OFFICE OF THE GOVERNOR
STATE OF MONTANA

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January 15, 2026

The Honorable Donald J. Trump
President of the United States
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20500

Through: Katherine Fox, FEMA Region VIII Administrator Acting

RE: Request for Major Disaster Declaration – Montana Windstorm

Dear Mr. President,

Under the provisions of Section 401 of the Robert T. Stafford Disaster Relief and Emergency Assistance Act, 42 U.S.C. §§ 5121-5207 (Stafford Act) and 44 C.F.R § 206.36, I respectfully request that you issue a Major Disaster Declaration for the State of Montana as a result of the severe windstorm to include Public Assistance Category A (debris removal), Public Assistance Category B (emergency protective measures), Public Assistance Categories C-G, and I (permanent work), and Hazard Mitigation. Based on the significant damages to date, I request this Major Disaster Declaration be authorized and designated specifically for twenty-eight counties Big Horn, Blaine, Broadwater, Carbon, Dawson, Flathead, Garfield, Glacier, Golden Valley, Judith Basin, Lake, Lincoln, McCone, Mineral, Missoula, Park, Phillips, Pondera, Powder River, Powell, Ravalli, Rosebud, Sanders, Stillwater, Sweetgrass, Teton, Valley, and Wheatland Counties and five tribal nations: Blackfeet Nation, Confederated Salish, Pend d'Oreille & Kootenai Tribes, Fort Belknap Indian Community, Fort Peck Tribes, and Northern Cheyenne Tribe within the State of Montana. Furthermore, I request the incident for this disaster begin on December 16th, 2025, and continue through December 18th, 2025. This request is timely under 44 C.F.R. §206.36(a).

The totality of impact from the most detrimental windstorm in 30 years is estimated to be $13.3 million. Damages, response, and recovery efforts impacted 45 of 56 Montana Counties, five of seven Tribal Nations including one with significant water system damages, five school districts, and 19 of 25 Rural Electrical Cooperatives. Damage from the storm is spread across eighty percent of Montana.

During the Joint Preliminary Damage Assessment, local, tribal, state and representatives of the Federal Emergency Management Agency determined that 28 of 56 Montana counties and five of

seven Tribal Nations had verified $6.5 million in public infrastructure damages that exceeded their county per capita threshold.

The State of Montana is facing significant effects from this windstorm, coming immediately on the heels of the Lincoln County flood, occurring only days prior. The request for a Major Disaster Declaration submitted on January 9, 2026, for the Lincoln County flooding totaled $9.968 million, and this current request for windstorm damages is $6.5 million

These recent historic disasters impacted the State of Montana within one week of each other. The magnitude of both events equates to approximately 8x Montana's statewide per capita indicator, with initial Joint Preliminary Assessed costs estimated at $16.3 million cumulatively. This is unparalleled for this time of year and occurred before the anticipated spring runoff. Consequently, over one third of the verified windstorm damage occurred in northwest Montana, which is the focus of my preceding Major Disaster Declaration request.

I. Meteorological Impacts

Synopsis:

Beginning late on December 16, 2025, the State of Montana experienced a long-duration, high-impact wind event and associated blizzard resulting in widespread damage and impacts to the region. The meteorological driver behind these impacts was the interaction of strong cold fronts descending from Canada undercutting an atmospheric river from the Pacific Ocean over the northwest US.

