

NC lawmakers to pass first Helene relief this week

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Author: Dawn Baumgartner Vaughan and Kyle Ingram; Staff Writer | Section: News | 1223 Words

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RALEIGH North Carolina's state lawmakers return to Raleigh for a one-day session on Oct. 9, and leaders say they will vote on an initial relief package for communities affected by Tropical Storm Helene.

Top Republicans, who control the legislature, put out a joint statement on Friday. Senate leader Phil Berger and House Speaker Tim Moore said they are "preparing to come back next week to vote on an initial disaster relief package."

"Over the past week, we've heard directly from residents in Western North Carolina and have seen the devastation firsthand. Our hearts are broken for the communities that have been ravaged by Hurricane Helene. Despite the destruction, it has been incredible to see how North Carolinians have stepped up to help. We cannot let up on those efforts or forget about the small communities that have been effectively closed off because of this storm," Berger and Moore wrote.

"The General Assembly is preparing to come back next week to vote on an initial disaster relief package to facilitate the state's response to Hurricane Helene. We are still working to determine what needs to be included in that legislation. Our thoughts and prayers remain with the victims of this storm and those who have lost loved ones, as well as the aid workers, volunteers, and rescue teams supporting the region," they said.

The General Assembly also has a weeklong session in November, and could also hold a special session. Lawmakers may wait until more information is known about what the exact needs are for communities in crisis for the next round of relief.

Money from the federal government is already on the way, with the White House reporting more than \$17 million in housing and other assistance for more than 10,000 households in North Carolina. Individuals and families can apply for FEMA assistance, and access other resources, at fema.gov or call the FEMA helpline at 800-621-3362.

In the meantime, at the state level, the Department of Public Instruction has announced what it definitely needs, and the Board of Elections has concerns, too. Here's where things stand with what lawmakers and agencies are considering.

General Assembly 'stands ready'

Berger said earlier this week, "It will take time to know the full catastrophic nature of this storm, but the General Assembly stands ready to take the necessary steps to help our neighbors in Western North Carolina."

Legislative leadership, particularly in the Senate, prioritizes its "rainy day" fund in annual budget discussions. No amount of spending has been announced.

Senate Democratic Leader Dan Blue, of Wake County, said Senate Democrats "look forward to working with Senate Leader Phil Berger and our Republican colleagues to ensure these reserve funds are allocated in a way that will restore stability in our communities as soon as possible."

Possible special session to deal with Helene relief

House Democratic Leader Robert Reives, of Chatham County, has floated the idea of having a special legislative

session to deal with Helene.

"House Democrats are thinking of and praying for the residents affected by Hurricane Helene, especially in Western North Carolina but also in Eastern North Carolina where a tornado tore through Rocky Mount. We are committed to doing whatever it takes to help rebuild the region over the long term," he said in a statement. Reives said it will take time to plan for "long-term recovery."

"House Democrats have begun working on a package of relief measures and look forward to working with our Republican colleagues and the Governor's team to help get it done. We stand ready to do this work in one of our regularly scheduled sessions or during a special session - whatever is necessary," Reives said.

Department of Public Instruction request

N.C. Superintendent of Public Instruction Catherine Truitt said what people "are seeing and hearing in WNC is heart breaking," and that after talking to school and school district leaders in Western North Carolina, her agency already has a list of requests for lawmakers.

That request, which Truitt shared on social media and at a meeting this week, includes about \$166 million.

The funding request includes \$150 million for building repairs and renovations, school nutrition, equipment, supplies and technology losses. The DPI request notes the amount is "a preliminary figure based on amounts appropriated during Hurricane Florence and estimates based on current needs."

DPI is also requesting up to \$16 million for school nutrition staff who were employed for scheduled instructional days that were missed due to Helene. And the agency is requesting school calendar flexibility for impacted school districts.

Elections request

The State Board of Elections is considering a variety of legislative requests to address Helene's potential impact on voting. Extra funding for counties hit hard by the storm could be a key part of the request, as well as changes to deadlines for receiving absentee ballots.

"We're still early in our conversations with the legislature," Karen Brinson Bell, executive director of the board told reporters on Tuesday. "...We want to be able to give them a very educated request and not just (be) haphazard in what we're asking for."

Though the board is still working with county election officials to determine the extent of the damage, Brinson Bell said funding may be needed to help counties pay to reissue ballots lost in the storm or hire on-site assistance for other election tasks. Getting absentee ballots in by the deadline, 7:30 p.m. on Election Day, could be another concern, given that postal service is still disrupted in many western counties and many ballots were likely delivered right before the storm hit.

With about a month left until the election, Brinson Bell said the board may need to consider asking the legislature to extend the deadline for receiving absentee ballots - an issue that has been a point of contention in the past. In previous elections, the state accepted absentee ballots within three days of the election, so long as they were postmarked by Election Day. However, last year, Republican lawmakers passed a bill eliminating this deadline over the objections of their Democratic colleagues and voting rights activists.

Short of asking for a deadline extension, Brinson Bell said there were other steps the legislature could take to help voters affected by Helene get their absentee ballots in on time. One of those changes could be allowing voters to drop off their absentee ballots in-person on Election Day - not just during early voting.

"That's the kind of thing we're weighing right now," she said.

UNC System request 'at some point'

The UNC System is still assessing what it might need.

"The UNC System will certainly request relief funds at some point, but it's too soon to evaluate costs when the region is focused on life, safety and health. We also support the state and congressional delegation who are advocating for federal support in North Carolina," UNC System spokesperson Andy Wallace told The N&O.

Higher education reporter Korie Dean contributed.

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WAVE OF DESTRUCTION - Once-in-a-lifetime weather event - The science behind why Helene was a catastrophic storm - and why it hit Western North Carolina with such force

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How did this happen?

That's one of the key questions on many people's minds as the recovery from Tropical Storm Helene continues in Western North Carolina, with more than 55 people confirmed dead and damage estimated to be in the tens of billions of dollars over a mountainous 25-county region.

The News & Observer asked four experts why this storm's rainfall was so catastrophic. They pointed to a number of contributing factors, including abnormally high water temperatures as the storm chugged through the Gulf of Mexico to a stalled weather system that caused heavy rain in the 36 hours leading up to Helene's arrival in Western North Carolina and likely played a role in the storm remaining so strong as it moved inland.

Here's a look at the role each of those factors played.

Warm ocean and gulf waters

Experts have been eyeing warm waters in the North Atlantic and Gulf of Mexico warily for months.

Warm water means more water vapor, Gary Lackmann, the head of N.C. State University's Marine, Earth and Atmospheric Sciences department, told The News & Observer.

And water vapor is one of the key ingredients in severe weather.

"Water vapor is weather fuel. It's like you have this huge reservoir of anomalously large weather fuel and then you basically just need some mechanism to ignite that fuel," Lackmann said.

As Helene made its way through the Gulf of Mexico Sept. 25 and 26, it passed over abnormally warm water.

Climate change, it's worth noting, has a major impact on ocean temperatures around the world. About 90% of global warming takes place in oceans, according to NASA.

On Sept. 25, the Gulf of Mexico's sea surface temperature averaged 84.2 degrees between 1991 and 2020. This year, Helene encountered waters averaging nearly 86.7 degrees.

"Not only is the sea surface temperature along its path a toasty 30-31 C, the warm water runs deep, producing extremely high ocean heat content ... an endless source of fuel," Ben McNoldy, a University of Miami hurricane expert, wrote in a blog post as Helene started to take shape.

Helene rapidly intensified in the hours before making landfall, starting as a Category 1 storm on Sept. 26 before strengthening into a Category 4 storm with 140 mph winds and making landfall late in the day.

Rain before the storm

As Helene was working its way northward, Western North Carolina was already experiencing heavy rainfall.

A low-pressure system before the storm stalled over the Tennessee Valley, effectively creating an atmospheric wall with severe weather on its eastern side.

Low pressure systems create strong southerly winds on their eastern edges, said Justin Lane, a meteorologist at the National Weather Service's office in Greer, S.C., which covers Western North Carolina. Low pressure systems also lift air into the atmosphere, where water vapor is more likely to condense and become rainfall.

Those strong winds picked up vapor-laden air that was already in the Gulf of Mexico and carried it into Western North Carolina, where strong rains started falling about 36 hours before Helene made landfall near Perry, Florida, around 11:30 p.m. Sept. 26.

"Even without Helene, there would have been a significant rainfall and flooding event just due to the other weather system and setup and this really vapor-rich air," Lackmann said.

At Asheville Regional Airport, for instance, 9.85 inches of rain fell on Sept. 25 and 26.

"We were just streaming that moisture over the area, basically over the same area, continuously for a day and a half or so. You can envision it being a firehose of moisture that doesn't really move," Lane said.

That's the second time in September that meteorologists called a severe rain event a "firehose." The same label was applied to the Sept. 15-16 rainfall that caused significant flooding in Carolina Beach and across Brunswick County.

Geography

The Blue Ridge Mountains played a key role.

As winds out of the east or southeast run into the mountains, air is pushed upward. And as air goes upward, more of the water vapor within it comes out in the form of rainfall or, in winter, snow.

In the case of Helene, that played a significant factor, said Chip Konrad, the director of NOAA's Southeast Regional Climate Center.

