

U.S. Senator Maria Cantwell

Flooding Press Conference with Whatcom County Mayors

December 13, 2025

Sen. Cantwell Remarks

[\[VIDEO\]](#)

Sen. Cantwell: Well, Rick, thank you. And I want to first also thank all the first responders. Everybody who's talked so far has mentioned the unbelievable coordination and communication, so thank you for that. It really meant a lot to the lives of individuals here in this community. I want to thank all the mayors, especially John Perry and Bruce Bosch. And really, those two, I mean, I definitely want to thank Nooksack Mayor Hester, as well.

I've been to, this is like the fourth stop, but I can just tell you, for two days, the first words out of my mouth everywhere about why this is all so important has been the words Sumas and Whatcom County. And that is because you've been the most hard-hit in our whole state, and you've had the fewest resources to deal with the response.

So I just thank the mayors for taking this on. I'm sure it is challenging and somewhat discouraging to be at this four years after the last one, and so just thank you for keeping your resiliency up. Thank you for that. Thank you for just hanging in there.

I want to thank our tribal leaders as well, both from the Nooksack Council and Chairman Hillaire. Obviously, we're all in this together, and we have to set priorities that are going to help us for the future. And reminding us all about Slater Road is a great reminder about why we've got to build more capacity at higher levels.

And to follow on what Rick said, so we were successful in getting an emergency declaration done by FEMA, which is really used for three things, helping you with evacuations and shelter, helping with clearing -- and I saw a lot of great work up in Sumas. And obviously here, there's a lot been done. But there's more work to be done in that clearing and helping get our systems back in order. They're good on that. And other, just infrastructure that helps us get back to operational levels.

So please, like, help us make a list. Not that you can't talk to them directly. I'm going to go back and request that we get somebody dedicated up here ASAP to just handle the FEMA response. We were in Skagit earlier today, and people were like, well, where is FEMA? Where are they? So people want to know, where are they, where are they going to be on the ground, and how can we best communicate with them.

I think Congressman Larsen also brought up a really important point, which has been brought up at our other stops throughout yesterday and today, and that is that there is another weather event moving through the region. And as people have said, we don't know, most of our dams are at capacity, so there's not a lot of room left, and so they're spilling more water and pushing more water through the system. And so when you're getting here, who knows what this will mean?

But I am going to, if law enforcement and our first responders don't have a direct NOAA contact -- right now, they have established a NOAA weather forecast person in three locations, but I'm going to

recommend that they have somebody up here, or at least be joined at the hip with you on all of these next events that are starting tomorrow and on Monday, to help give you the most accurate information so that you can use that information and planning.

The issue that we all have to come -- we have to use this event to say, we can't do this again. We have to use this event to say we can't go through this again. In looking at the successes that we've been able to manage in other places, in Tukwila yesterday, in Monroe and Skagit today, you're talking about years of work where people were able to put levees in to divert the waters and have the support to do that, or the management in King County's case of the Howard Hanson Dam, in conjunction with the levees and the dike system.

So we've got to get use this event to get FEMA's attention, and the Army Corps of Engineers, we're not going through this again. We're not going through this again. So we, in northeast Whatcom County, may not have all the resources that a big county has. In Skagit's case, there was a wall that was built along the river that basically did a pretty good job of keeping that out of downtown. But that, again, took years and years and years. The King County efforts took years and years and years. But we might not have years and years. We don't have time for a 10 year plan. We need a two year plan. We need a two year plan to do what we can to fix these issues.

And it's not lost on me that this Canadian side of the issue also, we have to figure out their impacts on the river system, and that makes it more complicated, but that shouldn't stop us. I did have a chance to talk to the Canadian ambassador right before I left DC, because she just happened to be at something that we're both attending. And she lives, her family's from here, right up here, so she was going to be here visiting. I was like, well, you'd better help us, because this is going to be a problem, and we never fixed it. We've got to have their cooperation to do some improvements on their side of the border, because if we don't, we can't manage this alone on our side.

But the number one thing that I said to the White House was that the biggest issue here is that we have a border crossing, and it's closed, and we have economic impacts from these roads being closed, and you can't have these communities exist and be the avenue for which this commerce can take place if we don't help them maintain these issues as it relates to flooding.

So I'm happy I'm here today, but I'm sorry I'm here for this occasion. I'm going to work with your congressman who does a good job back in Washington advocating, but we're going to have to get the attention of everybody. And I mean the White House on down, Homeland Security and FEMA and the Army Corps of Engineers and the Department of Transportation. I mentioned this to Secretary Duffy from the Department of Transportation. I said, we've got to get people's attention on the fact that the resources need to be made, here, or our larger economies are going to be affected. Not just Northeast Whatcom County or Whatcom County, but like the state and the country's economies are going to be affected. And so we need some help. We need some help, and it's got to happen now.

