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**TWO YEARS AFTER HURRICANE MICHAEL, SIGNS OF RECOVERY
IN FLORIDA PANHANDLE BUT MUCH MORE WORK TO DO**
*Rebuild 850 calls for continued investment in region struck by one of the biggest
and most devastating storms ever to make landfall in North America*

TALLAHASSEE, Fla. — Even as Hurricane Delta bears down on the Gulf region two years after Hurricane Michael made landfall as one of the most powerful and devastating storms to ever hit the continental U.S., advocates for the Florida Panhandle say the region’s recovery is far from over – and continued attention and investment are sorely needed.

This Saturday, October 10, marks the second anniversary of Hurricane Michael’s landfall as a brutal Category 5 storm – an event that took 50 lives in Florida, destroyed much of [Tyndall Air Force Base](#), leveled homes and rendered tens of thousands homeless, destroyed schools, shuttered hundreds of businesses, and wiped out hundreds of thousands of acres of agricultural and timber land.

“The storm itself was traumatic, but that trauma has been compounded by a painfully slow recovery,” said [Allan Bense](#), Co-Chair of [Rebuild 850](#) and a former Speaker of the Florida House of Representatives. “We’ve made progress, but there is still a long, long way to go.”

Hurricane Michael made landfall near Tyndall Air Force Base and Mexico Beach with maximum sustained winds at landfall of 161 mph. The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration estimated approximately \$25 billion in hurricane-related damage.

“Florida’s Panhandle residents are strong and resilient, have great resolve, and aren’t given to complaining. But these are also some of Florida’s most financially challenged communities, least able to endure a disaster like this financially,” noted State [Senator Bill Montford](#), whose district was hit hardest by Michael. “To put things in perspective: Hurricane Michael destroyed hospitals and schools, eliminated jobs, and left tens of thousands of people homeless, including thousands of children. Our neighbors lost more than \$1.4 billion in crops, timber, and livestock – some of that representing generational wealth that will not be recovered for generations, if ever.”

[AshBritt Environmental](#) CEO [Brittany Perkins Castillo](#), whose company has conducted much of the debris removal in the region, said Hurricane Michael represents the largest and longest debris removal mission ever – still continuing after two years, compared to Katrina’s year-long cleanup.



“As someone whose job it is to go into communities and clean up after natural disasters, I can say that Hurricane Michael was as devastating a debris generating event as any we have seen. Michael produced significant land- and water-based debris removal challenges, with a lot of debris coming out of environmentally sensitive areas,” Castillo said. “Two years later, AshBritt is still committed to Bay and Gulf Counties, supporting ongoing specialized debris removal and recovery projects, and rebuilding efforts that are important to the community.”

As part of that commitment, Ashbritt Environmental was proud to invest \$750,000 to help rebuild one of the Panhandle’s most essential resources: the [Gulf Coast Children’s Advocacy Center](#) trauma therapy treatment building in Panama City. The facility suffered extensive damage in Michael, and is on track to being restored and fully operational by the end of the year, thanks to generous sponsor donations. The center provides hope and healing for more than 7,000 child sexual assault survivors each year.

The state [Division of Emergency Management](#) has been an important partner to communities shattered by the Category 5 storm. Since January 2019, the division has paid out more than \$831 million for Hurricane Michael recovery, including more than \$177 million to [Bay County](#), more than \$47 million to the [City of Mexico Beach](#), and more than \$50 million to [Panama City](#). To help the region’s timber producers, the division and the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services are administering \$380 million in [federal timber recovery funding](#) through a grant program that is accepting registrations through Nov. 20.

Former FEMA Administrator [Craig Fugate](#) said the emerging pattern of extreme weather conditions has caused the nation’s attention to shift from disaster to disaster, creating a significant risk that a region like the Florida Panhandle could be forgotten before it has fully recovered.

“Recovery from a devastating storm like Hurricane Michael is not a sprint -- it’s a marathon. The nation was talking about Hurricane Andrew for a decade or more. But in this time of extreme weather and disaster upon disaster, many people would be hard-pressed to remember Hurricane Michael just two years later,” Fugate said. “Even as we deal with new disasters like Hurricanes Sally and Delta, our leaders and our residents need to continue to provide the support that will allow the Panhandle to fully recover and avoid a death spiral. Without a continued focus, the economic fallout could last for generations.”

The [Volunteer Florida Foundation’s Florida Disaster Fund](#) was the financial beneficiary of the Rebuild 850 campaign.

“The Rebuild 850 campaign undoubtedly helped bring awareness to not only our fund, but the true impacts of the storm that can still be felt in the area today,” Volunteer Florida CEO [Clay Ingram](#) said. “As communities continue to recover, we encourage individuals to visit [Volunteer Connect](#) to learn more about volunteer opportunities still available.”



[Will Weatherford](#), a former House Speaker and Rebuild 850 Co-Chair, urged federal and state officials, private sector investors, and individual Floridians and Americans to continue to support the region's recovery.

“Rebuild 850’s message is all the more relevant as the Panhandle enters its third year of recovery,” Weatherford said. “In the early days after the storm, the primary help needed was dollars and volunteers. Now, more than anything, we need for people to visit the region and for business and government to invest in the Panhandle’s future.”

For more information or to donate, visit rebuild850.org.

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REBUILD 850

On November 1, 2018, just three weeks after Hurricane Michael made landfall, Rebuild 850 was launched to keep North Florida’s recovery ‘front and center’ and to marshal ongoing support. REBUILD 850 is co-chaired by former Florida House Speakers Allan Bense and Will Weatherford. They are joined by a diverse group of dedicated partner organizations urging citizens everywhere to visit, volunteer, donate, and invest in the region that was, and continues to be, negatively affected by Hurricane Michael.