"There was more water vapor available to come in and then basically just being wrung out of the atmosphere at a very rapid rate as it's being forced up against the Blue Ridge escarpment," Konrad said in an interview.

Lane, the NWS researcher, agreed, saying the low pressure system and geography worked together to bring more rainfall.

"Because of the extra lift provided by those southeast winds flowing up the mountain, we basically were maximizing the efficiency of the rainfall rates given the available moisture," Lane said. "We got the most out of the moisture that was available."

Speed of the storm

The jet stream also played a role when Helene came into the picture, Lane said, helping the storm move swiftly northward through Florida, Georgia and South Carolina into Western North Carolina.

At one point after making landfall, Lane said, Helene was moving 40 to 45 mph through the Southeast. Normally, storms have time to lose energy over land. This one didn't.

"It was moving so fast, it just didn't have enough time to weaken significantly before moving into our area," Lane said.

And then Helene came

The region's strongest rainfall came as Helene was passing west of the region, Lane said.

The worst place to be when a hurricane is making landfall is the east side.

"By far the worst impacts are going to be in that area from just east of the center out to about 100 to 200 miles," Lane said.

That's exactly where Western North Carolina was.

At the Mountain Research Station in Waynesville, Helene brought 5 inches of rain the morning of Sept. 27.

The rain, which had been falling steadily from the predecessor event, picked up pace at about 2 a.m. Friday, with 0.4 inches of rain over the next hour. Then larger amounts started to fall.

By 6 a.m., there was 0.74 inches of rain falling in an hour. In the 9 a.m. hour, 0.87 inches of rain fell.

Friday brought nearly as much rain as the weather station saw fall in July and August combined. The 1.5 inches of rain that fell between 8 a.m. and 10 a.m. was more than the 1.21 inches the station recorded in August.

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Marshall residents dig out of the mud - They know Helene has forever changed their NC town

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Fran Randall peered into a comic book and board game store in downtown Marshall.

"This is the kind of business we never thought we'd have," he said, studying the damage inside.

Randall, 61, is a sixth-generation native of Marshall, a Madison County town with fewer than 1,000 people. He grew up on a hill just over downtown, which had bloomed since 2008 or so into an "artsy" sort of place, he said. There was a bike shop, a bar with live music, art galleries and even a tattoo parlor.

But the old Western North Carolina character was still there, like a place to buy bib overalls.

"It's kind of weird being in that generation that saw old and new," he said Tuesday. "Now, I'm about to see what's next "

Downtown Marshall lies between cliffs and the French Broad River. Like other areas on that river, it was devastated by Helene last week. Police and barricades blocked every way into downtown Tuesday morning. But shop owners, their friends and family met up.

The job was big but straightforward: dig out mud that caked the streets and buildings.

Help for Western North Carolina has come from local law enforcement, the federal government and volunteers. Recovery for some towns will take a long time, though.

Randall donned a fishing hat and a shovel. As he walked along the muddy road, he checked in on friends and neighbors.

Others downtown shared their stories with him and a reporter.

Jaime Perkins talked about putting up barricades around a church before the storm.

Jackson Massey was shoveling mud out of his grandparents' shop on his 15th birthday; he'd get his learner's permit to drive soon, his grandfather said.

Connie Molland shared some good news: Most of the art in Flow Gallery survived.

Randall's town will change more after Helene, he knows. There's some melancholy in knowing that. But then again, that's just the way it is. New people will come in. The collective memory won't hold onto the damage Marshall saw in September 2024.

"The buildings will be gone, a lot of them," he said. "But new things will come in. It'll be a further turn of the page, of the old generation of people that's been here to a new generation."

Ryan Oehrli: @oehrli

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commentary - Many Helene stories to come in NC; we commit to tell them

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Author: Thad Ogburn; Staff Writer | Section: News | 645 Words

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It's been a grueling, emotional week for North Carolina as we learn the incredible toll that Hurricane Helene took on our state and its cherished mountains. Even now, a week after the storm's arrival, the scope of the lives lost, the property destroyed and the landscape forever changed is hard to comprehend.

There are so many stories and images that will be seared forever in our minds.

On Tuesday afternoon, I got a text message from reporter Josh Shaffer and photojournalist Kaitlin McKeown, who had followed a convoy of relief vehicles traveling into hard-hit Avery County in the North Carolina High Country: "We're the first reporters in Banner Elk."

And they immediately got to work, documenting in words and pictures a place where "the police lieutenant saw his house float away" and "for days, food, water and diapers have arrived by helicopter."

Kaitlin and Josh were but two of the many journalists from The News & Observer and The Charlotte Observer who have worked to tell this immense story throughout the week:

Photojournalist Travis Long of The N&O, who has family in Cherokee, was there even before Helene's arrival. The photographs sent from across the region by Travis, Kaitlin and Robert Willett of The N&O and Khadejeh Nikouyeh of The Observer have been devastating.

Khadejeh and N&O reporter Martha Quillin captured stories of a family bracing for flooding who suddenly faced a landslide; a beloved Asheville area for artists washed away, and a wedding that went on in the storm's aftermath, with the National Guard arriving to wish the couple well.

The Charlotte Observer's Ryan Oehrli joined Travis for a report from the small town of Marshall, where resilient residents are thinking of the future as they dig out from mounds of mud.

The N&O's Brian Gordon and Robert, in the tiny area called Pensacola, talked to a resident who recalled a flood from 1977. But this time was different, she said, as "she felt the entire mountain move."

Virginia Bridges of The N&O told the heartbreaking story of families and friends searching for missing loved ones.

N&O transportation reporter Richard Stradling has constantly updated a list of the many road closures in the area, as well as explaining why rebuilding Interstate 40 through the mountains will be such a challenge.

The Charlotte Observer's Evan Moore and The N&O's Drew Jackson have updated a county-by-county list of damages.

As the situation turned political, with candidates and current office holders sparring over the federal and state response, Dawn Baumgartner Vaughan and Danielle Battaglia did a Reality Check to find the truth.

And correspondents Emily Vespa and Caitlyn Yaede also did some fact-checking about the many fake images being shared on social media and how to spot them. (Please, folks, don't share that photo of the crying little girl with big eyes holding the crying little dog with big eyes. It's Al generated, and there are many real photos that show what real people are dealing with. It doesn't need fake embellishment.)

These are just some of the many stories that The N&O and The Charlotte Observer have done. Our newsrooms have worked together closely, coordinating our response and trying to cover as many angles from as many places as possible.

All of our Helene aftermath coverage is outside of our existing paywall, and we are sharing freely with other newsrooms across North Carolina. You can find all our storiesat newsobserver.com/topics/helene-nc. You'll also find links there to ways you can help.

On their trip into Banner Elk, Josh and Kaitlin talked to Fire Chief Tyler Burr. He offered a memorable quote. "Let's be honest, we're the stepchild of the nation. If Taylor Swift gets engaged tomorrow, we're an afterthought."

We're committed to making sure that doesn't happen.

There will be a lot of rebuilding to be documented. There are many questions to be answered. And there are many stories to tell.

Thad Ogburn is interim executive editor of The News & Observer.

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Biltmore Estate closed until further notice after Helene

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Author: Chyna Blackmon; Staff Writer | Section: Living | 455 Words

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Following the catastrophic flooding of Hurricane Helene, several Western North Carolina homes and businesses were damaged or destroyed, including one of the state's biggest tourism sites: Biltmore Estate.

Like many other sites around the mountains, much of its destruction is still being assessed so the property will remain closed until further notice. According to the Biltmore website, it could be closed to guests until at least Oct. 15.

"Like all of this region, the damage varies by location across our 8,000-acre property. In forested areas, which is a large portion of the estate, wind damage is extensive to grounds and some structures. Crews have been working tirelessly to clear roads so we can begin repairs," the Biltmore's latest update on Oct. 3 said.

How bad was Helene storm damage at Biltmore?

Biltmore House, Conservatory, winery, gardens, and the property's hotels had very little to no impact, the team said, with most damage to other elements of the estate.

"The entrance to Biltmore, located in Biltmore Village, and other low-lying areas of the property, such as our farm, experienced significant flooding and damage to buildings. We are assessing structures and roadways in these areas," the team said.

"We sadly lost a few of our animals during the storm, but the vast majority are safe and accounted for thanks to our dedicated agriculture and equestrian teams. As with all of our neighbors who experienced the effects of Helene, we are working on our plans for a swift recovery and look forward to welcoming our guests to this region as soon as it is safe to do so."

Located in the state's largest mountain town, the 8,000-acre Asheville estate with 250 rooms is the largest privately owned home in the country and one of North Carolina's most popular tourist destinations.

What if you have tickets to visit Biltmore?

As the Biltmore remains closed to guests, including Biltmore Annual Passholders, Vanderbilt Wine Club members, and Sporting Clay Club members, the team is working to accommodate those with previous plans to visit during this time.

According to the Biltmore website, those with daytime tickets are welcome to reschedule a visit for another day once the estate has safely reopened or request refund online. For those who booked overnight stays at the estate between Sept. 27-Oct. 15, reservations have been automatically canceled and a 12-month credit will be distributed.

"We are heartbroken for our friends, family, and neighbors across this region who have been devastated by this storm," Biltmore's website says. "To our first responders, utility workers, and community volunteers, we are eternally grateful for your endless care and courage. We will all work together to recover from this unprecedented disaster."