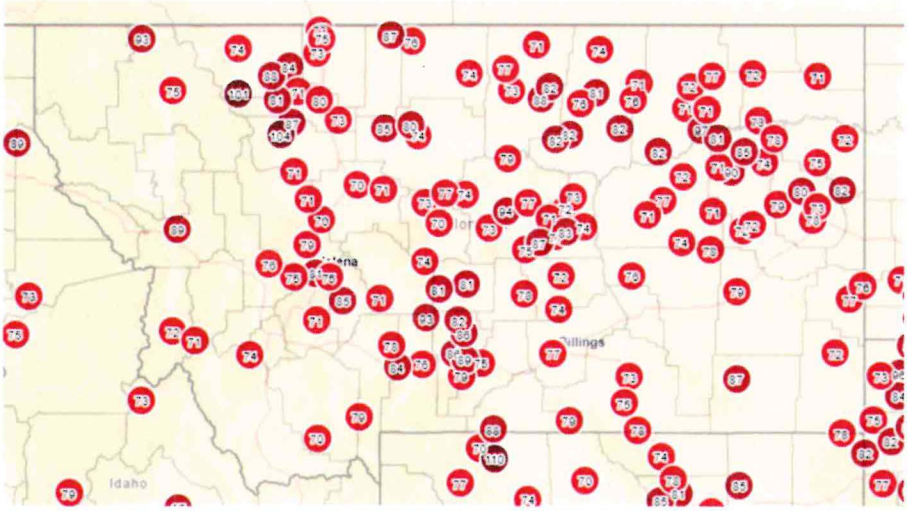
West of the continental divide, a historic high wind event unfolded as hurricane-force winds combined with saturated soils and weakened root structures from recent warmth to cause significant treefall at a magnitude rarely seen in the December record for all western Montana. Significantly eclipsing prior December events, this storm delivered frequent gusts between 60 and 90 MPH in valleys and over 100 MPH in the mountains for multiple hours, primarily during the morning. Reported impacts from the significant treefall event include blocked roads and trails, widespread power outages, crushed vehicles, and structure damage.

While strong winds are a normal occurrence east of the continental divide, this event stands out due to its spatial extent and prolonged period of impact, with many locations experiencing high sustained winds and wind gusts for six or more hours. The highest measured wind gust was 104 MPH, recorded eight miles west of Bynum in Teton County just east of the Rocky Mountain Front. 55 of 56 counties observed 55 MPH winds or greater. Billings saw its second highest gust on record at 79 MPH, with Miles City and Baker not far behind at 79 and 77 MPH respectively.

In northeastern Montana, high winds combined with heavy snow resulted and low temperatures in sustained blizzard conditions for over three hours and in some locations over five hours. Damage reported because of this weather system includes numerous instances of structural damage, downed trees and power lines, and widespread power outages. Widespread severe driving conditions were reported with multiple road closures because of blown-over semis and trailers, stranded motorists, fallen debris, and heavy blowing snow.

Figure 1. Maximum Wind Gusts over 55 Miles Per Hour

Figure 2. Maximum Wind Gusts over 70 Miles Per Hour



Meteorological Summary:

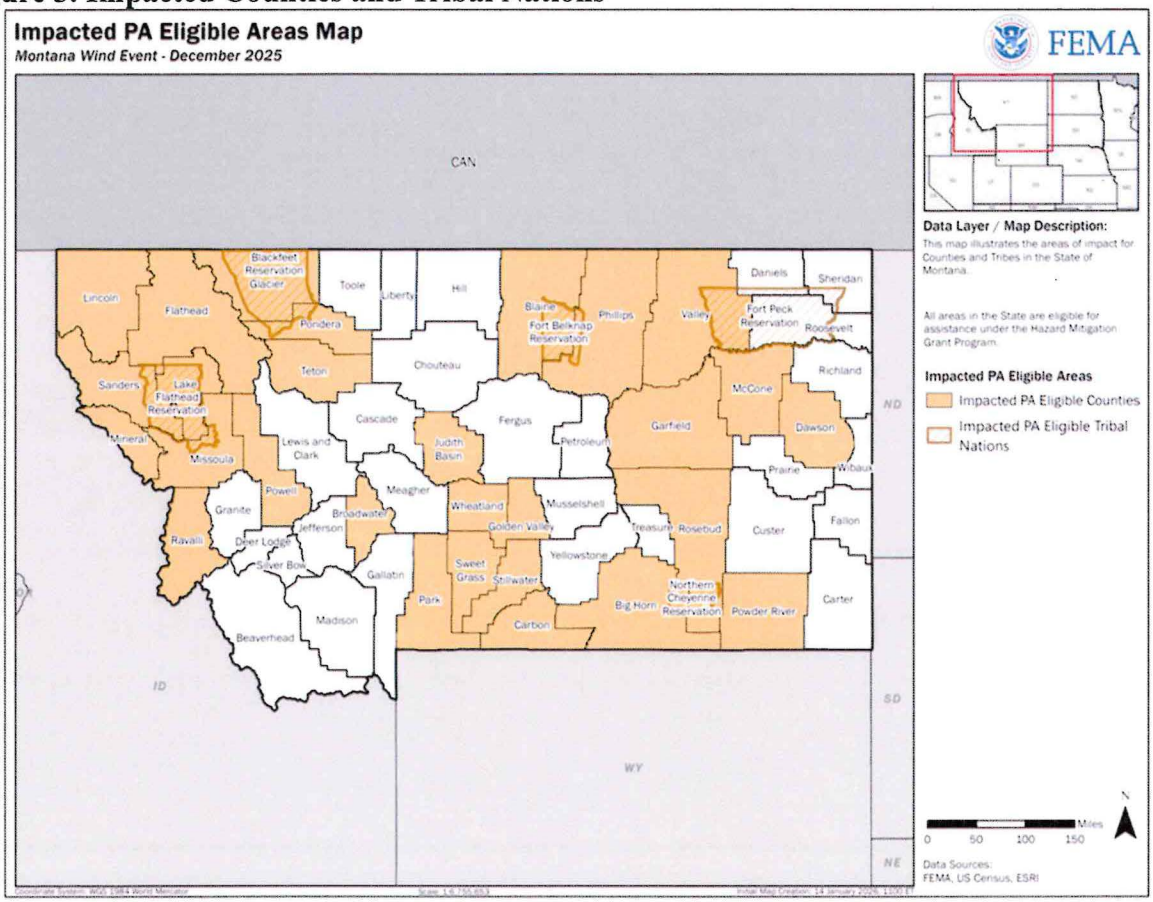
The primary meteorological factors contributing to the severity of the event were:

