

Back in action: Haywood athletes return to competition following Helene

October 16, 2024 | Mountaineer, The (Waynesville, NC) Author: Aarik Long | Section: Sports | 977 Words

OpenURL Link

Last week, athletes from around Haywood County returned to action for the first time since Helene Devastated local communities

The first game to take place here in Haywood County was on Wednesday evening when Pisgah soccer hosted Smoky Mountain in Bethel. The Bears were playing the game in Bethel due to the damages suffered at Pisgah Memorial Stadium during the flooding.

"It was exciting," Pisgah soccer coach Roddy Alt said. "It's a wonderful facility. I asked the guys before the game how many went to middle school here. About half raised their hand. I said 'This is a home game for us. This is what God provided us.'"

Bears soccer make return in Bethel

While the team was playing on a smaller venue than they are used to, the players didn't feel much of a difference.

"I love the field," Pisgah senior Andrew Hardin said. "It's great that we have this turf. Our home field was messed up, but this is the same turf. And it's so close. It's great to have this facility here."

As the players took the field to the roar of the Pisgah faithful, it was clear that this was more than just a game.

"We were ready to get back. Something bad happened to the town and a lot of us were affected, but we all love the game, and we were ready to get back," Hardin said. "We had a lot of emotion coming into it — almost enough that we couldn't handle it."

Pisgah had more than a week with no practice following the flood. The Bears were certainly shaking off some rust in the 3-2 loss to Smoky Mountain, a team the Bears had beaten 5-0 in their penultimate game before the break.

"It felt really nice to get back, but we had two days of practice," senior Hollis Blanton said. "I think we weren't ready enough today, but it felt nice because we've been out for a while. I really look forward to these games."

At one point during the pause in high school athletics, there were concerns that sports might not return in the fall.

"I told the guys last week that there were a few days there I was wondering whether we would come back for fall sports," Alt said. "I was concerned about that. When we got back to practice on Monday, we were really thankful that we even had a chance to play again."

For the players, the thought of losing out on the rest of the year was a tough one to swallow.

"Of course, I was scared," Hardin said. "This is my main thing — this game I love so much. Having the thought out there that we might not come back for the rest of the season was something I was really not wanting and probably unprepared for. I don't know what I would have done if we didn't have the rest of the season."

But the Bears did get back on the field.

"I'm really thankful for these guys being able to play and realizing with some humility that other places they aren't playing, and the kids aren't getting to play," Alt said. "It's one of those things that we're really thankful for."

Getting on the field allowed the players a chance to escape from the chaos and devastation going on in the world around them.

"It's a world of escape. It's like a whole different world," Hardin said. "You think of all the stuff going on outside, but anybody who plays the game knows whenever you step into it, you just forget everything. I think that's something a lot of us look for when we play."

Tuscola volleyball gets back on The Hill

The following night, Tuscola volleyball returned to action. The team took their home court against the West Henderson Falcons, losing in straight sets to one of the best teams in the conference.

"Stressful and nerve-wracking but also, because they're a really good team, I was coming on the court like 'What's going to happen this game? We haven't been practicing. We've had a whole week off,'" Tuscola senior Luci Snyder-Lowe said.

When the Mounties returned to practice earlier in the week, there were plenty of hugs as players saw each other for the first time.

"It was really nice being able to see everyone again and making sure everyone was safe. It was really fun being able to see everybody again," Tuscola senior Taylor Rogers said.

"When we didn't have internet, we couldn't text each other and see if everyone was okay. Being able to see everyone was nice," Snyder-Lowe added.

As thoughts of losing the fall season swirled, the players worried about their senior year.

"I was really nervous," Rogers said. "Volleyball is a big part of my life, and I didn't want to lose my senior season. But I also understood that I was able to have a good season, and if this is the end then it's the end because there are bigger issues right now than me playing volleyball for four or five more games."

Both players wanted to get back on the court but understood that they were lucky to even be thinking about volleyball.

"It was nerve-wracking," Snyder-Lowe said. "I have two sports that I play. It was nerve-wracking because I didn't want to lose my senior year to the flood. At the same time, I didn't want to be dissing the people who still don't have a house and be like 'Oh why can't I go run?' It was kind of hard."

While the Mounties are in the midst of their best season in several years, the players have more on their minds than the next serve, dig or spike.

"Volleyball is a big part of my life," Rogers said. "To be able to go back on the court was nice, but at the same time you think that you're so lucky to be able to play volleyball when some people don't have a house right now."

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• Citation (aglc Style)

Aarik Long, 'Back in action: Haywood athletes return to competition following Helene', *Mountaineer, The* (online), 16 Oct 2024 https://infoweb.newsbank.com/apps/news/document-view?p=AMNEWS&docref=news/19C3EA0A98A305A8



Barns, fields, animals, crops, and dairy among Haywood flood casualties

October 16, 2024 | Mountaineer, The (Waynesville, NC) Author: Vicki Hyatt and Kathy N. Ross | Section: News | 2287 Words OpenURL Link

From Cruso and the West Fork to Jonathan Creek and lower Crabtree, Hurricane Helene's fury has claimed not only harvests but land. She has swept away row crops, cattle, feed and barns, and she has stripped soil from the creek and river bottomlands, leaving gulleys, pits, and layers of rock in exchange. In places she piled sand, quartz as white and lovely as that on a Florida beach but likely almost as sterile and bare of nutrients, a poor trade for the rich topsoil she hurtled downstream.

Many farmers above the town suffered the loss of tomatoes, pepper and other row crops, which were nearing the end of harvest. Below Canton, livestock farmers were hit hard, losing cattle and winter feed, some already harvested and corn for silage still in the field.

No farm family was harder hit, however, than the Hargroves, who lost one of their own when Grover Hargrove's side-by-side overturned in the flood while he was checking on his cattle near the West Fork of the Pigeon River. It's a mark of the farmer's dedication, his or her willingness to risk life to care for the animals in their care. Hargrove paid for that dedication with his life, but others also risked the elements to care for their land and livestock.

Here are the stories of a few of the many local farmers who suffered losses and the challenges they face as a result.

Hyper careful fourth time around

Farmers in the Bethel and Cruso area were gun-shy when they heard another hurricane was headed their way. They immediately moved all they could to high ground.

"I think (Tropical Storm) Fred prepared me," said John Leatherwood. "We didn't lose stuff, but we lost dirt."

One of Leatherwood's fields that sits in a region known for its productive cropland now has an acre or so of large rocks and boulders where the topsail has been stripped. It's just one of many sites stripped bare by Helene.

Still, for Leatherwood, the storm wasn't as bad as in August 2021 when buildings and his greenhouses were swept away, vehicles were lost, and worst of all, the home where his son, Stephen, and family lived, was wiped out.

Because it was viewed as a "second home" on the farm, it wasn't eligible for any of the FEMA aid offered to families whose home was destroyed. Thankfully, John said, the church community stepped in and provided a home for the next generations of Leatherwoods.

"Fred wiped me completely out and so did Frances and Ivan," Leatherwood said. "We went through Hugo years ago when I was in high school. They seem to be getting worse, but Fred was the worst for us."

There was one small silver lining this go-around. One pepper field was spared and was able to be harvested this fall before the nearby packing house closed.

It was something that almost didn't happen, though. Within days, gas was almost impossible to find in the county. Interstate access was blocked in every direction except I-26 south, and panic sent thousands out to buy the available inventory, creating traffic-impeding lines at gas stations.

Hauling produce takes a lot of fuel, and Stephen Leatherwood was finally able to locate 100 gallons of fuel and get the peppers to market. Getting the land back into shape for the next crop means bringing in topsoil, cleaning up trees and figuring out a way to deal with the gravel and rocks washed into the field, Leatherwood explained. For now, the hollowed-out rock bar is not part of the field already prepped for planting strawberries to be sold next spring.

At one point there was a family discussion about just canceling the strawberry plant order, but unlike those who earn weekly paychecks, farmers get paid when the harvest comes in, Leatherwood said. Without a spring strawberry crop, the distance between paychecks would be long.

"I'm blessed," he said. "We were not hit as hard as Crabtree and Fines Creek. We moved back farther than we ever had and didn't lose stuff."

Chambers: 'It's up to us to get out of the way'

Ray Chambers, who has spent his life farming river bottomland near the Pigeon, said Hurricane Helene was the worst of the four once-in-a-lifetime storms in the past 20 years.

"It was biggest I ever seen," Chambers said. "I got parts of three different fields washed away."

Water from the West Fork of the Pigeon crossed his entire field, up to an area 1,000 feet from the river where he's never seen flooding. Still, the large trucks he uses for storing irrigation, planting and harvest equipment and supplies got flooded, but not badly.

"Did it look like a lake through here?"

"I wouldn't know," he replied. "I'm with the fire department and was working 36 hours straight. It was Monday until I got to see it."

The large swath of debris alongside the creek bank is testimony to the amount of work that's already been done to clear the field of the plastic, irrigation system and sticks used in production.

Some areas still have withered corn or other crops standing, and even in places where the fields have been disked, green tomatoes peek through the dirt. He's waiting on a Farm Services Agency visit to get an idea of next steps.

Chambers estimated about six to eight acres of cropland was badly damaged. In one place, water from the Pigeon washed holes deeper than he is tall and 25 times as wide. Ironically, just across the gravel road separating his field from Ten Acre Garden, the neighboring farm was busier than ever, offering wagon rides, pumpkins and plenty of farm activities that lure locals and tourists.

"There's no telling why this one was worse than the last one or why water goes one place but not another, " Chambers said. "I just know that when it comes, it is up to us to try and get out of the way."

Russell: Next challenges are cleanup and topsoil

Like Chambers, Skipper Russell's field off Martin Road had large holes where topsoil was swept downstream, giant trees were strewn across the field and gravel bars made it nearly impossible to farm as is. He estimates he lost about an acre of productive ground.

"We had a halfway decent year," said Russell who grows a variety of crops in addition to providing a longstanding fall attraction in Bethel at the Cold Mountain Corn Maize. "But it will take everything I made to clean up."

Because this year's flooding happened at the end of September, most vegetable farmers were almost done with harvest, something that wasn't the case in mid-August 2021. Most of the farmers in the region were between 65% and 85% through harvest, which minimized crop losses, ones only partially covered by federal crop insurance.

All rely on migrant labor from planting to harvest to get crops to market, but the work ahead will require months of work through the late fall and winter, a time when the labor has moved to Florida to pick crops there.

"Daddy always said when times got tough, to look around and you'd find someone else worse off than you," Russell said.