You can find more information and updates on the status of Biltmore's closure, cancellations and refunds online at

biltmore.com/weather-update.

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Only road into Pensacola, NC, adds twists to Helene response

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Author: Brian Gordon; Staff Writer | Section: News | 542 Words

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Stanchions of trees, embedded vehicles and mangled trailers line the only road through Pensacola, North Carolina, a week after Tropical Storm Helene crashed into the small Yancey County town. But the worst physical damage, locals say, isn't as evident.

"There are a lot of homes where you wouldn't know they were ever there if you hadn't lived here your whole life," said Noah Davis, a local handyman. "There's going to be a before-the-storm and after-the-storm Pensacola."

Consecutive days of heavy rains late last week overwhelmed the remote community of around 500 people in Pisgah National Forest - 22 miles and a world away from Asheville. Pensacola lays south of Burnsville in a holler between two hillsides. The Cattail Creek runs down one mountainside and the Cane River flows below.

Early Friday, the creek flooded and sent a torrent toward the town while at the same time, the river swelled and encroached. "We were surrounded by water," said resident Joyce Maness. "Our floors were giving in."

After three days, Christa Robinson felt the creek had receded enough to leave her house in the Cattail Creek community, which sits above Pensacola. With her 7-year-old daughter Lilly, she walked - and at times slid - into Pensacola, where they spent the next night at the local fire station.

Robinson remembers the immense local flood of 1977. Unlike then, she felt the entire mountain move last week.

"The highway is gone," said Mark Harrison, medical officer for the Pensacola Fire Department. "Most of the homes are gone."

Rescue and recovery began over the weekend as volunteers drove four-wheelers along rutted, muddy passageways. Pensacola Road is the town's only direct connection to the rest of Western North Carolina, and by Thursday, enough of the eroded blacktop had been cleared to allow trucks to narrowly inch through.

U.S. Army personnel arrived on the ground Thursday to hand out supplies as helicopters delivered medicine, appliances and food to hard-to-reach areas. Search-and-rescue teams from Charlotte, Pittsburgh, Kansas and elsewhere visited each standing home to document the destruction. Civilians pitched in further, offering neighbors their services as mechanics, movers and transporters.

"The lack of roads has been the biggest thing logistically," said Davis, who estimated he has evacuated at least 30 people on his four-wheeler.

Another major hurdle is accounting for everyone affected. The Cattail Creek community in particular has a sizable number of vacation homes. Were their owners out of town during the storm? Or are they now missing?

These are the questions people want answered.

"After COVID hit, a lot of people came in here, and we have no idea how many are residents," Harrison said. "We've evacuated all of the critical people that we could. Now, it's more or less preventative."

As for fatalities, Harrison declined to share a specific number but said "it's obvious" people have been killed. Donations in recent days have poured into the fire station, the community's makeshift recovery hub. Asked what

Pensacola residents still need, Harrison listed medications, including antibiotics and methadone.

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NC mountain businesses, tourist sites look ahead

October 6, 2024 | Herald-Sun, The (Durham, NC)

Author: Desiree Mathurin; Staff Writer Section: Living 1071 Words

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Jessie Dean, her sister Melissa and the Asheville Tea Company team spent all of last Thursday, Sept. 26, preparing their production center for Hurricane Helene.

The facility beside the Swannanoa River and down the road from Biltmore Village in Asheville is where the group blended and packaged their tea bags for the past eight years. For hours, Dean said the team raised as many items as they could off the ground, anticipating that some water from the river would seep into the building.

Some water guickly turned into unprecedented flooding.

Most everything near the Swannanoa River was swept away, including Asheville Tea's facility. The river rose more than 26 feet on Sept. 27, according to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.

Hurricane Helene raged through western North Carolina, destroying homes, local businesses and thriving tourist areas from Asheville to the town of Chimney Rock.

While local, state and federal agencies are focused on search and rescue operations, and delivering necessary supplies to the area, local communities are starting the long road to rebuilding and facing whatever the economic fallout may be.

"I was able to get to higher ground on Friday to try and see the state of the building and it was gone. It was just all water and it was completely gone," Dean said. "Everything was in that building. Everything is gone...

"Then we started seeing pictures of where the building was, and then a video of our building floating down the Swannanoa and it getting cut in half by a pole."

Economic impact of the storm

The fall season is a busy time for areas in western North Carolina, "both visually across the Blue Ridge Mountains and for our economic vitality," said Luisa Yen, director of public relations with ExploreAsheville, the city's tourism guide. Many people come to gaze at the colors of the fall foliage, for instance.

Tourism is one of the area's biggest economic drivers, particularly for Asheville and Buncombe County. And last year was record-breaking. About 14 million people visited the region, spending about \$3 billion, according to a local Tourism Economic Impact Report produced by the county tourism agency.

But as of now, Asheville and Buncombe County are isolated, with numerous roadways destroyed. And many attractions remain closed, including the historic Biltmore Estate. Or some have been completely swept away, like Main Street in the town of Chimney Rock.

According to AccuWeather, total damage and economic loss from the storm is totaling between \$145 billion and \$160 billion for the states. And that figure could increase as more damage across the Carolinas, Florida, Georgia, Virginia, West Virginia, Kentucky and Ohio are assessed.

"This is definitely going to hurt. Our hearts and minds are focused on supporting our community right now and starting to lay the foundation for recovery in the days and months ahead," Yen said in an email interview with The

Charlotte Observer.

The Biltmore Estate after Helene

About 70% to 80% of the arts buildings in the popular River Arts District were "compromised," according to Heather Divoky, marketing co-chair for the historic creative hub.

The district sits near the French Broad River, which crested close to 25 feet on Sept. 27. It's a popular area to visit and explore the work of local artists.

While some of the buildings experienced minimal flooding, the art was still compromised, Divoky wrote in an email, noting that humidity will eventually cause mold, and some artwork is on paper.

"We have 355 artists and organizations in the (district), and in one way or another all of our creative lives have changed," Divoky wrote.

Biltmore Village is another popular destination filled with local boutiques and history. It also has suffered heavy damage from the storm. Like Asheville Tea Company, it sits along the Swannanoa River and remains very inaccessible.

Biltmore Estate, which is south of the village, will remain closed through Oct. 3. It's unclear whether one of the state's most popular attractions, a Gilded Age, 175,000-square-foot home built by George Washington Vanderbilt II, sustained any damage.

But it sits closer to the French Broad River. A Biltmore Estate official could not be reached for comment Wednesday.

Other lodging sites, including the upscale, historic Omni Grove Park Inn and Wrong Way River Lodge & Cabins, which is known for its A-frame cabins, are also closed. On social media, Wrong Way said it sustained significant damage and the Omni said it is without water or power.

East of Asheville, the town of Chimney Rock, another popular tourist destination, was mostly wiped away by rising water from the Broad River.

Next steps after Helene

For all of these communities, next steps include a search for funding to help them rebuild.

Yen said ExploreAsheville has a list of organizations on its website that people can support, including MANNA FoodBank. Divoky said the River District is taking donations that will directly go to artists affected by the damage. Arts North Carolina, a nonprofit that supports the art industry in the state is also accepting donations for creatives.

"Our next step is to create a path forward," wrote Jeffrey Burroughs, president of the district. "We are only just beginning to communicate via text as of (Monday). We are looking to raise money for our artists, clean up, and building support...It will take a great effort to rebuild, but we are artists, we live to create and are up for the task at hand."

For Asheville Tea, Dean said the team is "committed to the long ride" of rebuilding and helping out the community. Asheville Tea is also asking for donations, as well as looking into federal aid.

It's unclear what the economic landscape will look like for western North Carolina. Dean said the road to normalcy will be long but the community already knows how to stick together.

"Neighbors are out and helping each other. Cooking for each other and going into their friends' properties and trying to help restore anything that can be restored," Dean said. "There's just a huge immediate outpouring of love

and effort within Asheville and that's really special.

"The magic of Asheville will rebound, it's just going to take a long time."

Desiree Mathurin: @Dez_AM

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Desiree Mathurin, Staff Writer, 'NC mountain businesses, tourist sites look ahead', *Herald-Sun, The* (online), 6 Oct 2024 1C https://infoweb.newsbank.com/apps/news/document-view?p=AMNEWS&docref=news/19C0CDDB15361978



Helene's NC death toll exceeds 100, expected to increase as recovery enters second week

October 6, 2024 | Herald-Sun, The (Durham, NC)

Author: Virginia Bridges; Staff Writer | Section: News | 907 Words

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A week after Helene slammed into western North Carolina, the state death toll reached 115, a tally expected to increase as search and recovery continues.

Some counties damaged by the storm, including Alleghany and Caldwell, finished their searches and safety checks this week, after crossing off dozens of names of people reported missing, according to sheriffs' officials there.

The hunt for living and the dead continues in Buncombe County. Rescuers there have found 72 bodies, by far the most in the state. And dozens of survivors were still known to be trapped on Friday, according to the Buncombe County Sheriff's Office.

"Our search and recovery has not ceased. We've been trying to do that 24/7," said Bumcombe County Sheriff Quentin Miller. "We cannot stop. We must continue to move forward."

