



Green River Cove Road, along the Green River was destroyed by historic flooding in the wake of Hurricane Helene on Monday, Oct. 7, 2024 near Saluda, N.C.

NC Gov. Cooper signs \$273M Helene relief bill into law. Here's how the money will be spent

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RALEIGH
North Carolina's lawmakers moved quickly to rush the first round of Hurricane Helene relief to the western part of the state devastated by flooding caused by the storm.

The General Assembly convened Wednesday to take up a \$273 million bill that leaders describe as a "first step."

Back in Raleigh for a one-day session, Republicans, who control the legislature, released the bill Wednesday. It received unanimous approval within hours, with a 47-0 vote in the state Senate and a 113-0 vote in the House, sending it to the desk of Democratic Gov. Roy Cooper.

Cooper quickly signed the bill into law on Thursday morning.

"This storm caused catastrophic damage but also showed the resiliency of NC's people and communities. We must continue the bipartisan work to help them build back strong," Cooper said in a statement.

The bill, called the Disaster Recovery Act, replaces the previous version of House Bill 149, and only required a yes or no vote, without any amendments.

Senate leader Phil Berger said in a news conference that the bulk of the money will go to state agencies for spending flexibility, rather than specific earmarks to districts. Berger and House Speaker Tim Moore announced there will be another legislative session on Oct. 24 to pass another round of funding.

"This is not all of it, not by a long shot," Berger said about the state money. He said the federal government will be providing most of the relief.

Lawmakers will work to figure out what FEMA is paying for, and what it's not, when they come back for the additional session later in the month, said Sen. Kevin Corbin, a Republican whose district spans seven Western North Carolina counties.

Corbin was among several Republican lawmakers who spoke at the news conference about the damage and response in their districts. Later that day during the Senate floor debate, Corbin talked about the historic magnitude of the storm and that the measure is still "a beginning."

"I thank God we have the rainy day fund. I thank God it's there ... We have over \$4 billion in the rainy

day fund, because in Western North Carolina, we had a rainy day. That's what it's for," Corbin said.

"We're in a long-term recovery," said Sen. Ralph Hise, a Spruce Pine Republican, who represents a devastated area. Hise said "there's a lot of distrust in the areas I have."

Hise also spoke about the recovery during the Senate floor debate. Democratic Sen. Julie Mayfield of Buncombe County echoed his comments about response time, saying that "nothing happens as fast as you want it to. And the first couple of days were terrifying because things weren't coming."

"But then they did start to come, and the National Guard is there, pulling people out of houses. And that's still happening, still happening. FEMA showed up. And despite what you read on the internet, and don't believe any of it, FEMA is everywhere," Mayfield said.

Sen. Tim Moffitt, who represents Henderson, Polk and Rutherford counties, said the bill is "a first chapter of a very long book to rebuilding the mountains."

Asked about Democrats' involvement in the bill, Berger and Moore said they had met with the Cooper administration, Senate Democratic Leader Dan Blue and House Democratic Leader Robert Reives.

NEW HELENE FUND

The bill creates a new Hurricane Helene Fund with \$273 million from the state's Savings Reserve fund.

• \$250 million will go to the Department of Public Safety, Division of Emergency Management, to provide the state's match to federal disaster relief funds.

The bill says "a portion" of the money will be used to establish a revolving loan program to help local government and state agencies with cash flow while they are waiting for reimbursement from the federal government.

Moore said they expect the federal government to pay 90% to the state's 10% in storm relief, and "don't want to supplant those federal dollars if we're not required to. And then there's language in the bill, too, that points out that we want to be careful on how the money is spent, that we don't forfeit the ability to get those federal dollars."

HELP ON SCHOOLS, INFRASTRUCTURE, IDS

Here's what else the bill does:

- \$16 million to the Department of Public In-

struction for "lost compensation of school nutrition employees due to school closures resulting from Hurricane Helene."

- Grants school calendar flexibility to public schools by allowing them to make up or mark as completed any number of the days or hours missed. It also allows the schools to use up to 30 remote instruction days towards required instructional days.

However, the bill did not grant other funding requests from the education agency.

- Provides flexibility for infrastructure projects.

Berger said the flexibility should not "impair the health, the safety, the required building requirements" but "a lot of it has to do with procurement and the way that you decide how to deploy the dollars to someone so something could get built."

- Allows the governor to waive fees assessed by the Division of Motor Vehicles for things such as obtaining a duplicate driver's license, obtaining an identification card and more.

- Provides \$2 million for grants to the North Carolina League of Municipalities, the North Carolina Association of County Commissioners and the North Carolina Association of Regional Councils of Governments "to provide technical assistance with local recovery funds. In providing this assistance, these entities shall prioritize grants to counties with a population of less than 250,000."

The Office of State Budget and Management will run the program.

- Temporarily lifts the six-month separation requirement for some retired state employees who want to help with recovery efforts.

- Temporarily waives the accrual of interest on certain state taxes such as for an underpayment of tax imposed on a franchise, corporate income, or individual income tax return.

- Temporarily extends some provisional licenses for adult care homes and family care homes in impacted areas.

WHAT THE BILL DOES ABOUT ELECTION DAY

The bill also includes \$5 million for the State Board of Elections, plus a variety of temporary election law changes to make it easier for residents of Western North Carolina to vote.

The hurricane has dealt a serious blow to what may very well be the ability to conduct elections in the disaster-related counties," Berger said.

The bill would allow the western counties hit by Helene to change polling

sites that were rendered unusable by the storm, giving counties more flexibility in how they hire election workers and give affected voters more options to get absentee ballots in.

"You have poll sites that literally no longer exist," Moore said. "... A fire department or church or community building - that building is no longer there."

The money would also be used to conduct outreach efforts to voters in affected counties to turn in their absentee ballot in any county in the state.

On the House floor, Democratic Rep. Caleb Rudow of Buncombe County attempted to bring forward a bill that would extend the voter registration deadline by one week and give voters in affected counties a three-day grace period to get their absentee ballots in.

The voter registration deadline is Friday, although those voting early in person will be able to register and vote on the same day.

Rudow's motion failed, with Republican Rep. Destin Hall, chair of the Rules Committee, saying he had not been contacted about this request before the session began.

"We don't have time for partisan games," he said.

WHAT GOV. COOPER REQUESTED FOR HELENE RELIEF

The Office of State Budget and Management,

which is part of Cooper's administration, sent its proposal on Monday to Berger, Moore and others.

Cooper requested the \$250 million that the bill provides for the Helene Fund.

The proposal, sent in a letter from Budget Director Kristin Walker, also says that the state has "already obligated tens of millions of dollars in the first week of response," and while "much of that will be reimbursed by FEMA," the state needs to be able to move money quickly and "without red tape or unnecessary delay."

The budget proposal to legislative leaders also included:

- Up to \$100 million to the Department of Transportation from the State Emergency Response and Disaster Relief Fund to deal with more than 600 roads closed and "catastrophic" damage to transportation networks.

- A request to amend the Emergency Management Act to "facilitate necessary executive response to emergencies so that a state of emergency can extend as long as necessary to respond to the emergency without enactment of a general law by the General Assembly."

In response to Cooper's emergency management request, the bill extends the statewide declaration that Cooper already issued until March 1. That order had concurrence from the rest of the Council of State, which is made up of 10 statewide elected officials. State law changed to limit the duration of states of emergency after Cooper issued a continuing series of orders during the coronavirus pandemic.

Reporters Luciana Perez Uribe Guinassi and Avi Bajpai contributed.

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