- The complex interaction between an energetic Pacific low-pressure system, undercutting cold fronts, and the topography of Montana contributed to development and severity of this weather event.

- The Pacific weather system brought a belt of strong winds aloft into western Montana early on the morning of December 17, with an accompanying cold front providing a mechanism for those winds to reach the surface and, notably, many populated valley floors. Strongest winds west of the divide were observed mainly between 8:00am and 12:00pm, with the core of strong winds tracking across the state through the daytime hours before subsiding through the evening.

- During the afternoon on December 17, a cold front moved southward from Canada to central Montana which resulted in the highest observed gusts for most of these locations and produced light snowfall northeast of a line between Malta and Glendive during the evening and overnight. This snow immediately became wind-blown due to strong winds and resulted in significant blizzard conditions across northeast Montana that persisted into Thursday morning.

Figure 3. Impacted Counties and Tribal Nations



Impacts Across the State:

Impacts began almost immediately as the high winds pushed into Montana early morning on Wednesday, December 17. Following wind gusts more than 80 MPH in eastern Washington and northern Idaho (with a few more than 100 MPH), winds surged into western Montana, leading to widespread damage. While impactful December winds have occurred previously—such as the December 4, 1995, Lolo National Forest blowdown that felled 21,605 cubic yards of timber and a December 15, 2006, wind event with 65 MPH gusts—this storm significantly eclipsed those precedents.

Utility infrastructure sustained severe damage with Flathead Electric Cooperative describing the event as one of its most challenging in their 88- year history, with 30,000 customers losing power due to snapped poles and downed lines west of the divide. Some areas including Libby, MT needed several days for power restoration due to broken poles (Dec 20-23). Further, response and recovery operations in northwest Montana were impeded due to the prior week's historical flooding events.

Winds began to spill across the continental divide during the mid- to late-morning hours. As winds increased, so did tree damage and power outages, with significant travel impacts also beginning to occur. Blowovers and tree/power line blowdowns combined to produce not only power outages but also widespread lane blockages. Some of these lane blockages resulted in road closures. The wind itself prompted numerous blowover warnings, including MDT-declared "severe driving conditions" by late morning and during the late afternoon. Early school closures were enacted ahead of the 70-80+ MPH winds that occurred. NorthWestern Energy reported around 35,000 outages, with areas near the continental divide sustaining significant impact due to treefall and estimated $4.3 million in utility damages.