Yancey County, so far, had the second highest number of confirmed deaths Friday: nine, according to state data. The latest death toll also included six people in Henderson County, according to numbers from the state.

Numbers reported by the state and counties continued to differ one week into disaster response, because the state doesn't count a death until a state medical examiner determines if it is related to Helene, according to Kelley Richardson, a spokesperson for North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services.

The state process takes time and results in a discrepancy between county numbers and state numbers that work out in time.

"We do not dispute the numbers released by our counties, but we work to release one verified number as the state on a twice daily basis," Richardson said.

Few names but some causes reported

According to both state and county data, Helene's death toll stood at 113 on Friday morning. At least 16 people drowned and 10 victims died due to landslides, according to the state Department of Health and Human Services, which releases death statistics twice a day.

Children were among those who perished. Among the youngest is a 4-year-old girl in Catawba County who died in a two-vehicle crash on a flooded road, and a 7-year-old Buncombe County boy who drowned.

One victim whose body was found at the end of this week was Julie le Roux, a 33-year-old artist from Georgia, who was separated from her fiancé in McDowell County, when water, mud and much more crashed into a home where they took shelter

The state hasn't reported any deaths in Mitchell and Alexander counties, and officials in those areas could not be reached by The News & Observer on Friday.

Some good news too

Among so much awfulness, there are slivers of welcome news. Lincoln, Jackson and Allegheny counties reported

zero fatalities when contacted by The News & Observer Friday.

Chief Deputy Shane Glenn said Allegheny communities kept the number of deaths down by looking after each other before and after the storm, said Allegheny Sheriff's Office Chief Deputy Shane Glenn. By Friday that county had whittled down its missing person list to zero, Glenn said.

McDowell County as of Friday had recovered the body of one person who died due to Helene and still had 20 people reported missing, Sheriff Office spokesperson Holly Ramsey said.

Numbers released by the state and counties conflict with widely shared social media claims overstating the death toll that describe gory scenes of mountains littered with dead people and animals, according to interviews with state and local officials.

North Carolina Emergency Management officials cautioned on Friday about false reports being spread online. The public should rely on trusted sources, like state, national and local government and weather sources.

"Dangerous conditions continue in some areas and false information could put people at risk," the press release states.

Man shoots at Buncombe deputies

That said, the situation is tragic, especially in Buncombe County. Landslides and floods there have left local and visiting law enforcement using borrowed boats, ATVs, drones and cadavers dogs to continue their search for the dead and living.

"We got areas that we haven't even been able to get to," said Sheriff Miller, who said his first goal is to save people who are stranded and cut off from resources. Second, is to knock on doors to find the missing, and the third is to find the bodies. Bodies that have been buried in landslides and tangled in mud and debris along the Swannanoa River, according to the daily state reports.

Bridges are down and roads are impassable, leaving more than 100 people stranded without running water and power, said Braxton Langston-Chapman, who works for Forsyth County Sheriff's Office but is temporarily serving as a spokesperson in Buncombe.

An out-of-town fire department is building temporary bridges so officers can get to communities, Langston-Chapman said. Other organizations are dropping resources down to them via helicopters and drones.

In the search effort, deputies are knocking on doors at night, trying to account for the missing as quickly as possible. But a recent incident highlights the dangers of exploring savaged areas at night. On Wednesday, a 64-year-old man fired four bullets at deputies walking up to his home. After a negotiation, the man was arrested on attempted first-degree murder and other assault charges.

"I would just ask people to help us, you know, be patient with us," Miller said, and keep in mind that it could be law enforcement just trying to check on them.

Virginia Bridges covers criminal justice in the Triangle and across North Carolina for The News & Observer. Her work is produced with financial support from the nonprofit The Just Trust. The N&O maintains full editorial control of its journalism.

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No power but only minor damage: Spruce Pine quartz mine owner updates Helene recovery

October 6, 2024 | Herald-Sun, The (Durham, NC)

Author: Brian Gordon; Staff Writer | Section: News | 488 Words

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The world's main producer of high-purity quartz, a mineral crucial to the global supply of semiconductor chips, announced its shuttered Spruce Pine, North Carolina, mines have endured "minor damage," according to an initial assessment conducted after Tropical Storm Helene upended the town.

"Our dedicated teams are on-site, conducting cleanup and repair activities to restart operations as soon as we can," the mine owner, Sibelco, wrote in an update Friday. The private Belgian company added the power remains out at its Western North Carolina mines but that repairs have "progressed significantly."

With around 500 employees, Sibelco is the largest employer in Mitchell County, a rural mountainous area northeast of Asheville. The company said all its employees and contractors had been accounted for following last week's storm, which dumped more than two feet of rain on Spruce Pine and flooded the local North Toe River. Its facilities have been closed since Sept. 26.

Sibelco's mines sit north of downtown in an area called the Spruce Pine Mining District. Like much of the region, Mitchell County has sustained extensive road and rail line damage, which could hinder employees' ability to get to the mines and Sibelco's ability to move its valuable quartz.

Free of impurities, Spruce Pine quartz has been crucial to the supply of semiconductor wafers, solar panels and other fast-growing technologies.

"It is rare, unheard-of almost, for a single site to control the global supply of a crucial material," wrote Ed Conway in his 2023 book "Material World." "Yet if you want to get high-purity quartz - the kind you need to make those crucibles without which you can't make silicon wafers - it has to come from Spruce Pine."

Sibelco has grown to keep up with the demand. Between 2019 and 2023, the company increased its production of high-quality quartz by almost 60%. And in April 2023, Sibelco committed to invest \$200 million in its Spruce Pine facilities to double production by next year.

On Friday, the company said its final product stock "has not been impacted" by the storm. "We are working closely with our customers to assess their needs and plan the restart of product shipments as soon as we can," Sibelco said.

Sibelco sells its white quartz sand under the brand name IOTA, which the company states online is "indispensable in the manufacture of a wide range of high-tech products."

Disruptions at the Spruce Pine mines have previously impacted the supply chain of quartz; In 2008, a fire at a local quartz refinery "temporarily brought production to a halt and impacted the market," the consulting firm Global Risk Intel reported.

Sibelco isn't the only quartz mining company in Spruce Pine. In recent years, a second company named The Quartz Corp opened area mines. On Tuesday, The Quartz Corp confirmed it had also stopped operations following Helene, noting "we have no visibility on when they will restart."

Compared to Sibelco's sites, The Quartz Corp mine is positioned closer to the North Toe River.

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UNC basketball scrimmage, originally planned for Cherokee, will now fund Helene relief

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Author: Shelby Swanson; Correspondent | Section: Sports | 449 Words

Page: 5B OpenURL Link

Chapel Hill The North Carolina men's basketball team's Blue-White scrimmage, originally scheduled on Oct. 13 at Harrah's Cherokee Hotel & Casino Resort in Cherokee, North Carolina, has been relocated due to logistical concerns following Hurricane Helene.

The event will take place on Oct. 12 at the Smith Center, following UNC's football game against Georgia Tech. The scrimmage will begin 45 minutes after the conclusion of the football game, which is scheduled for noon.

The event was originally going to be held off-campus to provide players more opportunities to promote and profit from their name, image and likeness. Now, following the damage caused by Helene, the scrimmage will function as a fundraiser to help those impacted by the storm.

"Our number one concern is the safety and well-being of the thousands of people who are affected by the storm and we didn't want to add to their challenges by trying to play a basketball game in Cherokee at this time," UNC coach Hubert Davis said in a statement. "We had some discussions about keeping the date to help restore some normalcy but there is nothing normal about the tragic circumstances people in the area are facing every day. We plan to bring our team to Harrah's and Cherokee another time when the conditions are right."

Tickets for the scrimmage are \$10, with proceeds going to hurricane relief. Those who previously purchased tickets for the Cherokee event can attend for free. UNC students can attend with a One Card at no extra cost.

Davis likened the event in Cherokee to barnstorming games he participated in as a former player at UNC.

"We would go play games all around the state and the reason why we would do it is not everyone had an opportunity to come to the Smith Center," he said. "So why not do it in the preseason? It gives us an opportunity to travel around the state and for North Carolina fans to be able to see us who can't make it all the way down here."

Davis said the Tar Heels will look for similar preseason opportunities in the future.

Following the Oct. 12 scrimmage, the Tar Heels play a preseason game against the Memphis Tigers on Oct. 15 at FedEx Forum, benefiting St. Jude Children's Research Hospital. The game will be broadcast on ESPNU, with all proceeds directed to St. Jude.

The Tar Heels will also host Johnson C. Smith at the Smith Center in an exhibition on Oct. 27, and their regular season begins on Nov. 4 at home against Elon.

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Avery County residents salvage what remains - 'It's gone'

October 6, 2024 | Herald-Sun, The (Durham, NC) Author: Josh Shaffer; Staff Writer | Section: News | 733 Words Page: 7A

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MINNEAPOLIS Bob Tatum stared over the Toe River bridge and pointed out the pieces of his house, smashed to splinters and wedged in the rocks below.

There's his wife's jewelry box, red and round.

There's the solid walnut mantle piece, cut by his father-in-law.

There's a cushion from his paddle boat, hanging from a tree.

"I might start crying," said Tatum, 74. "I'm raw. I don't know what day it is. You wake up in the middle of the night and you think, 'I don't have a house.' Your heart's pounding and you start to jump out of your skin."

