Services

The recurring nature of GLOFs has caused long-term psychological stress on our community. We request:

1. Crisis Counseling Services:

Federal funding is needed for short-term and long-term crisis counseling tailored to the unique needs of our tribal citizens. The trauma from successive floods requires specialized mental health services to help our people cope with this ongoing threat.

2. Disaster Unemployment Assistance (DUA):

Many tribal citizens have lost work due to the flood, particularly those engaged in subsistence and seasonal employment. We request DUA to provide financial support for those who have lost income due to the disaster.

IV. Public Assistance (PA) for Tribal Emergency Response Costs

Tlingit & Haida took a leading role in responding to the GLOF, but federal assistance is needed to continue these efforts:

1. Debris Removal and Emergency Protective Measures (Categories A & B):

The flood deposited large amounts of debris on tribal lands, homes, and public spaces. Federal assistance is requested for debris removal and the continuation of emergency protective measures to ensure the health and safety of our community.

V. Hazard Mitigation and Future Flood Prevention

To safeguard against future GLOFs, we support the State of Alaska's request for flood mitigation efforts and request additional measures focused on tribal lands:

1. Flood Mitigation Projects:

We request federal funding for levee reinforcement, drainage improvements, and riverbank stabilization to protect tribal lands and homes from future GLOFs.

2. Early Warning Systems:

The recurrence of GLOFs requires enhanced real-time monitoring of Suicide Basin and improvements to the early warning systems to give citizens adequate time to evacuate and prepare for future flood events.

Conclusion

Tlingit & Haida has consistently demonstrated our capacity for leadership in disaster response, both for our tribal citizens and the broader Southeast Alaska region. However, the scale of the Mendenhall GLOF, combined with the inevitability of future floods, requires immediate federal assistance. We request your action in declaring a major disaster and providing the necessary federal aid programs to ensure the recovery and protection of our community.

Thank you for your attention to this urgent matter.

Gunalchéesh / Háw'aa / Thank You,



Richard J. Peterson
President