So I just appreciate everybody and sorry that we're in this situation again so soon. I can't imagine, I really can't I really can't imagine. And I think we've got to give people here the faith that that we're going to use this event and capture some of those resources.

So what Rick was saying about the second phase, and that is why the preliminary damage assessments are important, is the governor will submit to the federal government probably sometime, I would guess, in the next 30 to some days, a ask for a federal declaration for assistance, and in that declaration, he

then specifies what the costs and issues are that have affected our state, and that'll be the consideration that the administration will make in deciding whether this was a disaster.

So we want to do a good job at that, a good job at communicating what those costs are to the region. And I don't think we should shy away from the costs that it cost us last time, and the delays in getting the border back open, and the challenges to the travel throughputs of the transportation system. And we should really see if there's anything that we can get now from any of these agencies as part of that process to really help us get back to rebuilding.

But we do need your help with -- I'm going to do everything I can to get a meeting out here with the Army Corps of Engineers. I'll bet you Rick will volunteer to come back and have that meeting. But sometimes that's what it takes. You've got to get everybody in a room and get them to start telling you what it is that they think can actually be done. The mayor has suggested this ring system, a ring dike. And maybe that's the proposal.

But let's not just have FEMA come out here and the Army Corps be -- the Army Corps is down the street in Skagit County right now, they're out there managing these different dams and coordinating with the rest of the emergency response. But let's get people out here now, and seeing the damage and communicating about what it is that we need to fix and get on a common, same page so that we can assure the people of this region that it's important to our state, we don't want to be here again -- well, we want to be here again, but for better purposes. And we want to be we want to be saying that we've been able to make these investments that's going to help this area continue to be a great place to live.

So thank you. Thank you, Mayor, and again, thank you to all the mayors that are here and your hard work in a very difficult situation.

[...]

Sen. Cantwell: Well, I want to take advantage of every darn thing they'll do for this area, so that you guys have time to do other things. So I want to get creative, because you don't have enough resources. So if they were to say, fine, we'll set up a shelter, let's let them set up a shelter. If they say, we'll do this road cleaning and getting things back to operation, let's let them do it. Let's figure it out.

Lynden Mayor Scott Korthis: I do have a question. You stated, and I agree, something should be done in the next two years. As a group of leaders, to have it done in the next two years, in the next three months we need to have a plan. And I guess, how can you, or what should we do as mayors to get a plan in front of the right people sooner than later. Because we need a plan, and we need probably six, eight months to figure out the plan we want, and then it's going to take a year to execute it, and then two years is up. If we don't start sooner than later, I see ourselves in trouble. So do you have any advice on how we can get the plan going sooner than later.

Sen. Cantwell: I want the Army Corps of Engineers to come like next week, to come here and meet with us and see the damage and see the problem, and try to get them to engage here, locally, so that they will understand what some of the solutions are that people are advocating here.

They may have different ideas. I mean, I'm just saying, it's not an easy crew to deal with, trust me. Like, we were in disagreement on the Howard Hanson dam, I don't know if you remember this meeting [gestures to Rep. Larsen]

Congressman Larsen: All too well.

Sen. Cantwell: But, like, at one point in time, we had to get everybody in a room in DC. The governor was there, every member of the delegation was there, and we had to hash it out, and we finally got an agreement. So there are a lot of engineers, and so they don't always agree, but we can't let the disagreement be the thing that sinks us. We've to get to a point where we can get on the same page.

And so I have offered, in our state, anytime there's a problem, I will come and we will get the Army Corps to join us, because we've got to cut down on the time. So let's see if we can make that happen, just so that they can understand. And there are people in the region, like I said, they're in the region right now because they're just coordinating everything from water flow and assessment.

And they're probably going to say, well, we're not coming on Sunday and Monday, because we've got another rain event coming. But I think it's prudent to come see the damage in Sumas and have the mayor walk them down the street here in Everson and say, this is where the river was, and for them to see this economy here and what we're dealing with.

And so, right now people are telling some pretty positive stories about all the prevention work we've been able to do in other parts of the state, and why that held. Okay, well, that's not the story here, that prevention work hasn't been done and it didn't hold and now we're back here with limited resources, trying to figure out how to clean it up, but also give hope for the future, right? Like we're trying to figure that out.

I think getting them here would also help us inform the declaration process for future funding, right? So it could help us get some funds out of that. So I'm willing to try to make that happen and get other agencies involved as well.