Further east, impacts included power disruption, blowovers, and property damage. The City of Livingston and Park County sustained significant damages to power transmission poles with widespread, extended power outages reported. Winds in this region lasted significantly longer than other parts of southern Montana, with Livingston seeing sustained gusts into the 70 to 90 MPH range throughout December 17. Outages started late in the morning of December 17 and continued through December 19 in some areas. Impacts due to high winds were similar in northeastern Montana with several instances of property damage and prolonged power outages, compounded due to blizzard conditions. Near-zero visibility due to blowing snow, bitter cold, and high winds combined to create an intense blizzard with few comparisons on record. Warming shelters were established by the Fort Peck Tribal Nation due to these blizzard conditions.

II. Effective Response and Recovery is Beyond the Capability of the State and Affected Local Governments – 44 C.F.R. §206.36(b)(1)

Profile of Impacted Communities

The State of Montana is facing significant impacts from this windstorm, following the Lincoln County flood, occurring only days prior. The request for a Major Disaster Declaration submitted on January 9, 2026, for the Lincoln County flooding totaled $9.968 million, and this current request for windstorm damage is $6.5 million. These costs are expected to rise as assessments and repairs continue. Combined, these two disasters—occurring within one week—will exceed $16.3 million in recovery costs. For perspective, Montana's disaster appropriation is $16 million per biennium. These events will fully exhaust the fund and could place the State in a financially precarious position without additional Federal support.

The FEMA per capita indicator for the State of Montana is $2.1 million dollars. The windstorm's validated costs are over three times the State of Montana's indicator, and the back-to-back disasters combined are nearly eight times the State of Montana indicator.

Montana is a largely rural and frontier state with a substantial elderly population, seven federally recognized tribes each associated with distinct reservations, and economically vulnerable population spread across the fourth geographically largest state. 15% of Montana's population was without power, some without power for over a week. Accordingly, many communities and businesses suffered the loss of perishable items as a result. Montana also has 16,879 Medicare beneficiaries that are on electricity dependent devices and durable medical equipment. Power outages created the need for community emergency food assistance and congregate feeding for 300+ people while the emergency shelters were open in Western Montana.

At the Fort Belknap Indian Community, the wind destroyed the protective covering for the community water storage tank. The Fort Belknap Indian Reservation alone sustained significant impacts to their 1-million-gallon water tank, serving 399 homes and 61 businesses. One of the top panels was completely eviscerated, exposing the water source to contamination and forcing the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to enforce a boil water order, which is still in place for the foreseeable future. Temporary repairs have proved futile. The boil-water order continues until permanent repairs and the required testing cycles can be completed/pass required quality inspections. The permanent repair is expected to take several months to complete, requires a special kit ordered, and will need a crane to assist. Consequently, it was communicated to the State of Montana that both the Fort Belknap and Fort Peck Indian Tribes have sustained such damages to privately owned homes that they will pursue their own disaster declarations, specific to the Individual Assistance Program.

Five small community schools suffered catastrophic roof failures, forcing students to use temporary facilities or alternative education solutions. One of these historic schools located in Stillwater County was insulated with asbestos. The impact and damage of the windstorm to this school caused a large spread of their asbestos insulation, creating a hazard for the school and its surrounding community. The safe cleanup of this damage is anticipated to be extensive, long-term, and costly. The Montana Department of Environmental Quality is partnering with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency to coordinate cleanup and mitigation efforts for this location and restore use of a historic education facility for students and faculty.

Impacts on Montana's Rural Electrical Cooperatives and their members were significant. Without additional federal assistance, the costs to repair the wind damage and restore the electrical grid may be passed on to their 171,429 impacted Rural Electric Cooperative members impacted and creating an increase to the cost of vital energy utilities as well as higher energy expenses per household.

The windstorm also created widespread debris throughout the state. The downed trees and powerlines created public safety hazards that needed to be cleaned and removed. The debris impacts to private property also created hardships for our residents as they work to clean up their yards, ranches, and fields, and homesteads.

III. Federal Emergency Assistance Is Necessary to Supplement the Efforts and Available Resources of the State, Local Governments, Disaster Relief Organizations, and

Over the past five years, several emergency events have affected the majority of jurisdictions throughout the State of Montana, resulting in liabilities of multi-millions of dollars, to include thirty-nine (39) counties and five (5) tribal nations. The anticipated 2026 spring runoff is expected to further exacerbate impacted areas. For fiscal recovery, the total estimate of Public Assistance projects for the six (6) current open disasters is in excess of $149 million, almost $45 million for Fire Management Assistance Grants (with over 1.4 million acres burned), and over $1.2 million of funding through the Governor's Disaster Fund for state declared events.