Even this time around, as bad as the flooding was, he didn't lose the vehicles and equipment that were washed downriver after Tropical Storm Fred. Still, neither 2004 nor 2021 had flood levels as high as this one, Russell said.

"The biggest issue we'll have is to try to find soil to replace what was lost. It will take a lot of external nutrients, lots of extra lime and fertilizer," he said. "It won't happen overnight."

Russell said he's heard of several farmers who will be going out of business rather than rebuild again after just three years.

"I hate to see it happen. Good farmers will be going by the wayside," he said. "Some say they are too old to try and rebuild."

When asked if he would be tackling cleanup and replanting once again, he just smiled.

"Gotta," he said.

Presnell: Neighbors watched as cattle, feed, went downriver

In Crabtree, beef cattle farmer Adrian Presnell, who also owns Presnell's Produce with wife Courtney, has spent the days following the flood rebuilding fences with son Michael. The Presnells lost three silos packed with winter corn silage and the vast majority of their hay. One of their two remaining silos missed destruction by a few feet.

In addition, the Presnells lost about 60 head of cattle that were washed downriver. The family has refused multiple offers of hay at this time for a simple reason: Two large barns they lease washed away, and they have nowhere to put replacement bales. As much as they appreciate the offer, Adrian said, they first have to contain their surviving cattle, then address the storage issue.

You can't predict what cattle will do. Many of the animals that were lost in the flood had access to higher ground and in the confusion, failed to follow their instincts and head for it. At the Jack Walker farm, which Presnell leases and which sits between N.C. 209 and Interstate 40, neighbors saw his cattle in the edge river. They ran them out and tried to turn them uphill, but the cattle turned back and plunged into the river, they said.

The day of the flood went like this for Presnell: He awoke at 5 a.m. thinking he would head to the Asheville Farmer's Market to stock his produce stand, only to turn back when he found a massive tree across Liner Creek Road. He returned with a chainsaw, to learn the road was fully flooded downstream. He woke Michael and the two of them moved cattle near their home away from Liner Creek — then turned around to find the creek had risen so rapidly that it was right at their backs. The Presnells spent two hours traveling over Crabtree Mountain Road to get to their cattle at the Walker and Bryson farms, only to discover the bridge was flooded and water had turned Highway 209 into a river. They backtracked to Interstate 40, pulled up beside the guardrail and approached their animals from above, though it was too late for some of them. They witnessed a tractor wash downriver, emergency lights flashing in the murky grey of a stormy dawn. At one point, Adrian was told that emergency staff had cut the fence at Interstate 40 because they feared the Lake Junaluska dam would burst and they would need to evacuate residents trapped between the river and the highway. With that threat ebbing, Adrian scrambled back up to the top of the pasture to repair the fence, since the last thing he needed was his surviving cattle in a panic on the interstate.

Their first priority since has been to reconstruct fences shredded by Helene.

"We will be building fence for years to truly get back to where it was," Adrian said.

Like the farmers interviewed in Bethel, the Presnells have no plans to quit farming. But to cope with the disaster, they said, they have to address the most pressing needs and not try to figure out the big picture, not yet.

In Jonathan Creek, dairy farmer Phillip Ross faced the same challenge as the Presnells, trying to keep befuddled cattle out of the creek. Several farmers reported their cattle behaved contrary to their nature, plunging toward the water even when they had escape routes. The Rosses and neighbors managed to recover about half of the animals that were washed down Jonathan Creek.

Fergusons mourn loss of three-generation dairy

In the Riverside section of Crabtree, the families of Johnny Bruce and son Jonathan Ferguson managed to save their milking cows. But the dairy operation washed away.

The Pigeon River filled Iron Duff and Rabbitskin roads on its southern side, Riverside Road to the north — and submerged everything in between, roiling over the connecting bridge, tunneling through the Fergusons' row of barns that sat parallel to the river.

The barns above the river still told their story after the waters receded, how the waters churned through the old red barn used for storage, the feeding shed and the milking barn, churning up the milking equipment, milk tank and all else inside. The river spit them out downstream and deposited soil, trees and debris in paltry exchange. It got it all, except perhaps part of two great silage piles and the milking cows. Before the river reached them, the Fergusons were in the storm, moving the herd to higher ground. That herd would eventually be transported to a dairy facility owned by Dean Ross in the Jonathan Creek community. Within a week, most of them had been sold, said Jonathan's wife Ashley. Some went to slaughter, cows that didn't weather the stress well, but the family is grateful that most of the herd is still being milked at dairies elsewhere.

And just like that, the dairy begun by John Robert and Edna Ferguson and their son and daughter-in-law, Johnny Bruce and Marlene 53 years before, left the milk business.

The family hasn't had time to think about what's next, though they also have a good-sized beef cattle herd and have said they will continue some type of farming. Jonathan has not ruled out a return to the dairy business but that will be a ways down the road and would require rebuilding not only the expensive milking and storage system, but the dispersed herd that had been bred and developed over three generations.

Meanwhile, the Fergusons have silage corn in fields throughout Crabtree ready for harvest. So they have done what farmers have done for generations following disaster: They're at work, clearing mud and debris, and chopping corn.

In the weekend edition: The Western Regional Livestock Yard has become a central hub for farmers' relief, drawing donations from Pennsylvania to Florida and all points in between. Also farmers and their families share spiritual and personal revelations they have experienced in the aftermath of Hurricane Helene.

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• Citation (aglc Style)

Vicki Hyatt and Kathy N. Ross, 'Barns, fields, animals, crops, and dairy among Haywood flood casualties', *Mountaineer, The* (online), 16 Oct 2024 https://infoweb.newsbank.com/apps/news/document-view?
p=AMNEWS&docref=news/19C3EA0A6E0C73CO>



Letters, Oct. 16

October 16, 2024 | Mountaineer, The (Waynesville, NC) Author: Staff Writer | Section: Letters To Editor | 1054 Words OpenURL Link

The Junaluska Cross prevails

It was J. R. (John Raymond) McCrary of Lexington, N.C. who first suggested that an electric cross be erected on the grounds of Lake Junaluska" according to a letter from W. A. Lambeth, president of the Lake Junaluska Assembly dated Sept. 5, 1941.

The Junaluska Cross was installed on a promontory over the water where it could be seen from every direction. It became an iconic landmark and significant attraction admired not only by visitors and special groups, but by people passing on the highway and Southern Railway Trains.

At the close of the first season, the lights on the Cross were turned off. However, as stated by Mr. Lambeth "before 10 nights had passed, there was a letter from the train crews of Southern Railway, running between Asheville and Murphy saying, they wished the Assembly would keep the lights burning on the Cross every night, because it made them think of their duty to their company, the traveling public; and a personal inspiration to the crew and passengers when they saw it while passing by.

Since then, the Cross has been lit at all times. People come from near and far to see the Cross and take photos, many of which posted on the Internet decades after the first electric Cross was erected. Indeed it has been — and still remains a "beacon of light."

To further add my personal notes to the information above, considering recent Hurricane Helene of Biblical proportions causing loss of lives and maelstrom destruction of bridges, roads, homes, churches and businesses; clearly it is a miracle that the "Junaluska Cross is still standing."

Therefore, not only has this historic Cross first suggested many decades ago by John Raymond McCrary been a religious sign of faith and inspiration to millions of travelers passing by and to tourists visiting Lake Junaluska throughout the years, and a landmark to travelers and Southern Railway Trains on rainy, foggy nights often experienced in the mountains — it can now be said the Junaluska Cross miraculously prevailed an Apocalyptic hurricane.

Connie Lee Lemacks lives in California and is the granddaughter of Mary Isabelle McCrary; relative of John Raymond McCrary. Email her at musicladycl@aol.com.

Thanks to many in this sad time

There are so many people to thank, for a variety of reasons. Obviously, in the wake of Hurricane Helene, we want to say how proud we are of the Waynesville Police Department and our son, Officer Ian Miller, in particular.

They're working around the clock, and we are so grateful. We're thankful, too, for all our first responders. Thank you to Michaels (craft supply), for giving kids an opportunity to express their gratitude for these hard working people, including linemen.

The "letter writing" station at your entrance is a wonderful idea. How encouraged the recipients of these notes must feel, and how good to give children the opportunity to share about the differences these people have made.

To all the churches, organizations, and individual volunteers working diligently to bring healing to Haywood County

and beyond, we love you and we're honored to serve beside you. These are troubling times, but we will come forth stronger and better prepared.

A special thanks to Presnells and Duckett's Market for providing produce for the Grateful Table to make hot meals for displaced families.

Keep encouraging one another. Gratitude breeds gratitude, and we all need this as our community grieves.

Finally, we are so grateful for Foggy Mountain Veterinary Services — for Dr. Holly Parsons and Dr. Danielle Lewis, as well as their faithful assistants — and our ferrier, Ben Clark.

All these fine folks cared for our wonderful 32-year-old Missouri Fox Trotter Mick, for many years. Though he left us recently, their kindness and compassion is a beautiful thing during this sad season. We are very thankful for you all.

Maureen Miller

Waynesville

The man in the tent

They sent two of us to deliver canned goods and other flood relief supplies to a trailer park along the Pigeon River in Clyde three days after Helene.

The Pigeon crested to almost 26 feet, flooding the homes and trailers along Broad Street, which follows the river. When we arrived, it was clear the trailers were abandoned. On each trailer there was a yellow "Condemned" notice.

So, we drove down the road and saw a homemade plywood sided tarp tent underneath a majestic oak tree near a flooded-out first floor of a two-story home. There was a campfire in front of the tent.

We stopped and a man who looked in his 60's came out. We offered him our canned goods and paper supplies. He willingly accepted and indicated he had no plans to leave his property.

As we drove away, I realized how soft my affluence has made me. Earlier on the way to Clyde I lamented my status without TV, internet or phone and spotty text service since the storm.

I'd been through many hurricanes in Florida with similar communication issues but I always came back to my intact home after working shelters.

Many people in western NC are struggling right now. They're dealing with a life-changing disaster that has taken so much; their home, their possessions, cars.

Helene has caused profound suffering. Many have lost everything. They are digging deep and finding inner strength they didn't know they had. Like the man in the tent.

When some of us go four-five days without TV, internet and phone, we consider it a difficulty. Then we learn others have no power and water for weeks, or maybe their homes are gone. Some have lost loved ones. Then we realize no TV is no problem.

Our world today has made life too easy for many of us. It's so comfortable it's difficult to deal with a disaster of unimaginable consequences. But many people in western North Carolina have figured out how to adapt.

