

There will be so many Helene stories to come in NC. We're committed to telling them

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

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

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

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

RAL 100224-HURRICANE-HELENE-TEL-25.JPG

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

Photojournalist Travis Long of The N&O, who has family in Cherokee, was there even before Helene's arrival. The photographs sent from across the region by Travis, Kaitlin and Robert Willett of The N&O and Khadejeh Nikouyeh of The Observer have been devastating. Khadejeh and N&O reporter Martha Quillin captured stories of a family bracing for flooding who suddenly faced a landslide; a beloved Asheville area for artists washed away, and a wedding that went on in the storm's aftermath, with the National Guard arriving to wish the couple well. The Charlotte Observer's Ryan Oehrli joined Travis for a report from the small town of Marshall, where resilient residents are thinking of the future as they dig out from mounds of mud. The N&O's Brian Gordon and Robert, in the tiny area called Pensacola, talked to a resident who recalled a flood from 1977. But this time was different, she said, as "she felt the entire mountain move."Virginia Bridges of The N&O told the heartbreaking story of families and friends searching for missing loved ones.N&O transportation reporter Richard Stradling has constantly updated a list of the many road closures in the area, as well as explaining why rebuilding Interstate 40 through the mountains will be such a challenge. The Charlotte Observer's Evan Moore and The N&O's Drew Jackson have updated a county-by-county list of damages. As the situation turned political, with candidates and current office holders sparring over the federal and state response, Dawn Baumgartner Vaughan and Danielle Battaglia did a Reality Check to find the truth.And correspondents Emily Vespa and Caitlyn Yaede also did some fact-checking about the many fake images being shared on social media and how to spot them. (Please, folks, don't share that photo of the crying little girl with big eyes holding the crying little dog with big eyes. It's Al generated, and there are many real photos that show what real people are dealing with. It doesn't need fake embellishment.)

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

RAL_100124-HURRICANE-HELENE-TEL-06.JPGResidents and volunteers clean up on Tuesday, Oct. 1, 2024 after the French Broad River flooded downtown Marshall. The remnants of Hurricane Helene caused widespread flooding, downed trees, and power outages in western North Carolina.

All of our Helene aftermath coverage is outside of our existing paywall, and we are sharing freely with other

newsrooms across North Carolina. You can find all our stories at newsobserver.com/topics/helene-nc. You'll also find links there to ways you can help.

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

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

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

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

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Helene fact check: Here are the rumors and the reality in Western North Carolina

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Editor's note: NC Reality Check is investigating the rumors and misinformation, some of it from official sources, inundating social media about relief efforts in Western North Carolina. If you encounter a rumor that you would like us to check out, email realitycheck@newsobserver.com

This file will be updated.

Emergency officials responding to the Hurricane Helene disaster in Western North Carolina say false rumors on social media are impeding their efforts to help tens of thousands of people in need.

"False information is being widely shared on social media channels, including Al-generated content and images," N.C. Department of Public Safety officials said in a statement. "Nefarious actors and those with ill intent may be taking advantage of this situation by spreading false information."

The public should find and share information from trusted sources and discourage others from spreading information from unverified sources, NCDPS officials said.

RAL_100824-HELENE-TEL-001 (1).JPGSoldiers with the 101st Airborne Division Air Assault, 2nd Brigade Combat Team, from Fort Campbell, Kentucky, use Infantry Squad Vehicles to deliver water, food, toiletries, and other aid to residents in the Soco Gap community in Maggie Valley on Tuesday, October. 8, 2024. The team has been using the Maggie Valley Pavilion and Town Hall as a distribution base for relief efforts in the town following Tropical Storm Helene.

On social media Friday, the American Red Cross said misinformation is hurting its Hurricane Helene relief efforts.

"Misinformation can spread quickly after a disaster, causing confusion and distrust within communities struggling to recover," the Red Cross said in a statement. "Unfortunately, we're seeing this during our response to Hurricane Helene."

Here are rumors being spread on social media and the facts offered in response by government agencies and local officials:

Rumor: 15 people died of hypothermia in Avery County this week.

Facts: A spokeswoman for the county said of this rumor: "Mark it debunked in all capital letters, please."

The rumor began with a post on social media platform X by an osteopathic doctor from the Midwest who has been working at a disaster relief center at the Avery County Airport. The county spokeswoman said Avery County Sheriff's Office deputies are investigating the doctor's intention for spreading the false rumor.