Historic Event Comparison & Mitigation Needs

Below are the State-issued Emergencies and Disasters that have occurred in the State of Montana in the past five years.

State Issued Emergencies and Disasters for SFY 2021, SFY 2022, SFY 2023, SFY 2024, SFY 2025, and SFY 2026:

- EO-4-2021: Energy Emergency
- EO-8-2021: June Windstorm
- EO-11-2021: Drought Emergency
- EO-12-2021: Wildland Fire Emergency
- EO-4-2022: Spring Flooding
- EO-1-2023: April Flooding
- EO-2-2023: Memorial Day Flooding
- EO-8-2024: May Flooding
- EO-9-2024: July Windstorm
- EO-10-2024: Miles City Windstorm
- EO-11-2024: Hamilton and Stevensville Windstorm
- EO-4-2025: Anaconda Manhunt Emergency
- EO-7-2025: Montana State Prison Water Supply Emergency
- EO-9-2025: Winter Flood
- EO-11-2025: Winter Windstorm

Federally Declared Disasters:
The State of Montana has had seven (7) Fire Management Assistance Grant Declarations since 2021.

- FEMA-5392-FM-MT -Robinson Draw Fire
- FEMA-5399-FM-MT -Buffalo Fire
- FEMA-5403-FM-MT -PF Fire
- FEMA-5406-FM-MT -Richard Spring Fire
- FEMA-5480-FM-MT -River Road East Fire
- FEMA-5507-FM-MT -Horse Gulch Fire
- FEMA-5611-FM-MT -Windy Rock Fire

The State of Montana is still in the recovery phase for six (6) Presidential declarations that remain open and have liabilities against the state general fund.

- FEMA-4508-DR-MT -2020 Covid-19 Pandemic - 56 Counties
- FEMA-4655-DR-MT -2022 Severe Storms and Flooding - Seven Counties
- FEMA-4726-DR-MT -2023 Spring Flooding - Seven Counties, One Tribe
- FEMA-4745-DR-MT -2023 Spring Flooding -Ten Counties
- FEMA-4801-DR-MT -2024 Spring Flooding- Ten Counties, Two Tribes
- FEMA-4813-DR-MT -2024 Missoula Windstorm

Montana currently has 64 Notices of Intent (NOIs) for Hazard Mitigation Assistance (HMA) eligible projects in various phases of review, representing a total of $40,964,669 in future mitigation needs. The State consistently demonstrates strong obligation rates across all open and legacy disasters, reflecting sound fiscal management and reliable execution. Montana maintains a robust portfolio of shovel-ready projects, ensuring timely obligation of available HMGP funds.

Over the past five years, Montana has seen increasing interest in hazard mitigation among our Rural Electric Cooperatives (REC). Montana has been awarded several mitigation projects through previous Hazard Mitigation funding, including the undergrounding of utility lines to reduce power loss during windstorms/severe weather and wildland fires. Additional projects have focused on relocating substations out of floodplains to ensure service continuity during flooding events. With each successful project, engagement and interest continue to grow by RECs to harden the electrical grid against wind.

The State's mitigation framework is well-aligned with federal priorities: Montana has a current FEMA-approved State Hazard Mitigation Plan and 98% of jurisdictions maintain FEMA-approved Local Multi-hazard Mitigation Plans. Additionally, Montana's adoption and enforcement of modern building codes meet or exceed national standards, promoting safer construction and reducing risk statewide.

IV. Confirmation That the Governor Has Taken Appropriate Action Under State Law and Directed the Execution of the State Emergency Plan – 44 C.F.R. §206.36(c)(1)

On December 18, 2025, I issued Executive Order No. EO 11-2025, declaring another disaster to exist in the State of Montana. The State Emergency Coordination Center was already activated as part of EO-9-2025: Winter Flood and continues to coordinate with state, local and federal agencies, executing the State's Comprehensive Emergency Management Plan in accordance with Section 302(c) of the Stafford Act to support both incidents.