The Headspace meditation coach I follow online says to have courage with what happens. To find an underlying sense of contentment, no matter how the body or mind feels at any given moment, when happiness is out of reach.

Patrick Johnson
Waynesville
Win-win
My husband and I live in Knoxville. We love Waynesville and visit often.
We contacted our vacation rental host twice to make sure it was safe and we wouldn't be a nuisance if we kept our reservation.
We've bought groceries, settled in, and plan to eat out and shop while we are here. Everyone wins.
Robin Brock
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• Citation (aglc Style) Staff Writer, 'Letters, Oct. 16', <i>Mountaineer, The</i> (online), 16 Oct 2024 https://infoweb.newsbank.com/apps/news/document-view?

Like the man in the tent.

He shows real toughness.

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Land lost to flooding poses massive challenge for Haywood farmers' recovery

October 16, 2024 | Mountaineer, The (Waynesville, NC) Author: Vicki Hyatt vhyatt@themountaineer.com| Section: News| 601 Words OpenURL Link

It will be months before the full extent of agriculture losses are known in Haywood, but a windshield survey shows plenty.

Acres of ripened tomatoes still hanging on brown and withered vines, green peppers and pumpkins clustered in areas where flood debris is trapped and fields that have disappeared along the Pigeon River in the Crabtree community tell the story, as do fragments of barn walls and shredded metal roofs.

While barns may be rebuilt, submerged tractors possibly salvaged and fences repaired, one of the biggest challenges may be dealing with the loss of rich topsoil in what has been some of the county's richest farmland. There are fields where that soil has been stripped down to almost-rock-hard clay or to bedrock itself.

Topsoil losses

When Tropical Storm Fred hit in mid-August in 2021, far fewer vegetable crops had been harvested and remained in fields, according to Haywood County Extension Director Sally Dixon.

With Hurricane Helene arriving in late September, there weren't as many tomatoes, peppers, cucumbers, squash and other crops lost. But there appears to have been a greater loss of livestock, hay and silage.

"The biggest loss, and it's one that's hard to quantify, is the loss of soil," Dixon said. "Chunks of land were washed away. The erosion is extensive in pretty much every river basin in the county."

Three years ago, when losses were largely concentrated in the Cruso, Bethel and Canton areas, the response area was much smaller than it will be this time.

"This is different because it is pretty much everywhere in the county. The destruction is far more widespread," she said.

Stream debris

Duane VanHook, director of Haywood County Soil and Water, has been at the heart of the stream debris removal effort for the past three years.

He's the first to admit that the federal and state programs, along with mountains of rules, are anything but quick. Still, he believes the amount of debris taken out of the East Fork of the Pigeon River in the Cruso and Bethel area helped lessen damages this go-around.

Additional stream debris removal efforts were underway as the storm was approaching.

"I have to hand it to the contractors," VanHook said. "They went above and beyond knowing this storm was coming. I have to think that make a big difference."

If there is a silver lining for Haywood, it's that when the federal flood relief programs become available, those who will be filling out the applications already know the drill and won't time trying to figure out the process or rules.

"We're all very familiar with how to do this," VanHook said. "For some of us, this is the third and fourth time we've

done flood recovery."

Shipping costs

Crystal Greene, manager of the Smoky Mountain Farmers Cooperative in Jonathan Creek, hears the stories of heartbreak from customers and those sustaining losses.

"Lots of farmers are just devastated," she said.

Livestock losses were reported by customers, one with up to 70 head of cattle missing at one time, but some were later found in fields far from home.

With so many roads closed into the region, supply trucks have to take different routes to get to the co-op, something that will increase costs due to the extra freight charges.

With the main route through the gorge on Interstate 40 closed, feed and other supplies are being routed through U.S. 64 in Franklin, while some flatbed trucks are getting through Mars Hill.

The co-op has set up a disaster fund where those interested in helping farmers stuck by Hurricane Helene can contribute. The funds will go directly to farmers known to have storm damage. Send contributions to Smoky Mountains Farmers Co-op, 4082 Jonathan Creek Road, Waynesville, NC 28785.

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• Citation (aglc Style)

Vicki Hyatt vhyatt@themountaineer.com, 'Land lost to flooding poses massive challenge for Haywood farmers' recovery', Mountaineer, The (online), 16 Oct 2024 https://infoweb.newsbank.com/apps/news/document-view? p=AMNEWS&docref=news/19C3EA0A828752D8>



Heroes of I-40 evacuate stranded drivers as the interstate crumbled

October 16, 2024 | Mountaineer, The (Waynesville, NC) Author: Becky Johnson | Section: News | 414 Words OpenURL Link

It's nothing short of a miracle that no one plunged to their death when sections of Interstate 40 collapsed into the swollen and angry Pigeon River amid Helene's fury.

Luckily, a truck driver who was the first to encounter one such missing section saw it in time and slammed on his brakes, in turn saving the drivers behind him from going over the edge.

"He was very startled and very addled," recalled Highway Patrol Trooper Joe Henderson.

But averting that catastrophe was only the first part of the battle. Drivers were stranded with nowhere to go as the interstate continued to crumble around them.

"We got a call that part of the interstate had fallen off around 12:30 that afternoon," Henderson recounted of that fateful day on Friday, Sept. 27, now seared into Western North Carolina's collective memory.

Henderson made fast tracks for the gorge. Two Haywood County roadside assistance patrollers with the N.C. DOT IMAP team — Garrett McFalls and Chris Strader — had beat him there.

They quickly realized all drivers in the eastbound lanes had to be moved, and fast.

"The first thing we did was work everybody to the left lane as close to the median as possible," Henderson said.

This got drivers away from the edge. But they were still trapped between missing sections of I-40, unable to go forward or backward. And no one knew if or when more sections would give way.

"There were a couple of them that were scared for their life," Henderson said.

The only way out was to use the intact westbound lanes, but they were separated by a stout concrete median. Enter the zipper: removable sections built into the median for just this reason.

After busting out the zipper, a logistical operation ensued to shuffle all the vehicles through the opening.

"We turned the passenger vehicles around first and sent them back to the zipper to get them out of the way," Henderson said.

But tractor trailer trucks posed a bigger problem.

"There's not enough room for them to turn around," Henderson said.

So they would have to back up, threading the needle between the median on one side and the missing outermost lane on the other. Miscalculation could send them plummeting into the river.

"We just backed them up one at a time until we got them all out of there and sent them back to Tennessee," Henderson said.

Henderson, along with the IMAP team of McFalls and Strader, had assistance from two firefighters from Tennessee and a Tennessee DOT worker who happened to be coming through.

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Becky Johnson, 'Heroes of I-40 evacuate stranded drivers as the interstate crumbled', *Mountaineer, The* (online), 16 Oct 2024 https://infoweb.newsbank.com/apps/news/document-view?p=AMNEWS&docref=news/19C3EA0A86D0CBF8



Barns, fields, animals, crops, and dairy among Haywood flood casualties

October 16, 2024 | Mountaineer, The (Waynesville, NC) Author: Vicki Hyatt and Kathy N. Ross | Section: On Premise | 51 Words OpenURL Link

From Cruso and the West Fork to Jonathan Creek and lower Crabtree, Hurricane Helene's fury has claimed not only harvests but land. She swept away row crops, cattle, feed and barns, and she has stripped soil from the creek and river bottomlands, leaving gulleys, pits, and layers of rock in exchange.

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• Citation (aglc Style)

Vicki Hyatt and Kathy N. Ross, 'Barns, fields, animals, crops, and dairy among Haywood flood casualties', *Mountaineer, The* (online), 16 Oct 2024 https://infoweb.newsbank.com/apps/news/document-view?
p=AMNEWS&docref=news/19C4018C6DDAA9A8>



Are federal coffers unlimited when it comes to disasters?

October 16, 2024 | Mountaineer, The (Waynesville, NC) Author: John Hood| Section: Columns | 673 Words OpenURL Link

The devastation wreaked on North Carolina by Hurricane Helene will take weeks to assess, months to clear out, and years to repair or rebuild. Second only to the value of the lives lost will be the exorbitant fiscal and economic costs of our recovery.

Our state government is reasonably well-prepared to shoulder its share. Our federal government is not.

Last week, the General Assembly authorized an initial \$273 million withdrawal from North Carolina's rainy-day fund to cover initial recovery expenses and changes in elections administration. Gov. Roy Cooper signed the bill.

That's only the first tranche of state expenditure. Lawmakers will return to the capital more than once before year's end, then commence regular session in early 2025. They'll appropriate much more money for various reconstruction efforts, from academic campuses and government offices to highways, bridges, water systems, and other infrastructure.

North Carolina has lots of money set aside. The rainy-day fund itself still contains about \$4.5 billion. Other accounts and our unreserved credit balance contain billions more. I don't mean to minimize the storm's staggering costs. I'm just pointing out that the General Assembly won't have to cut other programs, raise taxes, or borrow money to fulfill its responsibilities.

Congress is another story. Over the past couple of decades, presidents and lawmakers of both parties have run massive federal deficits and made exorbitant spending promises that far exceed any reasonable expectation of revenues at economically sustainable tax rates.

In a recent Reason magazine piece, Veronique de Rugy of the Mercatus Center pointed out that the federal debt now exceeds \$28 trillion — \$2 trillion more than last year and \$6 trillion more than when the Biden-Harris team entered the White House.

"This debt stands at 100% of America's gross domestic product, which, other than a one-year exception at the end of World War II, is the highest ratio we've ever had," she wrote. "Unlike in 1946, today's debt is only going to grow. Indeed, debt-to-GDP took a nearly 30-year dive to reach 23% in 1974. Today, federal debt is projected — under the rosiest scenarios — to rise to 166% in 30 years."

In other words, every dollar Congress authorizes and the executive branch distributes for hurricane relief in North Carolina is, in effect, a borrowed dollar. It represents a debt to be paid in the future, not a gift.

Of course, North Carolinians aren't the only ones who must pay each dollar back (with interest). Decades ago, our politicians essentially nationalized the provision of relief and reconstruction after natural disasters. I don't think that was wise. States and localities ought to make their own preparations and save their own money to handle future emergencies.

But at this point, I'm not sure how to extricate ourselves from this process. If Congress passed a law next year to slash federal disaster relief and then Kansas gets clobbered by tornados, their taxpayers could reasonably complain that they helped clean up after North Carolina's disaster and then didn't get their "turn" at withdrawing funds for their own.