As of Wednesday, there had been four Helene-related deaths in Avery County, with three people still missing.

Rumor: Former President Trump said Gov. Roy Cooper and Washington Democrats blocked people and money from coming into NC to help those impacted by Helene.

Facts: Trump's statement is false. Gov. Roy Cooper called it "a flat out lie."

"We're working with all partners around the clock to get help to people. Trump's lies and conspiracy theories have hurt the morale of first responders and people who lost everything, helped scam artists and put government and rescue workers in danger," Cooper wrote on social media, over a screenshot of Trump's post on Truth Social.

Cooper's post led to a response from Canton Mayor Zeb Smathers: "A 100% false statement by the former president..."

At least one person who identified himself as an Asheville resident backed up Cooper's statements under his post saying, "Aid and effort has been coming in and we are grateful for it."

Before Hurricane Helene struck North Carolina, Cooper activated the National Guard. After the hurricane crippled the region, President Joe Biden, at Cooper's request, ordered active-military to report to Western North Carolina to assist. Some 1,500 Army troops are now in the region, according to the N.C. National Guard.

Search and rescue teams, utility crews and highway construction teams from around the country have been helping with the recovery effort. Auxiliary law enforcement has been provided by the U.S. Border Patrol and the U.S. Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives.

The state has also been coordinating and assisting with the collection of both monetary and volunteer donations.

On Thursday, Rep. Kathy Manning helped lead a group of 64 Democrats in Washington to call on House Speaker Mike Johnson to bring Congress back before the end of their October recess to pass additional disaster relief funding.

Rumors that donations and volunteers were being turned away aren't accurate either. People faced roadblocks for safety reasons and needed to be rerouted to safer areas. (See below.)

Rumor: 163 school-age children were missing in Mitchell County.

Facts: Let's start with the most updated news. "We have accounted for every child," Mitchell County School board chair Brandon Pitman said during a phone interview Friday. Pitman clarified that "accounted for" did not mean no students were harmed when then-Tropical Storm Helene swept through Western North Carolina two weeks ago.

Mitchell County is a rural, mountainous area, part way between Asheville and Boone. Home to Spruce Pine and the county seat of Bakersville, it was significantly damaged by Helene flooding and rainfall. This year, Mitchell County Schools has 3.410 students enrolled.

Information that 163 school-age children were missing in Mitchell originated in a TikTok post from Michael Harbaugh, a Dayton, Ohio, resident who is running for Congress as an independent. In his video, Harbaugh interviews Kira Crisco of the Outdoor Wellness League, a North Carolina-based environmental education nonprofit.

"Landslides took out whole gatherings of homes," Crisco said. "The lady here was actually just telling me that they have 163 kids in the school system that are still unaccounted for."

On Oct. 9, the X account @GardensR4Health posted Harbaugh's video, which has been reshared more than 11,000 times. Others have posted the video on Facebook and Instagram.

Pitman said Mitchell County Schools leaders did make a missing students list, though they couldn't start immediately.

"Right before the storm hit us, we lost all communication," he said. "All cell phones went down. Landlines. It was a few days before our teachers were able to get in, to start compiling a list."

Mitchell educators then began contacting unaccounted for students. When internet service came back up, they

checked social media accounts to see if students were safe, Pitman explained. Staff also went door to door for house visits.

"Just until probably last weekend, we didn't really know exactly who was missing, who wasn't missing," he said. "So that's probably where that rumor came from, because it took us some time to try to figure out who we could put on a missing list, and who would not be on a missing list."

Mitchell County public schools have been closed since the storm.

Pitman wasn't sure whether the district's list of unaccounted for students was ever exactly 163 students. And the children the school district hadn't accounted for weren't necessarily missing to their family and friends (In Harbaugh's original video, Crisco used the word "unaccounted," but subsequent social media posts referred to the Mitchell children as "missing.")

A certain number of children in Mitchell County, until quite recently, were in fact on a missing students list. On Thursday, Harbaugh posted an update on TikTok. Speaking in front of Harris Middle School in Spruce Pine, he said he spoke to a teacher who said the district had accounted for virtually every student.