Before Hurricane Helene washed his entire house downriver and drowned both of his horses, Tatum woke his wife to say, "Edwina, we need to get out of here."

"We grabbed our dogs and a little cash," he said Wednesday. "Not thinking we weren't going to come back in a day or two. We've been through hurricanes before. I was in Vietnam. This is worse."

The not-quite-a-town of Minneapolis took some of Helene's worst, to the point everyone around can rattle off the names of half a dozen friends now homeless, and more than a few know a police officer who's pulled a body from the mud and debris.

Dogtown residents alone without power after Helene

Though named Minneapolis, the tiny hamlet in Avery County with a population of 185 near the Tennessee border more often goes by its nickname: Dogtown.

"At one time, there were more dogs than people," said Randy Pitman, a longtime local. "They called it Dogtown."

When the storm hit, neighbors fretted about Beulah Young, better-known as "Bootsy," who is 96.

She lives a quarter-mile upriver, with her son Champ Robert, wheelchair-bound since a motorcycle wreck his senior year of high school in 1977.

Now the mudslides blocked the steep mountain road to her house, leaving the two of them alone without power or water for three days.

"We had to hike in there with the mud up to our knees," said Larry Jones, her son-in-law. "I carried 30 pounds of water in a backpack. My wife had her legs all torn-up from rocks in her boots. They're infected. We just got some antibiotic."

The rescuers found the Young's barn swept away, and the yard replaced by river rocks.

"Do you think she said 'Glad to see you?'" asked Della Wright, laughing at the memory. "She said, "Don't come in here with that mud on your shoes!"

On Wednesday, "Bootsy" left her house for the first time since Friday, riding in Jones' pickup to collect her mail.

Neighbors busy shoveling mud out of their basements, crowded around her. Just last summer, the 96-year-old Dogtown native was grand marshal of the Independence Day parade.

"We just prayed that God would let our house be there," said "Bootsy." "The Good Lord just left my house."

'I hurt for Spruce Pine. I hurt for Asheville.'

Back on the bridge, Tatum continued his survey. Since the storm, he has been unable to return to the spot he shared a house with Edwina, their maltipoo named Puppy and their border collie, Hitch.

"That's where I go to church right there," he said pointing to Minneapolis Baptist, where walls leaned at 45-degree angles and thick mud coated the ground. "My wife taught school right there."

He leaned back over the bridge, noticing some of the former walls in the water, and teared up while struggling to remember the words to a Psalm.

He isn't able to get blood pressure medicine.

He hasn't been able to find orthopedic shoes.

Everything he had sat in the river below.

"I know all these people," said Tatum, a retired Avery County school administrator. "I hurt for Spruce Pine. I hurt for Asheville. It's not just us.

"You realize you went from having a beautiful home, a beautiful place. Retired. Feeding the fish. Feeding the horses. Petting the horses. Now you know it's gone."

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In the resort town of Hot Springs, service workers take on leadership - roles after Helene

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Author: Brian Gordon; Staff Writer | Section: News | 601 Words

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What is a resort town without a resort?

What is a stop on the Appalachian Trail without anywhere to stay?

These questions face the residents of Hot Springs, North Carolina, in the months ahead. Significant sections of the spa that gives the community its name were carried into the French Broad River last Friday during Tropical Storm Helene. A row of outdoor hot tubs, No. 1 to No. 8, are gone. Severed pipes and several roofs stick into the sandy grounds.

Along with Marshall and Mars Hill, Hot Springs is one of three towns in Madison County, a remote area of tree-covered mountains and slaloming roads directly north of Asheville and less than 5 miles from Tennessee. Where Marshall is the county seat and Mars Hill a college town, Hot Springs revolves around tourism.

With the French Broad running north, the greater community of around 1,100 residents is a popular spot for white water rafting. It also boasts the only downtown in the state that the Appalachian Trail cuts directly through. And like much of Western North Carolina, the local leaves turn majestic colors in the autumn.

"We call these people leaf lookers," said Karen McCall, who runs a Hot Springs rafting and tubing company with her husband. "All this town is is tourism. There's nothing else here."

As in other areas devastated by Helene, Hot Springs experienced not one local waterway flooding but two. In addition to the French Broad, an overwhelmed Spring Creek swept through the town center and its small concentration of shops, breweries and restaurants along Bridge Street. Keith Calloway watched from his second-floor apartment as the waterline consumed his specialty grocery store below. The creek receded Friday evening but his store was a soaking jumble. To get inside, he and a group tore down the entire front.

"The first two days we were cut off," Calloway said. "But then (the North Carolina Department of Transportation) got this road put back together."

A few doors down Friday morning, Rochelle Moon and two other women were shoveling mud out of the darkened local library. The shelves were bare, with a stack of salvaged books on a center table. Moon, a member of the nonprofit Friends of Libraries, said she hasn't spoken to county officials about the library's future. She simply arrived to Hot Springs on Wednesday, found the building in disarray, and began the process of clearing.

Volunteerism was evident throughout the community, as residents took on new responsibilities.

Last week, Sonya Phillips was a bar manager at a brewery off Bridge Street. On Friday, she was leading a massive recovery effort out of the Hot Springs public schools campus. Mounds of donated food, diapers, water, gallon buckets, trash bags and wipes filled the gymnasium throughout the day. Outside, someone asked Phillips about the logistics of a helicopter landing to drop off more supplies.

"There's a whole airspace thing," she advised before referring the person to an aviation contact she knew.

"Right now, it's about trying to coordinate outreach with other communities, like Marshall, Barnardsville and Burnsville," she said.

As volunteers kickstarted Hot Springs' long recovery, law enforcement continued to search for Helene victims. Behind the Hot Springs spa, where Spring Creek meets the French Broad, agents for the North Carolina Bureau of Investigations removed a mass of tangled tree trunks. Additional personnel from the federal Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms and Explosives were parked on the resort's front lawn.

There have been four confirmed deaths in Madison County attributed to Helene. As of Friday morning, around 13% of the county's 16,000 homes and businesses remained without power as authorities continue to look for those still missing.

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Trump, in Fayetteville, calls federal response to Helene 'terrible'

October 6, 2024 | Herald-Sun, The (Durham, NC)

Author: Avi Bajpai and Mary Helen Moore; Staff Writer Section: News | 1273 Words

Page: 15A OpenURL Link

FAYETTEVILLE Former President Donald Trump, in his first trip to North Carolina since it was hit by Hurricane Helene, said the federal government's response to the devastating storm had been "terrible."

During a town hall with supporters in Fayetteville on Friday night, Trump also praised billionaire Elon Musk, a major supporter of his campaign, for providing Starlink satellite systems to Western North Carolina.

He reiterated his campaign promise to launch the "largest domestic deportation operation in American history," and he vowed to change the name of Fort Liberty back to Fort Bragg, if elected again.

The town hall came as rescue and recovery efforts continue around the clock in Western North Carolina. A total of 115 deaths had been reported by state and local officials as of Friday.

President Joe Biden surveyed the damage by air Wednesday and promised additional federal resources, including 1,000 active-duty U.S. Army soldiers from Fort Liberty, and 22 aircraft. Vice President Kamala Harris will visit affected areas Saturday, but her office hasn't yet said where she'll be traveling in particular.

On Thursday, Trump said in a social-media post that he plans to visit Western North Carolina next week, but said he hasn't set the date because he doesn't "want to do anything that's going to interrupt their rescue efforts."

Federal response to Helene 'terrible,' Trump says

Trump said the federal government had done a "rotten" and "terrible job" of responding to the hurricane.

U.S. Rep. Anna Paulina Luna, who moderated the event, also repeated a claim Trump made earlier this week without providing any evidence, that Republican-leaning areas of the state impacted by Helene had been deliberately neglected.

"I do believe that they have intentionally, and this is my opinion, not helped out those residents, because it's red communities that are impacted," Luna said, adding over the roaring crowd: "Let's call a spade a spade. Do your job and do better."

Trump made a similar claim on Monday about North Carolina Gov. Roy Cooper and President Joe Biden. Later that day, Biden told reporters that Trump was lying, and said that it was "simply not true" and "irresponsible."

Trump also praised Musk at length for providing his company's Starlink systems to restore some internet and cellular access to the western part of the state, where connectivity has been severely limited, if not nearly nonexistent, since the storm swept through the region a week ago.

Federal officials were quick to state on Monday that dozens of Starlink systems had already been or were in the process of being shipped to Western North Carolina, and a White House spokesperson pointed out on social media that the systems had "already" been made available.

Vows to change Fort Liberty back to Fort Bragg

Trump promised to change the name of Fort Liberty back to Fort Bragg if he is elected, which received a massive

roar from the crowd.

He then answered questions from the audience about illegal immigration and the since-rescinded COVID-19 vaccine mandate for the military.

He repeated the vow he's made several times to launch the "largest domestic deportation operation in American history."

He referenced new data that U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement gave Congress last month that showed over 13,000 immigrants convicted of homicide were living in the country outside of the agency's detention, according to NBC News.

What Trump supporters said at the town hall

Joan and Dave Carlson, a military family from Fayetteville, hoped Trump would say something about the devastation in Western North Carolina.

"I want him to acknowledge there are people there dying and they're not getting the help they need," Joan Carlson said before the town hall began.