The next best thing, then, is for future Congresses and presidents to take their budgeting responsibilities more

seriously. As I've pointed out many times, the opportunity to bring federal revenues and expenditures closer to alignment without painful adjustment has long since passed. The gap is too large.

It can't be substantially closed by eliminating "waste, fraud, and abuse." Nor can it be substantially closed by "tax hikes on the wealthy." Contrary to popular misconception, the United States already has one of the most steeply progressive tax codes in the developed world. According to the left-wing Institute on Taxation and Economic Policy, the bottom quintile of American taxpayers pay an average of 17% of their income in federal, state, and local taxes. The middle quintile pays 26%. The wealthiest 1% pay 35%.

Washington's fiscal recklessness should be one of the top voting issues this year. Alas, it isn't. But ignoring the problem won't make it go away.

John Hood is a John Locke Foundation board member. His latest books, Mountain Folk and Forest Folk, combine epic fantasy with early American history (FolkloreCycle.com).

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• Citation (aglc Style)

John Hood, 'Are federal coffers unlimited when it comes to disasters?', *Mountaineer, The* (online), 16 Oct 2024 https://infoweb.newsbank.com/apps/news/document-view?p=AMNEWS&docref=news/19C3EA0A50BCD9E0



Heroes of I-40 evacuate stranded drivers as the interstate crumbled

October 16, 2024 | Mountaineer, The (Waynesville, NC) Author: Becky Johnson | Section: On Premise | 50 Words OpenURL Link

It's nothing short of a miracle that no one plunged to their death when sections of I-40 collapsed into the swollen and angry Pigeon River amid Helene's fury. Luckily, a truck driver who was the first to encounter a missing section saw it in time and slammed on his brakes.

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• Citation (aglc Style)

Becky Johnson, 'Heroes of I-40 evacuate stranded drivers as the interstate crumbled', *Mountaineer, The* (online), 16 Oct 2024 https://infoweb.newsbank.com/apps/news/document-view?p=AMNEWS&docref=news/19C4018C707361A0



A contest is on for the best ideas to fix I-40

October 16, 2024 | Mountaineer, The (Waynesville, NC) Author: Becky Johnson | Section: News | 810 Words OpenURL Link

All options are on the table for the monumental task of fixing collapsed portions of Interstate 40 along a four-mile stretch through the Pigeon River Gorge.

The N.C. Department of Transportation will use a novel approach to expedite the job and attract the best and brightest civil engineering minds.

Design firms and contractors are invited to pitch their own ideas — akin to a contest. And all bets are off.

"It is a blank sheet of paper. It could be that putting it back the way it was is the right thing to do, but this is a unique opportunity to really think outside of the box," said Wanda Payne, head of the 10-county westernmost division of DOT.

I-40 through the gorge in Haywood County has been landslide prone since the day it opened in 1968, due to the problematic topography of a steep-walled gorge.

But fixing I-40 this time is a different ballgame. The river scoured away the slope so severely in places that there's nothing left to build the interstate back on. The interstate tumbled into the river, and the ledge it once clung to sloughed off as well.

There's been talk of a viaduct model, similar to the suspended segment of the Blue Ridge Parkway around Grandfather Mountain. There's been talk of moving the river. And there's been talk of finding a new route for I-40 altogether.

"We are looking at all options. So whatever those options are," Payne said. "Everything is fixable, it just depends on how you fix it."

The blank slate is a once-in-a-lifetime challenge that is sparking interest from engineers across the nation.

"That is what I'm hoping," Payne said. "We've already been contacted by folks saying, 'We've seen this in Colorado,' or 'We've seen this in Canada, and this is what they did there.'"

The process solicits a construction manager on the front end, working in tandem with the DOT and a design firm to develop the project specs and then execute it.

It's quicker than the traditional process — which entails months of design and engineering and then going out to bid once a plan is in hand.

The DOT has moved at lightning speed to get the process underway. Less than two weeks after Helene hit, the DOT put out a request for proposals.

"We are looking to be under contract with a contractor and design firm by mid-November," Payne said.

Halting the collapse

In the meantime, temporary repairs have been underway to prevent more of the interstate from sliding into the river.

Luckily, damage was contained to the eastbound lanes closest to the river — so westbound lanes can at least be used by emergency vehicles and construction crews.

But the slope below the interstate is so compromised in places that further collapse is possible, witnessed by long cracks along the edge of the remaining pavement.

"We were starting to notice the cracks were migrating into the westbound lanes," Payne said, noting data from crack monitors.

The worst-case scenario is that more sloughing could take westbound lanes with it. If that happened, it would be a disaster, as there would be nowhere for heavy equipment to work from once repairs begin.

"We have to save what we have," Payne said.

The DOT quickly contracted with Wright Brothers Construction for emergency stabilization to shore up four at-risk sections. The work entails soil nails to anchor the slope below the roadbed from more slipping. That work will be done by December, Payne said.

Crews performing the work are harnessed in while working close to the edge. A third-party safety team is on standby constantly — ready to perform a rescue if anyone goes over.

Lay of the land

The Pigeon River's bed sluices through a canyon of sorts, lying about 40-50 feet below the interstate. Given the steep walls, the river had nowhere to go but up when it flooded. At times, with much of the Pigeon's waters flowing through a tunnel from Walters Lake to the hydroelectric power plant at the state line, the only water flowing down that stretch of the gorge is that of Hurricane Creek. That was far from the case during Helene.

"The river was almost at pavement level in places," Payne said. "When you've got that much force, that's that deep, it just scoured away the slope."

Complicating matters, the river channel shifted closer to the toe of the slope — resulting in a near vertical drop in places.

"We are definitely going to have to do something with the river. It is not where it used to be," Payne said.

The DOT has also discovered the compromised stretch is more extensive than initially thought — not just the visible damage along the final four miles of I-40 before crossing into Tennessee.

"Surveys since then have shown the escarpment along the riverbank where it has sloughed off actually starts at milemarker 7," Payne said.

Also of note, a service road that skirted the twin tunnels on the river side is mostly gone, as well.

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Church craft sale to be held in conjunction with Apple Fest

October 16, 2024 | Mountaineer, The (Waynesville, NC) Author: Staff Writer | Section: Arts Entertainment | 193 Words OpenURL Link

First Presbyterian Church in downtown Waynesville will host a Craft Fair and Bake Sale starting at 9 a.m. Saturday, Oct. 19.

The congregation creates unique crafts and delicious food in order to raise money to help local needs during Tuesday morning gatherings of the First Presbyterian Church Craft Guild, which is open to all. Some people also create items at home by crocheting or knitting. Meanwhile, the church's quilters pitch in with hand-sewn items, such as table runners and microwave hot pads. Homemade delicacies include jams and jellies.

Most years, the members of the Craft Guild donate between \$5,000 to \$7,000 to at least six local organizations. This year, all the profits will be used to help rebuild Haywood County from the flood.

Normally, the church's Craft Fair over two consecutive weekends, first during the Church Street Arts and Craft Festival and then in conjunction with the Apple Harvest Festival This year, however, it will be held only once, with the apple festival. But the Church Street Festival, originally scheduled for Oct. 12, was canceled due to efforts to recover from Hurricane Helene

First Presbyterian is located on the corner of N. Main and Walnut streets.

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• Citation (aglc Style)

Staff Writer, 'Church craft sale to be held in conjunction with Apple Fest', *Mountaineer, The* (online), 16 Oct 2024 https://infoweb.newsbank.com/apps/news/document-view?p=AMNEWS&docref=news/19C3EA0A36C80858



Donate money, not supplies for flood relief phase II

October 16, 2024 | Mountaineer, The (Waynesville, NC) Author: Becky Johnson | Section: News | 238 Words OpenURL Link

Supply donations rolling into Haywood County have been so generous that relief distribution centers are nearly at capacity.

"The water supply, the food supply, those critical life lines we have an abundance of now," said Allison Richmond, Haywood County Emergency Service public information officer. "We are overwhelmed with support and assistance coming our way to the point we are at capacity and almost don't know where to put it all."

In addition to local donations, a steady stream of tractor-trailers have delivered pallets of supplies from nonprofits, faith-based disaster groups and the government. The Smoky Mountain Event Center, which served as ground zero for the major shipments, is packed full.

For locals wanting to help, donations to United Way of Haywood County would be most beneficial at this point.

"As we move past the urgent needs of food and water, we're seeing families need to buy specific items. Donations to United Way are the best way to support the recovery now," Richmond said.

For example, there's plenty of baby food and diapers, but what a family might need most right now is a crib — thus the monetary donations.

Moving into cooler months, there could be a need for staying warm. Richmond anticipates local organizations may coordinate coat and blanket drives and to be on the look out for those.

Donate at www.uwhaywood.org or mail a check to PO Box 1139, Waynesville, NC 28786. Please note "Tropical Storm Helene Relief" in the memo line.

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• Citation (aglc Style)

Becky Johnson, 'Donate money, not supplies for flood relief phase II', *Mountaineer, The* (online), 16 Oct 2024 https://infoweb.newsbank.com/apps/news/document-view?p=AMNEWS&docref=news/19C3EA0A90A6A260



Haywood Community Band to perform free Halloween-themed concert

October 16, 2024 | Mountaineer, The (Waynesville, NC) Author: Staff Writer | Section: Arts Entertainment | 332 Words OpenURL Link

The Haywood Community Band will present a free "Frightacular" themed concert at 4 p.m. Sunday, Oct. 27, at First United Methodist Church in Waynesville.

"This is going to be such a fun concert for kids, families and our faithful fans. We welcome folks to wear their Halloween costumes and enjoy a couple of spooky hours with us," said Melony Bolden, a clarinet player and publicity volunteer.

There will be a surprise encore performance by special guests that promises to be a real "Thriller."

The Haywood Community Band was preparing for its last three concerts of the year when Hurricane Helene devastated the region.

"We weren't able to rehearse for a couple of weeks, but we are so blessed that all of our band members and families are doing OK with minimal damages," said Rhonda Kram, the band's board president. "We know this is not the case for so many of our neighbors. Thousands have worked tirelessly as first responders and volunteers to aid the recovery, sometimes experiencing their own heartache along with those who are facing enormous loss."

The band hopes that an afternoon of music will provide some enjoyment amid troubled times. Its members believe this is one way the band can give back to the community.

"Music is a much-needed comfort — one we can easily provide in a supportive gathering," Kram said.

In addition, the band will give a portion of its performance donations toward hurricane relief.

"We greatly appreciate our audiences' continued support of the band, and we hope the upcoming performances can bring some moments of joy to our fellow citizens who have suffered so much," said conductor Stephen Razo.