Rumor: 1,000 bodies remain unidentified in Asheville

Facts: That claim and other social media rumors are false, Buncombe County spokeswoman Lillian Govus said. The rumors are hurting the emergency response to the Helene disaster in Western North Carolina, she said.

"1,000 unidentified bodies" at the Asheville hospital, the rumor claimed. "Buzzards everywhere."

"And those hurt, because ... we have to redivert resources and make sure that our emergency personnel check that off the list," Govus said. "And it may be the fourth time that we've done that.

944bf01d-da89-4c79-9413-d603386f2c78.pngVerifying Hurricane Helene social media rumors as false "takes away time and resources from us being able to do those critical lifesaving maneuvers in our community," Buncombe County spokeswoman Lillian Govus said on Oct. 10, 2024.

"... It takes away time and resources from us being able to do those critical lifesaving maneuvers in our community," she said.

"So," Govus said, "I would ask that if you are so compelled to share information on social media, that those sources be from the county, the city of Asheville, the agencies that are supporting us at the federal level, at the state level with North Carolina Emergency Services, and verified individuals."

Rumor: The government created the hurricanes that have hit the Southeast to suppress voting.

Facts: Scientists at the University of North Carolina and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration say it is not possible to generate the energy required to artificially create a hurricane.

NASA says Hurricane Helene began as a thunderstorm in the western Caribbean first observed on Sept. 23 around 1,500 miles from North Carolina. The National Hurricane Center tracked the entire path of the storm. When it made landfall on Sept. 26, tropical storm-force winds extended more than 300 miles from the center of the storm, roughly the distance from Raleigh to Cherokee. NOAA's research division says no weather modification technology could produce or steer such a storm.

Small scale cloud seeding has been used in attempts to induce rainfall over small geographic areas, with mixed results.

Read the full explanation here.

A companion rumor, that the government has held a patent on a process to control weather since 1948, is not true. The U.S. Patent Office granted a patent in 1948 to Harvey M. Branau, a man from Wilton, Wisconsin, titled "Process for Controlling Weather." That patent application, however, describes a process for dissipating existing clouds and fog to keep weather clear around airports. It says nothing about generating storms. The patent expired in 1968. Branau was granted a second patent, in 1956, titled "Process for Weather Control," which also focuses on ways to dissipate clouds. That patent expired in 1973.

Rumor: Your previous W-2 form can keep you from receiving the \$750 initial FEMA assistance.

Facts: FEMA does not consider income when evaluating applications for assistance.

To help people quickly obtain essentials like food, water or baby formula, FEMA will provide \$750 in assistance, also known as Serious Needs Assistance, upon an individual's initial filing for federal relief.

Beyond these initial emergency funds, FEMA has already given out over \$60 million to address property loss in North Carolina alone, FEMA Administrator Deanne Criswell said.

The payment does not affect benefits from other federal programs and is not considered taxable income, FEMA said. Disaster assistance are grants and "do not have to be repaid."

It's also not the only form of assistance available to disaster survivors. Individuals whose homes are affected by the storm and who incur hotel costs during the recovery, for example, may be eligible for displacement assistance, Criswell said on Friday. "Many will be eligible for this," she said. "It will just depend where they were during the storm when they incurred the cost. Those are things that we can help them with."

Survivors can apply for other forms of longer-term assistance such as housing assistance or home repair.

To apply, visit disasterassistance.gov, download the FEMA App or call 1-(800) 621-3362.

Rumor: An unmarked helicopter damaged a supply area, possibly deliberately

Facts: Sunday, video emerged of a UH-60 Black Hawk helicopter flying over a supply donation site near Burnsville, causing tents and supplies to fly around. In posts on X, the United Cajun Navy said the supplies damaged were at a distribution site they'd established.

The aircraft involved in the incident was a North Carolina helicopter, Maj. Gen. Todd Hunt, the adjutant general of North Carolina's National Guard, said at a Wednesday press conference.

"I'll take responsibility for it and we own it," Hunt said.

NC National Guard responds to viral Black Hawk video: 'We're very sorry that happened'Maj. Gen. Todd Hunt, the adjutant general of the North Carolina National Guard, said Oct. 9, 2024, the crew was grounded and an investigation was underway after a video went viral on social media that showed a NCNG Black Hawk helicopter's rotor wash blowing away Helene relief supplies in western North Carolina.