V. An Estimate of the Amount of Severity of Damages and Losses Stating the Impact of the Disaster on the Public and Private Sector – 44 C.F.R. §206.36(c)(2)

As mentioned above, this event resulted in devastating impacts across Montana. The true extent of damage to homes, businesses, and infrastructure is still being determined. However, a portion of some of these significant damages to infrastructure were validated through the Public Assistance

Joint Preliminary Damage Assessments. These preliminary estimates of $6,540,565 accounted for over three times the CY 2025 State Threshold of $2,103,454. Furthermore, the actual costs of this event are anticipated to be much greater when the full cost for damaged infrastructure, as well as the required asbestos disposal within the Stillwater County school site are fully realized.

VI. State and Local Resources Committed to Alleviate the Results of the Disaster – 44 C.F.R. § 206.36(c)(3)

As of the date of this request, the State of Montana has spent approximately $689 thousand on response & preliminary recovery costs alone. Furthermore, I requested an eight (8) person Recovery Strike Team, from the State of Florida, through the Emergency Management Assistance Compact to assist with both the flood and windstorm.

Participating agencies and organizations included:

- **State Agencies:** Montana Disaster & Emergency Services, Montana Department of Commerce, Montana Department of Transportation, Montana Department of Environmental Quality, Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation

- **Local Partners**: Local elected officials, county and tribal emergency managers, local health departments, local planning departments

- **Community & Voluntary Organizations:** Local faith-based organizations, Montana Volunteer Organizations Active in Disaster (VOAD), Team Rubicon, American Red Cross

- **Electrical Power:** 19 Rural Electric Cooperatives, Montana Electric Cooperative Association, NorthWestern Energy

- **Private Sector Support:** Arborists, tree-trimming and tree-removal contractors, debris removal contractors, private sector power restoration contractor

- **Federal Partners:** U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) National Weather Service

- **Emergency Management Assistance Compact Resource:** Florida Division of Emergency Management - Damage Assessment Team

This collaborative approach ensured survivors had streamlined access to infrastructure recovery resources, and volunteer support for cleanup and remediation. Volunteer Organizations Active in Disasters (VOADs) are typically the first groups to respond when disasters occur and the last ones to leave. A Major Disaster Declaration would allow them to stretch their already limited donations and resources as far as possible so that they can remain engaged throughout the duration of the recovery process, assisting those in the community who are most vulnerable. In the wake of the windstorm, the American Red Cross, in partnership with local and state agencies, provided critical

response efforts to stabilize impacted communities and provide for humanitarian needs including temporary shelters, emergency feeding, and electrical charging stations.

VII. Preliminary Estimates of the Types and Amount of Supplementary Federal Disaster Assistance Needed Under the Stafford Act - 44 C.F.R. § 206.36(c)(4)

The Montana windstorm event resulted in significant damage across Montana. It is anticipated that these impacted jurisdictions will require additional assistance from other Federal Agency Programs, to include the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). Additionally, the Small Business Administration (SBA) with disaster physical damage and economic impact loans.

The full extent of additional federal assistance remains to be determined, given the scope, magnitude, and recency of this historic wind event. The State of Montana acknowledges that all relevant federal funding opportunities must be pursued for the successful response and recovery of these communities, as well as the remediation of significant economic impacts.

VIII. Certification by the Governor That State and Local Government Obligations and Expenditures for the Current Disaster Will Comply with All Applicable Cost Sharing Requirements of the Stafford Act – 44 C.F.R. § 206.36(c)(5)

Should this request for a Major Disaster Declaration be approved, I certify that State, tribal, and local government obligations and expenditures for the disaster will comply with all applicable cost sharing requirements of the Stafford Act. Please see enclosure, FEMA Form 010-0-13.

IX. Conclusion

I have designated Delila Bruno, Administrator of the Montana Disaster & Emergency Services as the State Coordinating Officer and Governor's Authorized Representative for this event. She is authorized to provide any further information, assurances, requests, or justification on my behalf. Additionally, I have designated the Bureau Chief for Montana's Disaster & Emergency Services Division, Jake Ganieany, as Alternate Governor's Authorized Representative for this request.

I look forward to your response. Please do not hesitate to contact me or my staff with any questions.

Sincerely,

Greg Gianforte
Governor

Enclosures:
FEMA Form 010-0-13
Enclosure B
Executive Order EO 11-2025