Both said their top issues are immigration and the economy, in that order.

"I think it's ridiculous that we have to compete with the current administration at all because they're complete failures," said Dave Carlson.

The Carlsons said they're only recently starting to be vocal about their support for Trump. She still won't wear a Trump shirt in public. He tried it at a hardware store recently and got some looks.

"We shouldn't be divided over politics. We're all people," she said.

Ronald Rodriguez, who drove from nearby Clinton with his wife and their two daughters. also wanted Trump to talk "about the hurricane and the way it's being handled."

He said the country has been headed in the wrong direction under Biden.

"It was a whole lot easier four years ago. Groceries were cheaper, fuel, pretty much everything," he said.

"Everything has gone up," his wife Chasity Rodriguez said.

Ronald Rodriguez said high interest rates are killing his car dealership.

"People can't afford to buy," he said. "Last two years, we've had to do more repos than ever. It's never been like that."

Brendon Core also drove in from Clinton, wearing a red Trump-Vance hat, a blazer and blue jeans.

"I'll tell you the real reason I vote Republican," he said. "It's because I'm a Christian."

He said abortion and the border are two of the biggest issues for him. At 21, this will be his first time voting in a presidential election. He's planning to cast his ballot in person on Nov. 5.

"I will be there," he said.

NC Republican warns of 'conspiracy theory junk'

As first responders, volunteers, national guardsmen, and others continue rescue efforts and deliver supplies to the region, there has been increased scrutiny of the emergency response in the immediate aftermath of the storm, and of the federal government's response in subsequent days.

At the same time, local officials and lawmakers have said they've been inundated by people calling about conspiracy theories that have spread across social media.

The situation prompted N.C. Sen. Kevin Corbin, a Republican from Franklin who represents several counties in the western end of the state, to urge people to help stop "this conspiracy theory junk that is floating all over Facebook and the internet about the floods in WNC," calling it "a distraction to people trying to do their job."

"Folks, this is a catastrophic event of which this country has never known," Corbin wrote in a Facebook post. "It is the largest crisis event in the history of N.C. The state is working non-stop. DOT has deployed workers from all over the state. Duke power has 10,000 workers on this. FEMA is here. The National Guard is here in large numbers."

Trump's campaign also launched a GoFundMe fundraiser for victims of the hurricane throughout the Southeast, which had raised more than \$5.3 million as of Friday.

The campaign said it had selected Samaritan's Purse, Water Mission, Clinch Foundation and Mtn2Sea Ministries as recipients for the funds, and had "made an initial disbursement and will continue providing more funds as support continues to come in."

Democrats slam Trump's 'extreme agenda for NC'

The presidential race in North Carolina was already tightening in recent weeks. Averages of recent polls maintained by 538 and RealClearPolitics show Trump leading Harris in the state by 0.9 and 0.6 percentage points, respectively, both of which are well within the margins of error of most polls.

Trump has won North Carolina twice, but by only 1.3 percentage points in 2020. His regular visits to the state have underscored how seriously his campaign has taken the state, as Harris has attempted to put it back in the Democratic column.

Ahead of Trump's visit, Democrats held a press conference in Fayetteville on Friday morning slamming what they said was the GOP nominee's "extreme agenda for North Carolina."

State Sen. Val Applewhite, a Fayetteville Democrat, said Trump was "coming here to spread more of his dangerous lies, just like his running mate J.D. Vance who this week refused to admit Trump lost in 2020."

Fayetteville Mayor Mitch Colvin, meanwhile, said people won't be able to afford four more years of Trump's economic policy, equating his proposed tariffs on other countries to tax increases on working families.

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Tillis and Budd say active duty military leader should be assigned to Helene response

October 6, 2024 | Herald-Sun, The (Durham, NC) Author: Avi Bajpai; Staff Writer| Section: News| 753 Words Page: 2A OpenURL Link

RALEIGH U.S. Sens. Thom Tillis and Ted Budd said Friday that an active-duty military leader should be assigned to oversee the rescue and recovery efforts in Western North Carolina.

After President Joe Biden approved up to 1,000 U.S. Army soldiers stationed at Fort Liberty to assist with the response to Hurricane Helene on Wednesday, the first 400 active-duty troops arrived in the region on Friday, the Federal Emergency Management Agency said.

In a statement Friday evening, Tillis and Budd said the National Guard along with local, state and federal first responders had been "working tirelessly to respond to this disaster with the resources they have," but added that the response could be aided by an active-duty military leader being assigned to the effort.

"Given the unprecedented extent of the devastation and complexity of search and rescue operations, it would be helpful to assign an active-duty military leader who has extensive experience with operations of this magnitude to lead moving forward," both senators said.

In a post on social media, meanwhile, Budd said that the deployment of the remaining activated troops from Fort Liberty needed to speed up.

The U.S. Department of Defense said Wednesday that the troops it had authorized to assist with the response were "assembling and moving to the affected areas within the next 24 hours."

"It has been two days since President Biden authorized 1,000 troops to aid North Carolinians," Budd wrote on X. "Less than half have been deployed from Fort Liberty to Western NC. There's no time to waste."

400 active-duty troops deployed to Western North Carolina

On Friday, FEMA announced that 400 active-duty soldiers had arrived in the western part of the state to help deliver critical supplies like food and water to distribution sites, and were "prioritizing survivors in hard-to-reach areas along the route."

FEMA Administrator Deanne Criswell, who has been on the ground in Western North Carolina, said in a statement that soldiers from the 18th Airborne Corps, including members of the 82nd Airborne Division and other units from Fort Liberty, were supporting the relief effort, including by providing command and control personnel, transportation, infrastructure support, supplies and services, fuel and other support to people."

The active-duty troops along with National Guard members are under the command of Brig. Gen. Charles Morrison of the North Carolina National Guard, who has been appointed as the dual-status commander for the state, a U.S. Army spokesperson told The News & Observer.

The dual-status commander has authority under law to command both active-duty and National Guard troops, and can serve in federal and state statuses at the same time, the spokesperson said.

Ahead of additional troops arriving on Friday, the N.C. National Guard sent seven heavy-lift CH-47 Chinook helicopters it received from the 18th Airborne Corps at Fort Liberty to Western North Carolina.

Capt. Tim Marshburn, a spokesman for the N.C. National Guard, said the helicopters were sent to Asheville, from where they would be directed to other parts of the region as needed.

Marshburn said Friday morning that the helicopters were "engaged in commodity deliveries and rescue and recovery efforts," and said those soldiers "will be activated for as long as the mission requires."

As part of those efforts, the N.C. National Guard said in a social media post that its soldiers and airmen were breaking down and preparing pallets carryingmore than 80,000 pounds of food and water that had been flown to a logistics hub in Asheville by the U.S. Army and Air Force, and would be delivered by troops with the 82nd Airborne Division.

In the week since Helene barreled through the state, more than 1,200 N.C. National Guard soldiers and airmen have responded to Western North Carolina to conduct search and rescue operations and transport critical supplies to the area, Gov. Roy Cooper's office said.

The N.C. National Guard's efforts have included 417 specialized vehicles and 26 aircraft that had been deployed to support those operations as of Friday, his office said.

In the meantime, N.C. National Guard leaders were "actively engaged in planning the best way to use the engineers coming from our active component," and active-duty soldiers that had yet to deploy were "preparing with rehearsals and developing movement and load plans," Marshburn said.

Marshburn had not responded to additional questions about how many active-duty troops remained at Fort Liberty, and what kind of assistance they will be able to provide when deployed, as of Saturday morning.

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Missing after Helene - Torn apart by landslides and floods, families frantic for news

October 6, 2024 | Herald-Sun, The (Durham, NC) Author: Virginia Bridges; Staff Writer | Section: News | 1334 Words Page: 5A OpenURL Link

John Norwood last saw Julie le Roux around 10 a.m. on Friday, Sept. 27, the day the storm came.

In Helene's chaos, Norwood and his fiancée took refuge at a neighbor's mountain home in Marion. As they watched water rise around them, a wave of debris and dirt roared into the home, crumbling a chimney beside them.

Norwood stepped to one side. Le Roux stepped to the other. Then the roof collapsed, crashing down on them.

"It happened so fast," said Norwood, 32. "All I remember is a bunch of crashing noises, and then I was underwater, and that was it."

Norwood is one of so many - no one has an exact count - waiting for word on whether missing loved ones survived Helene. With cell phone and internet service still dark in many hardest-hit locations, connecting in the usual ways has been impossible.

More than 115 have been confirmed dead by the state, as of Oct. 4, but an untold number remain unaccounted for. Local officials have been deluged with requests for help finding the missing.

Bulletin boards with notes seeking assistance have cropped up in mountain towns. People are posting cries from the heart on social media and calling into radio stations.

And as each day passed after Helene's historic assault, the worry grows more frantic.

"I'm praying for a miracle," Norwood said in a telephone interview Wednesday from a hospital room in Morganton.

Facebook groups at work

On Wednesday, pleas for help continued to roll in on social media, including in the newly created Hurricane Helene Missing People group.

There, a mother looked for a daughter who was living on the streets of Asheville during the storm. A woman wanted someone to find her sister in the Candler area. A man knew of an elderly couple in Lenoir that someone must check on.