First Methodist is located at 566 South Haywood St., Waynesville.

The band has two additional concerts this season:

"Songs of America" honoring veterans at 4 p.m. on Sunday, Nov. 10 at Haywood Community College.

"Sounds of the Season" holiday concert, a new tradition for the band, at 4 p.m. Saturday, Dec. 14, at Calvary Road Baptist Church in Maggie Valley.

For more information, visit www.haywoodcommunityband.com.

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• Citation (aglc Style)

Staff Writer, 'Haywood Community Band to perform free Halloween-themed concert', *Mountaineer, The* (online), 16 Oct 2024 https://infoweb.newsbank.com/apps/news/document-view?p=AMNEWS&docref=news/19C3EA0A408BDCB0



HART stage reopens for The Mousetrap with make-up dates added

October 16, 2024 | Mountaineer, The (Waynesville, NC) Author: Staff Writer | Section: Arts Entertainment | 297 Words OpenURL Link

This weekend was supposed to the fourth and final weekend at HART theater for The Mousetrap, a legendary Agatha Christie whodunit murder mystery — but it will now be opening weekend.

Three additional weekends have been added to the calendar to make up for the shows canceled due to Helene.

"Our stage is set, and we can't wait to provide you with a space to reconnect, enjoy a fun night out, and be part of something special with your friends and fellow theatre-lovers," said Candice Dickinson, HART Artistic Director.

HART will donate 50% of the profits from The Mousetrap to other theaters in the region that are unable to reopen at this time.

Set in a remote English manor during a snowstorm, The Mousetrap follows a group of strangers stranded together, whose anxieties rise when they learn a murderer is on the loose nearby. As it becomes clear the killer is among them, suspicions grow, and when a second murder occurs, tensions soar among the residents — and the audience.

In addition to Oct. 17-20, new shows have been added for Oct. 25-27, Nov. 8-10 and 15-17.

Under the direction of Julie Kinter, the production promises to deliver the same thrills, suspense, and unexpected twists that have made this play a global sensation.

"Agatha Christie's storytelling is timeless. The Mousetrap keeps you guessing right until the final moment, and we're excited to bring this iconic work to life with our talented cast and crew," said Kinter.

The cast includes local talents Madison Brightwell, Matt Edwardsen, Darren Frazier, Lara Hollaway, Lynx Killillay, David Krarup, Morgan Miller and David Spivey.

Show times are 7:30 p.m. except Sundays, which are at 2 p.m. Purchase tickets online at harttheatre.org or by calling the box office at 828-456-6322. Prices range from \$18-\$38, with special discounts for students, seniors and groups.

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• Citation (aglc Style)

Staff Writer, 'HART stage reopens for The Mousetrap with make-up dates added', *Mountaineer, The* (online), 16 Oct 2024 https://infoweb.newsbank.com/apps/news/document-view?p=AMNEWS&docref=news/19C3EA0A469D09F8>



Mount Airy hoodies headed to Helene victims

October 16, 2024 | Mt. Airy News, The (NC) Author: Tom Joyce tjoyce@mtairynews.com| Section: News | 630 Words OpenURL Link

Hurricane victims' long list of needs can include water, food, emergency shelter, among others — and don't forget hoodies

"Dry and warm, that's the first priority," explained Polly Long, a longtime employee of Mount Airy City Schools who aids at-risk youths through various programs.

Similar to other entities, the local educational system sought a way to help hurricane-ravaged residents of western North Carolina.

That includes Buncombe County, where four student deaths have been confirmed due to Hurricane Helene.

Long contacted an official there, Christy Cheek, about how Mount Airy schools could assist youths in Buncombe.

"She said what they need is hoodies," Long advised, which reflects the fact that the weather not only has been getting colder here but much more so in that area of the state.

"So I said, 'OK, let's do hoodies,'" Long related — and thus the Bundle Up For Buncombe Hurricane Relief Project was hatched.

It is a project involving all four Mount Airy campuses — where the principals are excited about the effort — and the central office, with donations from the community also sought to provide 2,000 hoodies in all sizes at \$13 apiece.

Bundle Up For Buncombe grew from the efforts of both Long and city schools Superintendent Dr. Phillip Brown in trying to identify some meaningful way for helping those in Buncombe County, where folks are said to be shell-shocked.

Brown spoke with the superintendent there for insights on where to target the hoodie drive, given that Buncombe is a large system with 40-plus campuses.

"He found out the five schools that were hit the hardest," Long said, each of which has been adopted by the respective Mount Airy schools and central office.

These include Black Mountain Primary, W.D. Williams Elementary, Black Mountain Elementary, C.D. Owen Middle and Charles D. Owen High.

In some cases, students have lost their homes.

While formulating the hoodie campaign, Dr. Brown wanted to make sure that new hoodies were supplied to students bearing their respective school colors and logos as an extra morale booster.

"We want them to feel special," he said.

How to help

Pine State Marketing is supplying the hoodies, which will occur in phases as donations roll in from the community.

Monetary contributions can be taken to individual schools in the city or the central office, and also can be mailed to the latter at Mount Airy City Schools, 351 Riverside Drive, Mount Airy, NC, 27030.

Checks should be made payable to the Mount Airy City Schools Foundation and designated for disaster relief.

"We're going to flow the money through the foundation," Brown explained regarding the MACS fundraising arm, so contributions are tax-deductible.

"We're hoping to finalize the order at the end of October," Brown said Monday.

"We're very happy we can use a local company," Long said of Pine State Marketing.

"I called them and told them what we wanted."

In addition to promoting the hoodie campaign, Long is pursuing a separate effort with another Mount Airy company, Renfro, to provide socks for hurricane victims.

Plans call for the hoodies to be loaded onto a new Blue Bear Bus to become available later this month, along with other items needed, and hand-delivered to Buncombe County.

The bus, the second in the Blue Bear fleet, will be a timely arrival in this way, Long agreed.

Aid for Buncombe is expected to be provided in some way locally throughout this school year.

Prior storm experience

In enlisting Long's expertise for the Bundle Up For Buncombe Hurricane Relief Project, Dr. Brown was turning to someone who wasn't tackling her first rodeo with such an endeavor.

"This is my third hurricane," Long said of previous campaigns to aid victims of Katrina and Harvey, in Houston and eastern North Carolina, respectively.

"I can't cut trees and I can start power up again," she conceded.

But Long is looking forward to spreading something that's also important — kindness and love — up the mountain to Buncombe County.

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• Citation (aglc Style)

Tom Joyce tjoyce@mtairynews.com, 'Mount Airy hoodies headed to Helene victims', *Mt. Airy News, The* (online), 16 Oct 2024 https://infoweb.newsbank.com/apps/news/document-view?p=AMNEWS&docref=news/19C4027F76A22CF0



Armed NC man charged with threatening FEMA officials working in aftermath of Helene

October 16, 2024 | News & Observer, The (Raleigh, NC) Author: Josh Shaffer and Lexi Solomon; Staff Writer | Section: News | 528 Words Page: 2A OpenURL Link

Sheriff's deputies near Lake Lure and Chimney Rock have arrested a 44-year-old man for threatening FEMA officials working in the aftermath of Hurricane Helene.

In a Monday news release, officials in Rutherford County said initial reports described truckloads of militia in the area, as was reported in several national media outlets.

They now believe William Jacob Parsons of Bostic, N.C., acted alone.

Speaking in Caldwell County Monday, FEMA Administrator Deanna Criswell confirmed there had been a "credible threat" to workers in Western North Carolina since Helene.

That team was pulled out of the area because of the threat, but Criswell said it only affected "one part of our mission" and would resume soon.

"There's been a lot of misinformation, and it's just not OK, right?" Criswell said. "The misinformation is just not OK, and any threats to anybody, and especially when we're faced with a situation where people have such great need, is really hurtful, and it just detracts from the ability to make sure we are meeting people where we are.

"It's heartbreaking to see people want to spread lies and hatred that impacts their ability to recover," she continued. "We are here to support the people of North Carolina. We are going to continue to be here to support the people of North Carolina. But we will take anything we deem a credible threat seriously, and I just appreciate the ongoing partnership with Gov. Cooper and local law enforcement to make sure that we understand all the facts as well."

A man with a rifle talking about harming FEMA agents

On Saturday, deputies said, an emergency call came into Rutherford County saying a man with an assault rifle was talking about harming FEMA agents.

Deputies and police tracked the threat to nearby Polk County, where they got a description of the suspect's car and later his license tag number.

Parsons, carrying a rifle and handgun, was charged with going armed to the terror of the public, a misdemeanor. He was released after posting a \$10,000 bond.

FEMA's response in NC after Helene

Chimney Rock suffered some of the worst damage from Helene after a wall of water took out most of Main Street. Debris filled Lake Lure, much of it destroyed buildings.

Since then, the town has also fought false rumors that government officials had seized it to obtain lithium - one of many bits of misinformation surrounding the storm.

"What we are doing here in North Carolina is working," Criswell said. "We are getting people the assistance that they need to help with their recovery process, and as of today, FEMA has provided more than \$96 million to

individuals across Western North Carolina.

"Just because you don't see somebody in a FEMA shirt does not mean FEMA has not been on the ground supporting," she continued. "We are just one part of the team, and we bring in the full federal team to help support."

This is a developing story. Check back for updates.

Josh Shaffer: 919-829-4818, @joshshaffer08

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• Citation (aglc Style)

Josh Shaffer and Lexi Solomon, Staff Writer, 'Armed NC man charged with threatening FEMA officials working in aftermath of Helene', *News & Observer, The* (online), 16 Oct 2024 2A https://infoweb.newsbank.com/apps/news/document-view? p=AMNEWS&docref=news/19C41ACF91E45E38>



Raleigh's Crabtree mall will hold fundraising events to support Western NC. How to help

October 16, 2024 | News & Observer, The (Raleigh, NC) Author: Renee Umsted; Staff Writer | Section: Business | 295 Words Page: 9A OpenURL Link

Crabtree Valley Mall in Raleigh has several events planned this year to support communities in Western North Carolina that were affected by Helene.

The initiatives are part of the "M-All Hands on Deck" campaign, which was started by Pacific Retail Capital Partners, the group that manages Crabtree and other retail properties across the country.

Through the campaign, Pacific Retail Capital Partners hopes to raise funds throughout the holiday season for communities affected by hurricanes Helene and Milton. The company will also make a corporate-level donation to support recovery efforts.