The crew was trying to deliver a generator to the landing site, Hunt said, but upon approaching noticed there were too many people, tents and commodities near where they were trying to land.

"They pulled in power to take back off to go around in the helicopter and the rotor wash caused that damage," Hunt said.

Rotor wash is a blast of downward air generated when rotor blades spin to generate lift on a helicopter.

NC National Guard officials are investigating the incident, and the flight crew has been grounded until that probe is complete.

"We are very sorry that happened," Hunt said.

Hunt also said that while National Guard helicopters involved in the Helene response initially had no communication with people on the ground at landing sites, there is now "some communication," particularly with emergency personnel.

Rumor: Cooper hasn't called up National Guard

Facts: North Carolina Gov. Roy Cooper declared a state of emergency and activated the North Carolina National Guard before Helene reached the state on Sept. 25.

In the first few days after the storm, the National Guard reported conducting 16 missions and rescuing 119 people, including 41 in one mission to Buncombe County, and 11 pets. Multiple people, including a baby, were flown directly to hospitals for medical treatment, the N.C. National Guard reported.

On Oct. 9, state officials reported over 3,000 soldiers and airmen, including National Guard units from 12 different states and active-duty military from Fort Liberty and Fort Campbell, in the region.

The troops brought with them at least 40 helicopters and over 1,200 specialized vehicles and were helping local responders in a variety of ways, from search and rescue missions to food and relief delivery and cleanup efforts, state officials said.

Video: See Helene's destruction in NC's Lake LureCharlotte City Council member Tariq Bokhari went to the Lake Lure/Chimney Rock area on Sunday, Sept. 29th, 2024. He posted this video on X saying about the destruction from Hurricane Helene: "...never seen anything like this. Post apocalyptic. It's so overwhelming you don't even know how to fathom what recovery looks like, let alone where to start. Going to be a long path to recovery that all levels of stakeholders are going to be needed."

Rumor: The Lake Lure Dam burst

Facts: The Lake Lure Dam was damaged when Helene's rains flooded the Broad River on Sept. 27, but is still standing and is structurally stable, town and state officials said.

The dam, built in 1926, sits on the Broad River, which flows from north of Bat Cave and Chimney Rock, N.C., to Lake Lure, where it shifts southeast toward South Carolina.

The state has designated Lake Lure a "high hazard" dam, which means a break could pose a large risk to people and property. In early 2024, town officials said they "are confident the dam is safe unless we experience a significant (10,000 year) earthquake or rainfall in excess of 30 inches of rain in a 24 hour period."

On Sept. 27, the dam overflowed after over 18 inches of rain fell across northwestern Rutherford County before and during Helene, according to the N.C. State Climate Office.

Residents downstream were evacuated as the water level neared 992 feet, just a half-inch shy of the level at which the dam spills over the 124-foot-tall dam. But the dam held, and within a few days, the water receded enough that an engineer could check the structure.

Despite erosion on both sides of the support abutments, the dam was found to be stable, according to Josh Kastrinsky, spokesman for the NC Department of Environmental Quality.

The town is working with contractors, the National Guard and the state Department of Natural Resources to make

repairs and remove debris from the lake, town spokeswoman Laura Krejci said in an update. A hazmat boom will be installed on Oct. 10 to soak up oil and other hazardous chemicals, she said.

A wastewater treatment plant at the bottom of the dam, which was also flooded, is being repaired, and a temporary lift station being installed until the damaged station can be replaced.

The town is in the midst of a 10-year plan to build a replacement dam 100 yards downstream that meets modern safety requirements, with \$16.5 million in state funding and \$238,070 in FEMA grants, with plans to apply for more, according to town documents.

See the devastation Helene left in western NCNews & Observer photojournalist Travis Long and Charlotte Observer photojournalist Khadejeh Nikouyeh document the destruction left in the path of Helene as it ravaged the western mountain region of North Carolina over the weekend.

Rumor: OSHA fined an Asheville fire department for capacity violations related to donations

Facts: The federal Occupational Health and Safety Administration, or OSHA, has not been in contact with any fire departments in Asheville, according to Asheville Fire Department spokeswoman Kelley Klope.

A search of OSHA's online inspections database also did not find any reported violations in Asheville or for a fire department in North Carolina between Sept. 27 and Oct. 10.

Rumor: The government is seizing land in Chimney Rock to get the critical metal lithium.