"They need help! Food, water and oxygen. I've posted in multiple areas, but no response," he wrote.

The waiting was torture, said Jasmin Colon, 36, who lives in Cape Coral, Fla. She was looking for her Uncle Billy, a 79-year-old longtime Bakersville resident.

"My biggest fear is that he stayed in his camper and that it got either crushed by a tree or the landslides took it out," she said Wednesday.

Family last spoke with William "Bill" Smith, a retired parachute instructor, on Wednesday. He told Colon's dad by phone that he was keeping an eye on Helene.

But when they followed up after that, Smith did not answer or respond to texts.

They reported him missing to the state and the American Red Cross. And Colon joined a local Facebook community group. She added his name to a spreadsheet she found online of missing people, and checked community lists of people who have been found, including those who were seen getting meals at a local church. Smith's neighbor told Colon Friday her uncle was safe.

"We found him," Colon said Friday evening.

'We need to go'

Norwood, a blacksmith originally from Pittsboro, and le Roux, a 33-year-old artist from Georgia, had dated for three years before he proposed last summer.

Norwood woke up around 6 a.m. Friday and saw a nearby creek creeping close to his place, nestled with about a dozen other homes on the side of a mountain by Pisgah National Forest in McDowell County.

"We need to go," he told le Roux, who helped round up their cats, Ginger and Lily, in a crate. Carrying the bags they packed the night before, they loaded up their Subaru Outback.

First they drove up the mountain. As they rounded a corner, mud and rocks, deposited by a slide, blocked the road. Then they drove down, but were stopped again, by fallen trees laying flat.

Norwood pulled out his chainsaw and tried to clear a path.

"It was so windy and rainy that more and more trees just kept falling all around us, and we just agreed that it was too dangerous to be out here," said Norwood.

The couple drove back to the house in the dark rainfall.

Refuge turned dangerous

Around 8:30 a.m., they walked to a neighbor's with a generator and a Starlink satellite phone.

Norwood texted his mother and his sister to let them know they were OK. As they sat and watched the water rise, they saw it push cars around and knock more trees down.

Then, through a window, he saw a wave of water, tree limbs and rocks sweeping down the mountain. It soon hit them.

"We looked up and there was this wall of water and debris coming towards us, and a split-second later, the whole house was coming down," Norwood said.

And they were swept into a rushing river of mud and debris.

Norwood struggled to keep his head above water as branches, rocks and pieces of houses hit him in the face and pulled him under, pulling off his sandals and shirt.

"I fully kind of accepted that I was going to die there," he said.

In no time, the water took Norwood about a quarter-mile, where he found himself stuck on a growing pile of tangled houses and debris atop something snagged below.

His arms were free and his head was above water, but two large pieces of wood had crushed his legs under the surface. A big log pushed at his back.

Norwood heard his neighbor yelling. But he didn't hear his fiancée.

"I was just screaming, 'Hey, I'm here. Help. Please. Help,'" Norwood said.

As Norwood's neighbor dug him out, pain in his legs set in. He started screaming for le Roux.

"Julie, Julie, Julie," he yelled, he said, for 20 minutes.

But she never answered.

"I kind of just went into shock and panic after that," he said.

'Please, God, let her be somewhere safe'

Unable to walk, Norwood crawled barefoot about 100 feet up the mountain on his hands and knees, getting a bird's eye view of the destruction.

"I see nothing. There's no road anymore. There's no way out of there," he said.

He leaned up against a tree and passed out for an unknown amount of time before the cold woke him up and sent him searching for shelter.

He shimmied down the mountain on his rear and found a woodshed, he said, where he waited for a few hours before seeing a cabin with a hand-made sign that said "Alive inside."

He opened the door and found his neighbors, but not le Roux.

"Please, God, let her be somewhere safe. Let her be OK somewhere," Norwood said he kept saying to himself.

Eventually, they saw people nearby but on the other side of rushing water, which muffled their yells as they tried to communicate.

Rescue teams strung a thick rope across the creek, and pulled Norwood and his neighbors across in metal baskets.

Firefighters carried them to vehicles that drove them about four miles to land clear enough for ambulances to reach those rescued from the mountain, Norwood said.

They took him to the hospital, where he was treated for muscle damage and a staph infection. And where he remained hopeful that le Roux had survived.

But awful news came Friday. Le Roux's family announced, using her nickname, that she had not.

"We feel the prayers, cherish the love and need continued support as Julie went to be with our Lord and Savior yesterday. Our Lulie, our wildflower [will] be greatly missed," read the Facebook post.

Virginia Bridges covers criminal justice in the Triangle and across North Carolina for The News & Observer. Her work is produced with financial support from the nonprofit The Just Trust. The N&O maintains full editorial control of its journalism.

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How to report

a missing person

To report a missing person or request non-emergency support, call NC 211 or 1-888-892-1162 if calling from out-of-state.

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Tropical Storm Helene closed - the most famous road in Western North Carolina

October 6, 2024 | Herald-Sun, The (Durham, NC)

Author: Richard Stradling; Staff Writer | Section: News | 361 Words

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The Blue Ridge Parkway remains closed throughout North Carolina and Virginia after Tropical Storm Helene tore through the mountains last week, and the National Park Service says it doesn't know when the road will reopen.

In North Carolina, the two-lane highway meanders 252 miles from the Virginia line to the entrance of Great Smoky Mountains National Park. All 252 miles are closed, as crews clear fallen trees and debris and assess damage to the roadway.

The park service has brought in outside help. As of Thursday afternoon, about 250 park service employees from 32 states and the District of Columbia were helping Blue Ridge Parkway staff with recovery, said spokesman Mike Litterst.

Litterst said park service teams were still doing initial inspections of the roadway.

"Based on what the teams have seen so far, significant, and in some cases catastrophic, damage has occurred along the parkway," he wrote in an email.

The worst damage, Litterst said, appears to be in a 189-mile stretch from near Grandfather Mountain to Great Smoky Mountains National Park. The damage includes places where the road was washed away and where buildings, such as the Linville Falls Visitor Center, were destroyed.

Litterst said it will take weeks for the park service to fully assess the damage and begin to estimate how long it will take to make repairs and how much they might cost. That means the road will likely remain closed through fall foliage season, when traffic is often bumper to bumper.

Completed in 1936, the parkway runs 469 miles between Shenandoah National Park in Virginia and Great Smoky Mountains National Park in North Carolina.

The parkway is both a local route for residents and a huge draw for visitors who take in the mountain air and views from numerous overlooks and hiking trails along its route. The park service estimates that nearly 16.8 million people visited the parkway last year, spending nearly \$1.4 billion in nearby communities.

The National Park Service has reopened U.S. 441, also known as Newfound Gap Road, which runs through Great Smoky Mountains National Park between Cherokee, North Carolina, and Gatlinburg, Tennessee. As on the parkway, commercial vehicles are prohibited on U.S. 441 through the park.

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Asheville's River Arts District washed away after Helene

October 6, 2024 | Herald-Sun, The (Durham, NC)

Author: Martha Quillin; Staff Writer | Section: Living | 482 Words

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Asheville Asheville's River Arts District, where painters, sculptors, potters and others found outlets for their creative wares, took a direct hit as the French Broad River raged through the west side of the city during flooding from Hurricane Helene.

When barricades blocking access to Riverside Drive were removed on Tuesday, local residents ventured into the area where Interstate 240 and a railroad trestle cross the river. Last week, an array of businesses lined the river on the south side of the trestle: White Duck Taco Shop; a music venue called The Salvage Station; an auto parts dealer, a crematorium and a river outfitter.

Upstream, on the other side of the bridge, were galleries and shops.

But when the river came out of its banks, water at least 10 feet deep swept through the buildings, pushing their contents so hard in the current that exterior walls were broken or bulged outward.

It was an eerie scene near sunset. Parking lots were mud plateaus, and power poles, street signs and the remains of small trees were snagged with bits of plastic and ragged fabric that fluttered in the breeze, making the place look like it was occupied by ghosts and bones.

It was nearly incomprehensible to Sonia Pitts of Weaverville, who works for the nonprofit Open Heart Arts Center in Asheville.

Looking at the devastation along Riverside Drive, Pitts was near tears.

"I don't even know how to describe how I feel," she said. "I feel hopeless and helpless, like I need to be doing more to help other people."

Pitts said her family came through the storm safely, though there were tense hours when she couldn't reach her grown children or get word on more distant relatives.

When she was able to travel down Riverside Drive, Pitts got out of her car and pulled on her mud boots to walk around, using her phone to photograph the graffiti on the concrete railroad trestle supports. The bright colors of the art stood out against the tall piles of tangled debris that had jammed against the bridge during the flood.

"These are some of my artists," she said.

During the flood, Pitts had stood on the highway bridge above the water watching the deluge, which looked like it was boiling with huge metal containers and big propane tanks that rolled over and over against the supports before finally passing under the railroad trestle.

From Riverside Drive, Pitts walked up a bank to stand on the rail line, closed by fallen trees and other debris, and gasped at the sight of a black bear lumbering away down the tracks.

Pitts took the bear sighting as a sign of nature's resilience.

Wildlife will bounce back, Pitts said. "And humans will too."