"The devastation left by Hurricane Helene, and now Milton, is indescribable," Debora Overholt, general manager for Crabtree, said in a news release. "Our hearts are broken as we think about the lives lost and the catastrophic damage to our beautiful state and elsewhere. We are doing everything in our power to help those affected."

This campaign is one of many fundraising events benefiting Western North Carolina. The News & Observer is maintaining a list of ways to support communities impacted by Helene.

What is Crabtree doing to support Western NC?

Events and programming at Crabtree are targeted at raising money and awareness for the communities affected by the storm.

A portion of proceeds from a concert and silent auction will go to relief efforts following Helene. Details on the time and date of these events have not yet been announced.

An "M-All Hands" art walk fundraiser, where local artists paint a piece that will be auctioned

A giving wall that shows information about how to get involved

Donation-based character meet-and-greets and guest appearances

A portion of proceeds from holiday photos with Santa will go to relief efforts. Photos with Santa are available Friday, Nov. 8, through Tuesday, Dec. 24.

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Citation (aglc Style)

Renee Umsted, Staff Writer, 'Raleigh's Crabtree mall will hold fundraising events to support Western NC. How to help', *News & Observer, The* (online), 16 Oct 2024 9A https://infoweb.newsbank.com/apps/news/document-view? p=AMNEWS&docref=news/19C41ACF87A3F690>



What's it really like when the Army arrives to help Western NC post-Helene? We tagged along

October 16, 2024 | News & Observer, The (Raleigh, NC)

Author: Catherine Muccigrosso; Staff Writer | Section: News | 1382 Words

Page: 13A OpenURL Link

The welcoming mountains of Western North Carolina was where Robert Arndt grew up. And after the deadly Hurricane Helene pummeled the area, he knew he had to do something, anything, to help.

"Nanny's house is completely destroyed," Arndt said last week. His great-grandmother's house was in Clyde, halfway between his hometown of Sylva and Asheville. She's safe and staying with family in Sylva nearly an hour west of Asheville. "A house is replaceable. A life isn't," Arndt said.

He's among 1,300 soldiers with the 20th Engineer Brigade mobilized to the mountains for recovery relief. The brigade includes soldiers from Fort Liberty (formerly Bragg), where Ardnt is based, as well as Fort Meade in Maryland and Fort Campbell in Kentucky.

The job is personal to the 22-year-old, whose family also lives in towns like Canton and Waynesville, all hammered by the storm and within the 27 counties designated as major disaster areas.

"They need more hands, more workers, more engineers to help clear the roads or build them, or help get supplies to people who can't get out of their houses," Arndt said.

Helene's deadly path of destruction tore through 300 miles inland from the coast. "It hurts me," Arndt said. "It's something you can't really prepare for up in the mountains."

To get a first-hand look at what the soldiers were doing to assist hurricane victims in the mountains, a Charlotte Observer reporter and visuals journalist spent a 12-hour day embedded with the Army last Wednesday. Here's what we saw and heard.

'Thank you for coming!'

It's just after 8 a.m. Dozens of small camouflage-colored tents line the front of a large pavilion turned logistics center at Camping World RV Sales in Marion, about 100 miles northwest of Charlotte.

It's muddy and it's loud, with an army of vehicles revved to go.

After being handed three-pound Kevlar helmets, we climbed up a four-step metal ladder into the open-air 5-ton Light Medium Tactical Vehicle alongside seven soldiers on metal benches. We were followed by a medic truck.

Our destination: school distribution centers in Spruce Pine.

Along the route, many businesses are closed. Parking lots like Wendy's and Dollar General are caked in mud, while shopping centers are now staging areas for utility crews. A gem mining sign says "rain or shine," but it's closed.

A passing pickup driver gives a thumbs up. A woman rolls down her truck window, shouting, "Thank you for coming!" It's a sentiment shared throughout the day.

Turning onto NC 226 E., a manned barricade allows only relief crews and local traffic through.

Too many uprooted trees to count mar the landscape. About halfway up the mountain, a portion of the road is

gone, as washed-away trees give way to a cliff drop with a view of the majestic mountains.

Army Sgt. Jared Marshall warned us it was coming. Road crews work to rebuild the outside lane as our military vehicle rumbles over the rock and gravel path.

During the hour-long ride, Marshall shared how Hurricane Helene affected his own family.

His in-laws fled their Fairview home, about 11 miles southeast of Asheville, and are staying at his house in Fayetteville.

"We're here trying to do everything we can to help out," Marshall said. "To see them happy that we're here, it brings happiness to me and all of the soldiers."

'The worst I've seen'

Arriving at Harris Middle School in Spruce Pine, mountains of bottled water sit stacked on pallets out front. Inside the closed school's gym are boxes, bags and bins filled with donations.

The soldiers answer a call for help from a line crew over an excavator stuck in mud. Dylan Myers of Oklahoma, working alongside about 200 lineworkers from Ohio, New York and Connecticut, has been on several storm damage recoveries before in Florida and Louisiana.

"This is probably the worst I've seen," the general foreman said. "I've never seen so many in distress."

'When they lose everything it's a disaster'

At 10:44 a.m., at Deyton Elementary School, about a tenth of a mile away from the middle school, pallets of livestock and animal feed, along with firewood, sit outside near more bottled water mounds. Inside, classrooms are filled with donations. Paper signs by the doors read pet food, baby supplies, cleaning supplies, hygiene and home goods.

In the library, soldiers unpack and stock bookshelves with food.

By the next week, people will be able to come in and choose what they need, said Melissa Martin, a special education teacher at Mitchell High who was sorting boxes of canned food in a classroom.

"My students have hardly anything to begin with," Martin said, her voice cracking. "and when they lose everything it's a disaster."

Residents still struggle without power, water service and cell service.

"Some still can't get out," Martin said. She and Sarah Margaret Smith of Watauga Opportunities logged 55 miles checking on students the day before. Most of the students have been accounted for, but they're still looking for some, she said. "We know they're safe but where did they go?"

Wearing a purple T-shirt with block white letters reading "We are still one," Lori Jones is coordinator at the Deyton site. The soldiers help by unloading trailers, breaking down boxes, sweeping rooms, whatever they're asked to do, the seventh-grade social studies teacher said.

Seeing the soldiers brings her a feeling of safety and security.

"It gets better every day," she said. It's a statement echoed throughout the day by other volunteers and residents.

'We couldn't make it without all the help'

At 1:23 p.m., we headed about five miles away to the new Mitchell Elementary/Middle School in Bakersville.

The stream of cars coming through the drive-thru distribution site is sometimes 10 or more deep. Wanda Duncan came for electrolytes. Soldiers and volunteers race to cars with arms full of water cases, Band-aids and wipes. Some people arrive not knowing what they need, while others have lists.

"It's a blessing to all of us here because the simple things we take for granted have been taken away," teary-eyed Duncan said. "We couldn't make it without all the help."

A sweet, familiar scent wafts through the area. Auntie Ruth's family-owned doughnut and pretzel business from East Tennessee gives out freshly made glazed doughnuts and coffee from a borrowed food truck. "We're happy to do something," said Jolene Kauffman, the owner's daughter. "It's something to brighten their days."

Lyle Hendrix of Hendersonville arrives in a pickup truck with donations collected by DSSOLVR brewery in downtown Asheville. His right wrist is covered in poison ivy blisters from cutting downed trees in his neighborhood to get himself and others out. But he's fine.

"This has showed me that people really are good," he said. "Everyone is a hero."

Dale Blevins, 66, has been overseeing supplies and donations since the distribution center opened Oct. 1. "You could see the distress on their faces," he said.

But people are beginning to smile and joke more.

Small groups of volunteers have popped in from the Charlotte area too. Then the Army showed up. "It was a breath of fresh air. Hands is what we need," Blevins said.

'Help and hope'

By 2:26 p.m., the last of a thousand doughnuts were handed out, including to Rachael Hollifield and her 15-year-old daughter, Taylar.

Once power was restored Tuesday, they learned of the distribution site. They came to get bottled water, food and paper towels. Like others, they don't have running water. Like so many others, their basement is flooded, too.

With prompting from a volunteer, Hollifield agrees to take a large can of potatoes and three jugs of water. "I don't want to take too much from other people who may need it," she said.

The Hollifields moved into their Spruce Pine home just two days before the storm hit. "We were totally unprepared," Hollifield said. "We didn't have power. We didn't have water. We didn't have cell service. We were stuck."

Wearing a shirt that says "God has perfect timing," Hollifield looks around and says, "Help and hope is what I see here."

Day's end

At 4:53 p.m., we head back to Harris Middle School where soldiers offloaded stacks of bottled water they moved from the distribution site.

By 6 p.m. our convoy made its way back down the mountain, as passersby wave to the soldiers and they wave back in unison.

The destruction hasn't deterred Sqt. Marshall's plans to move to the mountains near his wife's family after he's

discharged next year.

"We want to move up here regardless of the storm," the 26-year-old said. "It's such a pretty area."

Catherine Muccigrosso: 7043585198, @CatMuccigrosso

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• Citation (aglc Style)

Catherine Muccigrosso, Staff Writer, 'What's it really like when the Army arrives to help Western NC post-Helene? We tagged along', *News & Observer, The* (online), 16 Oct 2024 13A https://infoweb.newsbank.com/apps/news/document-view? p=AMNEWS&docref=news/19C41ACF94F908A8>



Here's the answer to every question you have about the 2024 NC State Fair

October 16, 2024 | News & Observer, The (Raleigh, NC)

Author: N&O Service Journalism Team; Staff Writer | Section: News | 2567 Words

Page: 11A OpenURL Link

Welcome to North Carolina State Fair season. Learn the basics and get familiar with the new stuff before heading to the fairgrounds this year.

You can get additional info about the fair at ncagr.gov/divisions/ncstatefair/2024.

When is the NC State Fair? What are the hours?

The fair begins Thursday, Oct. 17 and ends Sunday, Oct. 27.

Hours:

Thursday, Oct. 17: noon-11 p.m.

Friday, Oct. 18 - Saturday, Oct. 19: 9 a.m.-midnight

Sunday, Oct. 20 - Thursday, Oct. 24: 9 a.m.-11 p.m.

Friday, Oct. 25 - Saturday, Oct. 26: 9 a.m.-midnight

Sunday, Oct. 27: 9 a.m.-11 p.m.

How much do NC State Fair tickets cost?

Tickets can be purchased online at a discount until Thursday, Oct. 17, and there are walk-up locations available from until Oct. 17 to purchase tickets at this rate. Gate prices are a bit higher, beginning Friday, Oct. 18.