Facts: The government is not seizing land in Chimney Rock to obtain lithium.

On Oct. 8, Republican U.S. Rep. Chuck Edwards, who represents Western North Carolina, released a statement debunking several Hurricane Helene myths. His first fact-check focused on a prominent rumor about lithium and a small Rutherford County town that was devastated by the storm.

"Local officials have confirmed the government is NOT seizing Chimney Rock," Edwards wrote. "There was no 'special meeting' held in Chimney Rock between federal, state or local governments about seizing the town."

False news of lithium inspiring a government land grab spread in the aftermath of Hurricane Helene on X, Facebook, and TikTok. "Lithium, that's why they're doing it," is how one person opens her TikTok video, which has since garnered 20,600 likes. Some of the posts referred to an Oct. 2 public meeting during which officials supposedly discussed seizing private property after rushing waters leveled most of Chimney Rock's Main Street.

The next day, Rutherford County Emergency Management offered clarification on Facebook, stating, "These claims are entirely false." The department said town officials had met with state, county, and federal leaders on Oct. 2 about coordinating support after Helene.

Lithium is not currently mined in North Carolina, but two companies want to start digging for it.

In 2015, a Charlotte-based resource company called Albemarle purchased a former lithium mine about 30 mile west of Charlotte in the small city of Kings Mountain. Albemarle currently operates the only active U.S. lithium mine, in Silver Peak, Nevada, but the dormant Kings Mountain mine could eclipse Silver Peak's output by a factor of 10.

A different Charlotte-area lithium company, Piedmont Lithium, is lobbying to dig a brand new mine in Kings Mountain.

Lightweight with a high-voltage capacity, lithium is an ideal component in electric vehicle batteries. Lithium-ion batteries are also crucial to cell phones, laptops, cameras, toys, medical devices, and other electronics. In North Carolina, a series of forthcoming lithium projects has positioned the state as a key player in the emerging "EV

battery belt" forming across the Southeast United States.

In late September, Albemarle submitted permits to the state and federal governments in its pursuit to restart the Kings Mountain mine (which is currently a 163-foot-deep lake). The company submitted these permits days before Helene passed over Western North Carolina, and some noted this chronology in posts about a Chimney Rock land grab.

More than 50 miles separate Chimney Rock and Kings Mountain.

As it tries to reopen the mine, Albemarle currently refines imported lithium at its Kings Mountain facility. In a statement to The News & Observer on Wednesday, the company said this plant "did sustain a period of power loss from Hurricane Helene; however the site facilities were not otherwise impacted."

The site has since resumed normal operations, the company said.

Rumor: 200 people were found inside a church in Candler, NC, where they spent six days without food or water.

Facts: This is false.

Lillian Govus, spokeswoman for Buncombe County, confirmed to The News & Observer that this is false.

This widely circulated story comes from social media posts written by people outside of the area, some of them putting the total at 2,000 people and calling the Buncombe County unincorporated town "Chandler." Many more from Candler itself have surfaced to debunk the story, noting it has gone unreported by every news outlet in the state, country and world.

This one from Sarah Reams on Facebook's Hurricane Helene Safety Check-in page has gotten forwarded most often:

"I live in Candler, NC. The information in the post is not true. I have had cell service for most of the time and have been monitoring local and national news. There has been nothing reported about this. In addition, one of my friends has been doing search and rescue with local law enforcement and has not mentioned anything. ... Not to mention, I don't think a church in Candler could hold that many people. Also, Candler is not that large, and it is definitely not a concentrated town."

RAL_HELENE-NE-100624-RTW_23.JPGFEMA employee Jirau Alvaro navigates beneath fallen trees on a damaged bridge on NC 9 above the Broad River on Sunday, October 6, 2024 in rural Buncombe County, near Black Mountain, N.C.

Rumor: FEMA is not responding to Swannanoa.

Fact: FEMA has sent more than 1,200 urban search-and-rescue personnel to Western North Carolina.

On Sunday, a FEMA task force was combing the Swannanoa River near the Whitson Avenue Bridge, searching for victims of the storm. They used excavators to pull cars from the water and search dogs to locate people beneath rubble.