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'Civilization is pretty much gone' after Helene tears through Spruce Pine, NC

October 6, 2024 | Herald-Sun, The (Durham, NC)

Author: Josh Shaffer; Staff Writer Section: News 610 Words

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SPRUCE PINE With the mud ankle-deep inside her music store, and the water stains climbing 8 feet high on the walls, Angie Buchanan said goodbye to 50 years of teaching music in Spruce Pine.

Then she walked through the stinking sludge of Lower Street and tossed her prized cello on a trash pile.

"My life is in there," she said. "It's hard. Very hard."

The Mitchell County town of 2,000 took a beating from the North Toe River, which destroyed its historic brick riverfront and left neighbors still enduring life without power, water or cell service a week after Hurricane Helene roared through.

"Our water treatment plant washed away," said Sonja Emmett, who was out walking her dog. "All the garbage trucks washed away. Everything civilization is pretty much gone."

Tiny Plumtree's near-impassable roads

Nearby, the community store in tiny Plumtree still served as a Grand Central Station for side-by-sides carrying water, food, diapers and toilet paper up narrow, muddy, near-impassable roads where neighbors sat stranded.

And around midday Thursday, they learned one of their own had been found dead after a week. Nobody wanted to talk about it. They hugged and cried as the relief operation became an outdoor wake powered by generators.

Helicopters flew overhead, National Guard trucks rolled past and a community of 818 kept feverishly looking after each other, keeping a list of who is stuck where and who needs what, sending out side-by-sides like free DoorDash service.

"The main thing we don't want is people to think, 'These poor, old, ignorant Appalachian mountain people,' " said Libby Wise, running to check on her 90-year-old mother. "We have plenty of college-educated people here. We are so appreciative of all the outside people are doing for us. Please don't think you're sending food and water to a log cabin."

Those still 'unaccounted for'

Back in Spruce Pine, a makeshift relief station opened up outside L&L Furniture on the Upper Road, which barely escaped disaster, unlike its riverfront neighbor.

Many residents couldn't get out of their houses until Sunday, and an army of 100 volunteers has cut them free oneby-one. One of them on Lower Road Thursday said he'd gotten out 15 families since last weekend.

But fears persist of those still "unaccounted for," the term Spruce Pine uses rather than missing.

Much like Plumtree, neighbors keep a tally of who is where, sending volunteers out to check. But when the find empty houses, mostly intact, the communication blackout forces them to guess at whether their friends have taken up with family elsewhere or disappeared down the North Toe.

"I can sometimes get Facebook with a generator and a Starlink," said Shirley Singleton, whose daughter owns L&L.
"Kind of that's how we're finding people."

Spruce Pine's living room washed away

Down on Lower Street, David Niven was shoveling the mud out of DT's Blue Ridge Java, also sunk under 8 feet of water.

"It's only \$2 million down the drain," he joked. "I've got 40 gallons of gas sitting at my house. I'm blessed."

He and his wife Tricia opened their coffee house 20 years ago, inside a building listed on the National Register.

"I wish you could have seen it," she said. "We were the living room of Spruce Pine. Every church group met here. Everyone and anyone met here. God has kept us for 20 years through fires, through pandemic. On the third day after the flood, God spoke to me and said, 'We're rebuilding.' "

On the day after the storm, before she even saw the ruined guitars, drums and dulcimers, someone broke into Buchanan's music store and stole a harp.

"Kids, probably," she said. "Probably just kids."

Somehow, she thought, in storm or fair weather, she will get Spruce Pine playing music again.

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Editorial/Opinion

October 6, 2024 | Herald-Sun, The (Durham, NC) Section: Editorial/Opinion | 673 Words

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When Vermont was hit by Hurricane Irene in 2011, its infrastructure was shattered, just as ours in North Carolina is now. Someone up there had the wisdom to make sure every culvert, bridge and building that was destroyed was replaced by a version that was bigger, stronger and more resilient to flooding. I suggest North Carolina take the same approach, with substantial support from the federal government and our own General Assembly. It may be expensive up front but provides significant savings and much faster recovery from storms down the road.

Ron Sutherland, PhD, Durham

New building codes

The author has a background in urban design.

I am heartbroken about the damage in western North Carolina.

Over the past 15 years, state lawmakers have rejected limits on construction on steep slopes, which might have reduced the number of homes lost to landslides; blocked a rule requiring homes to be elevated above the height of an expected flood; weakened protections for wetlands, increasing the risk of dangerous storm water runoff; and slowed the adoption of updated building codes, making it harder for the state to qualify for federal climate-resilience grants. When appropriate, an independent investigation should be conducted to see how current building codes may have contributed to the loss of homes and to determine if these codes need to be changed or modified. We need to take politics out of building codes when it impacts the safety of our community.

Stephen Berg, Chapel Hill

Republican weather

Let's be clear, Helene was so severe because tropical storm Helene grew into Category 4 Hurricane Helene as it quickly crossed the historically hot Gulf of Mexico, some scientist believe. We've always had hurricanes but never so many so severe ones. This is global warming at work, the global warming climate experts have warned us about for decades, the global warming Republicans first poo pooed (Donald Trump still does) then opposed every step to fight it. This climate, this weather is the result of Republican policy. This is Republican weather.

Neil Stahl, Chapel Hill

Ensure voting

While our eyes, hearts, and resources are focused on the immediate loss and damage sustained by communities in Western North Carolina, our state Board of Elections and legislators must look to the coming elections.

Damage to roads and communications infrastructure, combined with actions by the legislature to require ID for voting and requiring absentee ballots to be delivered by Election Day, together with actions by the state judiciary that have delayed the mailing of absentee ballots, will severely limit the ability to vote of citizens who have lost everything and where postal service, already greatly degraded under Postmaster Louis DeJoy, is likely to be even worse.

The NC Board of Elections, the state legislature, and the governor's office must work together to create emergency rules and put in place an infrastructure to ensure that eligible voters in the affected counties can cast their ballots. Disenfranchisement cannot be added to the burdens already being shouldered by these communities.

Andrew Geller, Durham

Hopeful VP debate

Although the vice presidential debate is unlikely to change the outcome of the 2024 election, I now feel more comfortable with both candidates after watching them discuss the issues facing our country.

As someone who knew little about either individual until recently, I believe Sen. J.D. Vance won the debate, with Gov. Tim Walz coming very close. Looking back at the earlier presidential candidate debates this year, this one offered relief and assurance that Democrats and Republicans can be civil. Seeing both candidates occasionally agree on issues while still respectfully disagreeing on how to address them showed that we can move forward as a nation through meaningful discussion. It's far more productive than the consistent bashing of opponents as we often see former President Trump and Vice President Harris tend to do.

However, not everything during those 90 minutes was positive. Unsurprisingly, both Sen. Vance and Gov. Walz lied and avoided questions from the moderators. Overall, as a first-time voter just starting college, I feel there is still hope for countering the political division and radicalization on both the left and the right.

Luke Basso, Wilmington

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Country star drops midnight surprise on storm-ravaged NC

October 6, 2024 | Herald-Sun, The (Durham, NC) Author: Théoden Janes; Staff Writer | Section: Living | 505 Words Page: 2C OpenURL Link

A week ago, North Carolina's Eric Church - the 10-time-Grammy-nominated singer responsible for country-music hits like "Springsteen" and "Drink in My Hand" - had no plans to release new music in 2024.

Then Hurricane Helene swept through his home state, leaving many of the parts he's most familiar with totally devastated.

And in response, at midnight Friday, the 47-year-old native of Granite Falls (a small town northwest of Hickory) released a surprise single he said was dedicated to "the unsung heroes, the people who show up when the world's falling apart."

But Church added an even bigger twist: He signed over all of his publishing royalties for "Darkest Hour," according to a news release, "to the people of North Carolina."

"We've been helping with boots on the ground efforts," the 2000 App State grad said in a statement, "but this is something that will live beyond just the immediate recovery. This is not a quick thing to fix, so hopefully 'Darkest Hour' will be able to contribute to that for a long time to come.

"This song goes to my home, North Carolina, now and forever."

Royalties from "Darkest Hour" will be funneled to and distributed by Church's Chief Cares Fund (which plays on the "Chief" nickname he inherited from his grandfather, a former police chief of Granite Falls).

The charity also will be assisting "in all states and communities affected from Appalachia to the Gulf," the news release said.

"When the night's at its blackest, this is for those who are holding the light, guiding the lost and pulling us through," Church said of "Darkest Hour." "The message of the song specifically in this time is about Hurricane Helene and the people that need help, but in a broader view, it's about any challenging times that we have in our life."

A sampling of the lyrics:

All I really know is I never know

What's coming around the bend

But you should know you're not alone

Hang on and hold my hand

In your darkest hour

Baby I'd come runnin'

In your darkest hour

I'd light your way

Baby don't give up

I'll do everything in my power

To take even a minute off your darkest hour

"It's always important to know that in your darkest hour," he explained, "there are people that will come running, there are people that will help. And I think it's also important to be one of the people that go running when other people need help."

The song marks the first new solo release in more than three years from Church, a part-time resident of Banner Elk.

"I've been in the studio for a while," the singer said in his statement, "trying some different things and exploring creativity. ...

"We were going to wait to release music until next year, but it just didn't feel right to wait with this song. Sometimes you give songs their moment and sometimes they find their own moment."

"Darkest Hour" can be streamed here.

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