Adult (ages 13 to 64): \$10 through Oct. 18, or \$13 at the gate beginning Oct. 18.

Military adult (ages 13 to 64): \$8, but they can only be bought at the gate after Oct. 18.

Youth (ages 6 to 12): \$5 through Oct. 18, \$7 at the gate after that.

Child (ages 0 to 5): Free.

Senior adult (ages 65+): \$5 anytime.

Groups can buy discounted tickets. Group adult tickets are \$8 each when bought in groups of 40 or more, while group youth tickets are \$4 each when bought in groups of 40 or more.

Are there any NC State Fair ticket discounts?

Adult or youth groups of 40 or more can get ticket discounts (see above).

These passes must be purchased online by Thursday, Oct. 17:

Dizzy Pass: \$38 includes a FastTrack gate admission ticket and an unlimited ride wristband, only valid for one day during the 2024 State Fair.

Kegs & Corks Pass: \$17 includes a gate admissions ticket and an NC Public House Beer + Wine ticket, which provides your choice of a 16 oz. craft beer or a 6 oz. wine.

State Fair Flyer Package: \$17 includes one gate admission ticket and one round-trip State Fair flyer ticket, which is not valid for carnival rides.

State Fair SkyGazer: \$14 includes one FastTrack gate admission ticket and a SkyGazer (Ferris wheel) ticket, which is not valid for carnival rides.

And there are a couple of days when some folks can get into the fair for free:

Senior Citizens' Day (Tuesday, Oct. 22): Seniors aged 65+ get free admission. Bojangles biscuits and coffee will be served at 9 a.m. on the Dorton Arena Patio near the Waterfall.

Smithfield Foods Hunger Relief Day (Thursday, Oct. 24): Bring six cans of food and get in free. Since Hunger Relief Day began at the State Fair in 1993, fairgoers have donated more than 6 million pounds of food to the Food Bank of Central & Eastern North Carolina.

Are rides or games included with my NC State Fair ticket?

Rides and games require separate purchases.

Games are cash-only, and you purchase tickets for the rides.

You can also purchase wristbands for rides (except for the SkyGazer Ferris wheel and Flyer). Wristbands can be bought online for \$30 in advance or for \$40 during the fair (online or in person).

* For ride tickets: Visit the ticket plazas (neon green tents with stars on top) near Gates 7, 8 and 9 or in front of Dorton Arena.

Ticket plazas are open daily 9 a.m. to 10 p.m. (minus Thursday Oct 17, when hours of operation differ slightly). Carnival ticket plazas, located in each Midway, will be open during Carnival operating hours.

How can I buy ride tickets for the NC State Fair?

You can purchase these tickets online (and at a discount) before the fair, or you can buy them in-person when you arrive for the fun.

* Ride ticket cards, which rolled out last year, take the place of the ride ticket sheets the fair has used for years.

Tickets will be placed on a chipped card, which needs to be presented at each ride and automatically debited the ticket count for that ride. These cards will now carry over from year to year, letting you use last year's unused tickets and even save some for next year.

Ride ticket cards are \$10 for 18 ride tickets bought online through Thursday, Oct. 17, then they're \$1 per ticket at Ride Ticket Plazas (or \$18 for 18 bought online) during the fair.

When the fair begins, ride ticket cards will be available online and in person at Ride Ticket Plazas. (More on those below.)

* Ride wristbands are \$30 per wristband when bought online by Oct. 17, then they're \$40 per wristband Oct. 18 and

beyond, whether purchasing online or at carnival booths in person. Wristbands are valid only for one day during the Fair.

What's the NC State Fair lunch pass?

Here's how the Weekday Lunch Pass Program will work in 2024:

Enter through Gate 9 off Trinity Road or Gate 1 off Hillsborough Street between 11:30 a.m. and 1:30 p.m. on a weekday.

Purchase a lunch card at the gate for \$20. Lunch cards are cash only (and previously \$10).

Visit the food vendors for lunch (there are dozens of new offerings).

Return the lunch card by 1:30 p.m. to the same gate used for entry on the same day it was purchased.

Get a full \$20 refund for the lunch card.

Important reminders:

If you leave after 1:30 p.m., you forfeit your \$20.

No food is included in the program. The cost only covers admission to the fair.

Which new foods are coming to the NC State Fair this year?

This year's list is studded with collisions from two great eating forces - fair food tradition and TikTok. You can thank those forces as you stroll through the fair sipping on pickle-flavored Dr. Pepper.

Other trends seem to include breaded bologna fries, pickles in just about every kind of situation and new plates of nachos. Somehow, this year's roster of fair foods even includes deep fried spaghetti.

For our run-down of new fair foods for 2024, visit newsobserver.com/living/food-drink.

Can you pay for food at the NC State Fair with a card, or is it cash only?

Many vendors take credit cards, but some only take cash. There are ATMs on the fairgrounds.

If you only brought a card, or if you only brought cash, there would be plenty of food options.

A tip: Having some cash on hand is always smart, because when the fair gets busy, the wireless network tends to slow down. ATM lines can get long too.

Can I park for free at the NC State Fair?

Yes. There are a number of parking lots that let you park for free, and some have a shuttle that will take you to the fairgrounds, so you won't have to walk.

Here are the free parking lots:

Dogwood Lot

Cardinal Lot

Carter-Finley Stadium

Lenovo Center

Note: There may be exceptions if events are scheduled at Carter-Finley (no NC State home football games are on the schedule) or Lenovo Center (there are concerts scheduled for Oct. 18, 19, 25 and 26).

Can I take free shuttles to the NC State Fair?

Yes. The fair will offer several park-and-ride shuttle options from off-site parking lots to entry gates at the fair.

Shuttles will be offered to and from these lots, which will also have accessible shuttles available.

Dogwood Lot: The shuttle drops visitors off at Gate 8 of the fair. The address is 4501 Reedy Creek Rd. in Raleigh.

Cardinal Lot: The shuttle drops visitors off at Gate 7 of the fair. The address is 5766 Chapel Hill Road Rd. in Raleigh.

Both lot hours are from 9 a.m. until one hour after gates close each day. (Hours slightly differ on Thursday, Oct. 17.)

Shuttles will not be offered at Carter-Finley Stadium or the Lenovo Center. Remember, there may be exceptions to daily free parking at these lots if there are events scheduled at these two sporting arenas.

Can I pay for parking to be closer to the fairgrounds?

Yes. There are some privately operated options near the fairgrounds that charge for parking.

During the fair, residents near the fairgrounds often convert parts of their private property into small parking lots. These lots provide additional parking options, but you will have to pay.

Can I take a GoRaleigh bus to the State Fair?

Yes. GoRaleigh shuttles will carry passengers to the state fairgrounds from the Triangle Town Center Shopping Mall, 5959 Triangle Town Blvd. in Raleigh, near the Dillard's parking lot. The shuttles will run every 30 minutes daily from 8:30 a.m until the fair closes.

Here are the prices for the shuttle:

Round trip: \$5

One way: \$4

Seniors 65 and older and passengers with disabilities: \$2.50 round trip or \$2 one way

Children under 40 inches tall: Free

You can pay with cash or by using the UMO app. The GoPass is not valid on State Fair routes.

Advanced sale passes are available through the UMO App or in-person and can be purchased at the GoRaleigh operations facility, 4104 Poole Rd. in Raleigh, or at GoRaleigh Station in downtown Raleigh.

When are the fireworks at the NC State Fair?

Nightly. Attendees can enjoy a firework show every evening at 9:45 p.m. over the Heritage Circle Pond.

What kinds of rides are at the NC State Fair?

The fair will have nearly 100 rides ranging from thrill rides for adults to slow, small rides for children.

There will be two new rides this year:

State Fair Slide: A 210-foot slide

Candyland Adventure: A 130-foot long funhouse

What is the Village of Yesteryear?

The Village of Yesteryear is an area set aside for artisans who preserve skills and crafts from past generations. Their slogan: "Preserving art of the past for generations of the future."

Crafters include glass blowers, jewelers, painters, basket weavers, potters and sculptors, wood carvers and much more.

More than 75 artists and crafters are featured. This year, seven crafters will be celebrated who have been in the Village for 35 years or more.

The majority of the crafters in the Village of Yesteryear are from North Carolina, and many are from the mountains. (See below on how you can support them after Hurricane Helene's devastation.)

The Village of Yesteryear is located near the Heritage Church and Folk Festival, close to the Midway. It's most easily accessible by Gates 6, 7 or 8.

(Note: On the other side of the fairgrounds - on the Hillsborough Street side behind Dorton Arena - the North Carolina Pottery Tent features pottery for sale made only by potters from the state.)

How can I support Western NC after Helene at the fair?

Donations can be contributed online for those buying tickets on the State Fair's website with the option to give to the fundraiser link before you check out with the option to give \$5-\$25.

The donation drive isn't the only way to support those affected by the storm at the state fair this year.

Of the more than 75 artisans coming out for fairgoers to see them in action, many are from Western North Carolina, and the State Fair has confirmed that they will still be able to attend.

Here's a list of some of the member crafters you can support as the cleanup continues in their communities:

The Village of Yesteryear will be open at the N.C. State Fair from 10 a.m. to 10 p.m. every day. On opening day, Thursday Oct. 17, it'll be open at noon. You can find more information online at nostatefair.org.

Are dogs/pets allowed at the NC State Fair?

Pets are not allowed at the fair, but service dogs are welcome.

Can I buy alcohol at the NC State Fair?

Yes. North Carolina craft beer and wine are sold at the NC Public House, located on the south side of Dorton Arena.

There's a limit of one Beer+Wine ticket per person per visit to the Public House. One Beer+Wine ticket, which costs

\$10, provides you with a choice of two servings of wine (3 oz. each), beer or cider (both 8 oz. each).

A Kegs & Corks Pass, which can be bought for \$17 online ahead of the fair, provides one Beer+Wine ticket and one gate admission ticket.

Note: You may bring your own food into the State Fair, but alcohol is prohibited.

Can I rent wheelchairs and strollers at the NC State Fair?

Yes. You can rent scooters, wheelchairs and strollers at the fair, but they cannot be reserved in advance.

Prices and details from Raleigh's Mobility Concepts LLC:

Electric scooters are \$60.

Wheelchairs are \$20 and available in medium and large sizes.

Children's transport devices are \$20. Strollers are available in single and double capacity. CuddleCars are only available in single capacity.

Reservations will not be accepted in advance. Instead, patrons can visit tents located around the fairground to pick up and/or drop off equipment. Devices will be issued in a first come, first served capacity.