In Helene's aftermath, rescue turns to grim recovery in the mountains of Western North CarolinaMore than 1,200 FEMA search-and-rescue personnel from across the country have converged on Western North Carolina in the wake of devastating flooding from Helene. Their work is transitioning into the grim task of recovery more than a week after the storm hit the mountains.

Victims anywhere can apply for FEMA aid at DisasterAssistance.gov.

But many residents remain without power or internet access. FEMA Administrator Deanne Criswell traveled to Black Mountain, near Swannanoa, with Gov. Roy Cooper last week. On that trip, she said FEMA is sending survivor assistance teams into Black Mountain to register people offline, according to Black Mountain News.

Rumor: There are 'bodies everywhere' in Chimney Rock and the government has been seizing private property.

Facts: While the village of Chimney Rock was hit hard by the storm, Rutherford County government has confirmed just one storm-related death.

Rutherford County government said there have been no seizures of private property or discussions about seizing property involving the federal, state or local government. There was no "special meeting" on Oct. 2 about the government seizing the village.

"Town of Lake Lure and Chimney Rock Village officials met with NC House Speaker Tim Moore, NC Senator Tim Moffitt, NC Rep Jake Johnson, Sheriff Aaron Ellenburg, County Commissioner Chair Bryan King, Emergency Mgt Director Frankie Hamrick, and representatives from our congressional delegation to offer them an opportunity to hear directly the impact to their individual municipalities and to request their support and advocacy for federal and state support," the county said on Facebook.

The county is asking that would-be volunteers stay away from the village while contractors "clear roads and debris, a necessary first step to create safe conditions for any future volunteer efforts."

Residents will be allowed to visit their properties "when it is safe" and will need proof of residency or ownership.

Surviving after Helene: 'Just living is a challenge'The News & Observer's Travis Long was one of the first journalists on the ground when Helene's floodwaters roared through Western North Carolina. A veteran of more than 20 major storms, he shares his experiences and images after a week of covering the devastation the storm left behind.

Rumor: FEMA assistance is taxable.

Facts: FEMA funds are not considered income and are not taxable. Applying for disaster relief will not affect eligibility for Social Security, Medicare, Medicaid, SNAP or any other federal and state benefits.

Assistance from FEMA is a grant and does not have to be repaid. It is not just for homeowners. Renters can receive help for lost personal property. FEMA can't provide money for losses that are insured, however.

Rumor: Governments aren't responding to the disaster.

Facts: The N.C. State Emergency Response Team includes local, state, federal and military units; power and cell phone companies and other businesses; and volunteer organizations.

On Saturday, Mooresville Fire Chief Curt Deaton said his team alone has rescued 11 people and two animals in Ashe County and will remain there until it is safe for residents and their first responders.

RAL_100824-HELENE-TEL-002 (1).JPGSoldiers with the 101st Airborne Division Air Assault, 2nd Brigade Combat Team, from Fort Campbell, Kentucky, use Infantry Squad Vehicles to deliver water, food, toiletries, and other aid to residents in the Soco Gap community in Maggie Valley on Tuesday, October. 8, 2024. The team has been using the Maggie Valley Pavilion and Town Hall as a distribution base for relief efforts in the town following Tropical Storm Helene.

"This work is very strenuous," Deaton said. "These men spend most of the time walking and climbing through dangerous debris piles, searching for any survivors or victims ... Some of our team, they've been there for 10 days straight now, working around the clock."

Sunday, reporters watched as a FEMA search and rescue team from Maryland scrambled over a fallen structure in Swannanoa, cutting layers of debris away with chainsaws because a human search team dog had indicated there may be remains there.

Just upstream, a construction worker using an excavator lifted a Dodge Charger out of the banks of the Swannanoa River. Members of the search and rescue team surrounded the car, smashing in windows and pulling off the door before shoveling thick layers of silt out of it. No one was in the car.

Also Sunday, the 18th Airborne Corps from Fort Liberty announced that the 1,000 troops requested last week had arrived in Western North Carolina, along with 500 Fort Liberty troops from the 1-502 Infantry Battalion and the 101st Airborne Division.

It said the military has identified "trafficable routes" for aid delivery in Swannanoa, Pleasant Grove, Old Fort, Spruce Pine, Bakersville, Fairview and Emerald City. Soldiers had begun distributing 2,800 meals and 4,500 bottles of water. The 82nd Combat Aviation Brigade on Saturday delivered more than 85,000 pounds of recovery supplies.

Photo: Army uses tactical vehicles to bring supplies to hard hit ares of NC mountains after Helene

Urban search and rescue personnel organized by FEMA have been in the field across the western part of the state and thus far have rescued over 3,200 people, according to the White House.

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration has conducted 68 hours of flights to capture post-disaster imagery with a focus on Western North Carolina, helping local, state and federal officials to determine the extent of damage throughout the region and where to allocate resources.

FEMA Disaster Survivor Assistance staff, including some of the agency's most experienced leaders, are on the ground to help affected North Carolinians navigate their applications for federal assistance.

Overall, 10,000 federal staff are on the ground throughout the Southeast supporting relief efforts.

Rumor: Donations, volunteers turned away at checkpoints.

Facts: Western N.C. roads are still dangerous and impassible in many places, and landslides remain a threat. Traffic is being rerouted on some roads so emergency vehicles, disaster relief efforts and local traffic can still access them.

RAL_HOTSPRINGS-NE-100424-RTW_4.JPGSeven-year-old Zander Reed of Hot Springs, N.C. sorts through a massive amount of donations for Hurricane Helene victims in the gym of Hot Springs Elementary on Friday, October 4, 2024 in Hot Springs, N.C. Donation coordinators said they have plenty of diapers, but are in need of PPE equipment, and muck boots.

Rumor: Governments are discouraging and confiscating donations.

Facts: The state encourages financial donations to the North Carolina Disaster Relief Fund and to N.C. volunteer organizations responding to the disaster. The state is working with the organizations to collect and distribute physical donations coming in from across the state and country.

Coordinated volunteer disaster relief efforts are needed in Western North Carolina, according to the NC Department of Public Safety.

"We strongly encourage neighbors to continue helping neighbors in impacted areas," department officials said. "Those wishing to volunteer should register at www.nc.gov/volunteer," and not "self-deploy" to the region.

But emergency officials are asking people not to show up on their own bringing supplies.

In Banner Elk, the fire and rescue department posted on Facebook that the outpouring of donations has met their needs for the next week, and that the wave of suppliers are creating a "bottleneck" that compromises their already strained infrastructure.

"Cash donations offer voluntary agencies and faith-based organizations the most flexibility to address urgently developing needs," NC Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster President Kristy Kulberg said in a news release. "Although the need is great, and desire to help strong, it is important to avoid donating material goods or self-deploying to help until communities are safe and public officials and disaster relief organizations have had an opportunity to assess the damage to identify what the specific unmet needs are."

Drone video shows the damage to Biltmore Village in AshevilleBiltmore Village received extensive damage from flooding of the Swannanoa River after the remnants of Hurricane Helene caused torrential rainfall in western North Carolina over the weekend.

Rumor: The FAA is restricting access to the airspace.

Facts: The FAA is not restricting access for recovery operations but is trying to people safe. There has been a 300% increase in air traffic in the region, the FAA says.

"The FAA is coordinating closely with state and local officials to make sure everyone is operating safely in very crowded and congested airspace," according to a statement by the N.C. Department of Public Safety.

When President Joe Biden visited the area on Wednesday, the Secret Service took painstaking care to keep all search-and-rescue and relief flights going, a U.S. official told The Charlotte Observer.

The official said recovery-related flights that are coordinated by the N.C. Emergency Operations Center are assigned special Beacon codes and allowed to proceed. If a pilot lets the EOC know they are planning to deliver aid, the plane would be pre-cleared by the FAA.

The only flights affected would have been by pilots unknown to members of the relief or search-and-rescue community, the official said.

Rumor: "The Red Cross isn't here."

Facts: At least 1,300 Red Cross disaster responders are helping people in the Carolinas, Florida, Georgia, Tennessee and Virginia with safe shelter, food, hygiene items, medications and emotional support.

Before Helene made landfall, the Red Cross positioned hundreds of disaster responders and thousands of relief supplies across the Southeast.

The Red Cross is "engaging in targeted distribution of emergency supplies in low-income communities with high levels of minor or affected residential damage," the White House said, alongside the Salvation Army, which has set up nine mobile feeding units that have distributed over over 12,600 meals, 9,600 drinks and 5,600 snacks.