These will be located inside ticket booths at Gates 1, 7, 8, 9 and 10.

(Note: The accessible parking lot is located near Gate 10.)

Patrons must give another item as collateral - such as car keys, a photo ID or a cash security deposit - when reserving an item. The collateral will be returned to the customer upon rental drop-off.

Attendees may also bring their own wheelchair, scooter, stroller or child's wagon. Golf carts are prohibited.

How accessible is the NC State Fair?

Buildings: All modern buildings at the Fairgrounds have been modified to standards set by the Americans with Disabilities Act. There are some historical buildings in Heritage Circle that are not up to ADA standards.

Bathrooms: There are changing tables in all bathrooms.

Universal changing tables are in the Scott Building and the Agri Supply Exposition Center.

Family restrooms are in the Martin Building and Agri Supply Exposition Center.

Mothers' rooms are in the Scott and Martin buildings and the Agri Supply Exposition Center.

Parking: Accessible parking is available near Gate 10.

Visitors with handicap permits should park in the paved parking lot at the corner of Blue Ridge Road and Trinity Road, near Gate 10 of the Fairgrounds. There are more than 100 parking spaces designated for use by visitors with disabilities in this lot, but a valid handicap permit is required. Visitors can access the Fair through Gates 9 and 10.

AccessABILITY Day will be held on Sunday, Oct. 20.

From 9 .m. to 1 p.m. this special event will include:

Rides and games will operate with no lights or music playing.
Vendors will operate with no lights or music at their booths.
Music stages will only play acoustic sets with light amplification.
The public address system will only be used for lost visitor announcements.
Throughout the whole day:
An indoor "Chill Out Zone" in the Graham Building will have tables and chairs, low lighting and soft music.
Noise canceling headphones will be available for checkout in the "Chill Out Zone."
Inclusive and/or adaptive "on the spot" competitions will be held.
What is the NC State Fair's bag policy?
Clear bags are strongly encouraged. Here's what the fair's website says:
A modified clear bag policy will be in place in 2024. This policy is only in effect for the N.C. State Fair in October and does not extend to additional events held at the N.C. State Fairgrounds.
The N.C. State Fair will operate two security checkpoints at each gate. Those fairgoers who bring a clear bag will go through a much quicker inspection, while those with an opaque bag will go through our bag search line. In an effort to get you into the fun as quickly as possible, please bring your items in a clear bag. There is no size limit to the clear bag being accepted.
What are you allowed/not allowed to bring to the NC State Fair?
Allowed:
Food and drink
Water bottles
Diaper bags with baby/toddler supplies
Your own wheelchair, scooter, stroller or child's wagon
Medications
Not allowed:
Alcoholic beverages
Drugs
Firearms knives, brass knuckles, batons and/or weapons of any type
Golf carts
Pets (minus service dogs)

Can I bring my own food to the NC State Fair?

Yes, outside food and drink are allowed, with the exception of alcohol. All bags are subject to a search policy, the fair says.

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• Citation (aglc Style)

N&O Service Journalism Team, Staff Writer, 'Here's the answer to every question you have about the 2024 NC State Fair', *News & Observer, The* (online), 16 Oct 2024 11A https://infoweb.newsbank.com/apps/news/document-view?
p=AMNEWS&docref=news/19C41ACF8CFFAADO>



Don't tell me we can't - build better in western NC

October 16, 2024 | News & Observer, The (Raleigh, NC) Author: Jonathan Phillips | Section: Editorial/Opinion | 740 Words Page: 8A OpenURL Link

As soon as roads allowed last week, I arrived at my property in Bat Cave, North Carolina with a car full of water, food and supplies for neighbors. There was only one thing I had that was of interest to people - gasoline and diesel fuel. For days, military helicopters and good Samaritans had been airdropping supplies up and down Highway 9 near my house. Pallets of pre-made military meals, water and other supplies were already piling up in garages. What people wanted was energy to drive the machinery needed to dig out, power the wells that pump water and generate electrons that keep the lights and communications devices operating.

This is also what I find every day in my work in Africa and South Asia on energy poverty. People are willing to spend enormous shares of their income on energy. It is the essential backbone to modern life. Billions of dollars are siphoned off annually to pay for expensive fuel. Badly needed investment flows elsewhere because businesses don't set-up operations where power supplies are unreliable. People remain stuck in poverty.

Western North Carolina already had a major power reliability problem. People who can, including my family, own generators to compensate for an extremely weak grid in the region. But everyone should be able to access reliable power. Building back smarter right now means building to new specifications. Bury power lines where necessary. Build redundancies into the grid. Update flood maps to reflect a world that is changing because of climate change. These are exactly the types of policies that recent legislation - the bipartisan Infrastructure Law and Inflation Reduction Act in particular - are helping enable.

These measures represent hard work that will take time, but people in the region are hurting now. Unfortunately, the Trump campaign is driving an exploitative misinformation campaign that pins suffering on immigration policy, preying on people's vulnerability and anger while providing no relief.

These lies are spreading across North Carolina mountain country like wildfire right now. They are part of a new climate change denial messaging playbook that we do not have time for.

Leaders should be focusing on how the southeast must prepare for storm devastation it's never seen before and what that means - building more resilient power grids, avoiding building in vulnerable locations, providing better risk information to people so they can buy insurance. Virtually nobody in western North Carolina owns flood insurance so they will not get benefits from the policies they've paid into for decades. Instead, the misinformation specialists blame, dodge, and stoke anger. All of this is to avoid talking about the fact that the Gulf of Mexico was an abnormally warm 85 degrees as Helene gathered strength, and those waters are fueling bigger and more devastating storms, according to scientists.

Where is the call (eh-hum, North Carolina Senate delegation) for Congress to pass emergency response funding, which will certainly be needed once members return to Washington in November?

My property is buried two feet deep in toxic sludge, and I have a new creek running through my yard. I'll have no grid power or water for months. Don't tell me that I live in an area that doesn't flood. Don't tell me we can't build homes to higher resilience standards. Don't tell me we can't climate-proof power systems. Don't tell me cowardly lies like recovery money is going to illegal immigrants. We live in a new, harsher environment here in the Southeast. Tell me how we as Americans are going to rise to the challenge of surviving and thriving in it.

It is disappointing that someone running for the highest office in the land has chosen to exploit this natural disaster for political purposes. Efforts such as the bipartisan infrastructure act and new regulations that will help FEMA

develop better flood maps backed by the current White House are only the beginning of the real work needed to harden our infrastructure and ready our communities for what is to come.

Jonathan Phillips, writing in a personal capacity, is Director of Energy Access at Duke University's Nicholas energy institute. He was an advisor to Congress and Obama's administration on climate and foreign policy.

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• Citation (aglc Style)

Jonathan Phillips, 'Don't tell me we can't build better in western NC', *News & Observer, The* (online), 16 Oct 2024 8A https://infoweb.newsbank.com/apps/news/document-view?p=AMNEWS&docref=news/19C41ACF617D5570



Gov. Cooper increases NC unemployment benefits after Helene. Here's what's available.

October 16, 2024 | News & Observer, The: Web Edition Articles (Raleigh, NC) Author: Avi Bajpai, News & Observer | Section: politics government | 628 Words OpenURL Link

Gov. Roy Cooper signed an executive order Wednesday increasing the maximum weekly unemployment payment available to North Carolinians in the aftermath of Hurricane Helene.

The executive order applies statewide and authorizes the current maximum weekly payment of \$350 to be raised to \$600.

The payments paid out by the state will continue to be capped at 12 weeks, but North Carolinians who lived or worked in the western counties that were impacted by the storm, and are out of work because of it, will qualify for up to 26 weeks of federal benefits that will be paid through the end of March.

In a statement, Cooper, a Democrat, said he was authorizing the raise in weekly unemployment benefits after traveling across Western North Carolina and hearing concern from small business owners about employees who were still unemployed because their businesses are still closed.

The executive order, which received unanimous agreement from the rest of the bipartisan Council of State, is tied to the ongoing state of emergency for Helene, and will stay in effect until the end of the emergency, or until the order is rescinded.

On top of raising the cap on weekly benefits to \$600, the executive order also increases benefits by \$250 per week, up to the \$600 maximum, to ensure that any low-income or part-time workers who were receiving less than the current \$350 maximum "receive necessary benefits in the wake of Helene," according to a news release from Cooper's office.

Cooper's office noted that even though federal law requires the increased benefits to apply statewide, 79% of new claims filed - 19,735 - between the storm hitting North Carolina on Sept. 27 and Oct. 13 were filed by workers in impacted counties.

The governor's office also noted that only eight other states have lower weekly maximum unemployment benefits after North Carolina, adding that the \$350 cap, which was set in 2013, had not been changed since, "even as rising wages in the state continue to grow North Carolina's Unemployment Insurance Trust Fund from which benefits are paid."

The trust fund currently has more than \$4.8 billion, and is the second-largest of its kind in the country, the governor's office said.

The governor's office said that the Division of Employment Security estimated that if 50,000 North Carolinians from the impacted counties were to receive the maximum unemployment payment for the entire 12-week duration, it would cost the trust fund a total of \$150 million.

The additional 14 weeks of federal benefits available under the federal Disaster Unemployment Assistance program would cost the federal government an additional \$175 million, the governor's office said.

"Many currently unemployed workers will likely return to work before receiving the full benefit they are entitled to claim, so the actual fiscal impact of the increased benefits is expected to be lower," Cooper's office said in the release.

In a statement, State Treasurer Dale Folwell said he concurred with Cooper's executive order but suggested that officials should work to figure out where the increased benefits are most needed.

"While natural disasters are nothing new in North Carolina, they always present new opportunities to learn important lessons," Folwell said. "I recommend that the Governor, working with local, state and federal officials and agencies, resolve to more clearly define and identify areas that are most impacted by this and future disasters. That would assure that increased benefits and employer tax relief are provided to those in the greatest need."

"Hopefully, the U.S. Congress and the North Carolina General Assembly will take this opportunity to draft laws that will allow precision focus and immediate action to struggling disaster relief areas instead of extending response on a statewide basis," he said.

Cooper's office said Wednesday that it could take people filing for unemployment between two and three weeks to see the increased payments in their weekly benefit checks.

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• Citation (aglc Style)

Avi Bajpai, News & Observer, 'Gov. Cooper increases NC unemployment benefits after Helene. Here's what's available.', *News & Observer, The: Web Edition Articles* (online), 16 Oct 2024 https://infoweb.newsbank.com/apps/news/document-view? p=AMNEWS&docref=news/19C8AE743B28C298>