RAL_GYvIOZ8WoAAzP3p (1).JPGSoldiers assigned to the Connecticut, Maryland and North Carolina National Guard work to distribute food and water to local first responders in Avery County.

Rumor: The Red Cross is confiscating or discarding donated items.

Facts: The Red Cross is not "confiscating, removing or discarding donated items," Red Cross officials said in a statement Friday. The Red Cross focuses on providing shelter, food and relief after disasters.

"While we don't accept physical donations, as managing them takes time and resources away from our mission, we

work with community partners who are better equipped with these resources to handle and distribute these items," Red Cross officials said.

Call 211 to find out where donated goods are available.

RAL_100524-HELENE-TEL-005.JPGDebris removed from flood damaged businesses line a street in downtown Waynesville on Sunday, Oct. 6, 2024 after Tropical Storm Helene flooded Richland Creek. North Carolina officials have confirmed 76 deaths from Tropical Storm Helene.

Rumor: The Red Cross is taking over shelters.

Facts: The Red Cross does not take over shelters. Rather, it provides management support at the request of local partners.

Rumor: The Red Cross is taking over volunteer groups.

Facts: While the Red Cross is working alongside other volunteer groups, the Red Cross is not taking over their efforts or services.

RAL_092722-HURRICANE-HELENE-TEL-24.JPGSoco Creek in Cherokee rages on Friday, Sept. 27, 2024 as the remnants of Hurricane Helene caused flooding, downed trees, and power outages in western North Carolina.

Rumor: FEMA does not have enough money to provide disaster assistance for Helene.

Facts: FEMA has enough money right now for immediate response and recovery needs.

FEMA Administrator Deanne Criswell said on Friday that "the disaster relief fund certainly does not have enough money to continue recoveries for everything that I have through the entire fiscal year."

"But I have enough money to support the immediate needs

In alone, FEMA has provided more than \$26 million in housing and other types of assistance to over 25,000 households, it said in an Oct. 5 release.

More than 700 FEMA staff and over 1,200 urban search and rescue personnel are on the ground. Over 1,000 National Guard troopshave also been deployed to the state.

FEMA is still accepting assistance applications throughout areas affected by Helene, it said.

Over 1,400 people who cannot return home are currently staying in safe and clean lodging through FEMA's program.

For current application timelines, visit or FEMA's state-specific Helene disaster site for .

This is false, FEMA said. No money is being diverted from disaster response needs.

After the Homeland Security secretary last week warned that FEMA can meet immediate needs but is short of funding to make it through hurricane season, some are wrongly blaming agency spending on for draining disaster relief funds.

Contrary to by former President Donald Trump and Elon Musk, FEMA did not divert disaster relief funds to house people who are living in the country without legal authorization.

Some Trump supporters this are alluding to a funded by U.S. Customs and Border Protection money at Congress'

direction. FEMA distributed last fiscal year under the program to relieve overcrowding in temporary shelters.

Others, like right-wing X user, are referring to a FEMA that helps provide food and shelter to those in need. Congress previously under the program to a now-defunct arm that provided humanitarian relief for migrants, which was the CBP-funded program.

Sen. Ted Budd and Rep. Dan Bishop, both Republicans, voted against a continuing resolution to keep the government funded at its current levels through Dec. 20. The CR refilled FEMA's \$20 billion budget.

to explain his vote, saying he won't vote to spend billions on things the country doesn't need when he has concerns about the election and "our debt is sky-rocketing."

Budd's spokesman told McClatchy he "wanted to see reform to the broken budget process" and that "when the government overspends on things it shouldn't, it crowds out the real responsibilities it has, like disaster relief."

FEMA cannot seize your property or land. Applying for disaster assistance does not grant FEMA or the federal government authority or ownership of your property or land, FEMA said.

Reporters and photographers from The News & Observer and The Charlotte Observer have been in Western North Carolina since the day the storm hit. This map will show you where they've been, with links to some of their stories. All of our Helene-related coverage is free.

If you were affected by Helene, apply for disaster assistance. The fastest way is through . You can also apply through the or by calling the FEMA Helpline at 800-621-3362. If you use a video relay service, captioned telephone service, or other communication services, provide FEMA the specific number assigned for that service.

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Areas hardest hit by Helene flooding in NC are the least likely to have flood insurance

October 5, 2024 | News & Observer, The: Web Edition Articles (Raleigh, NC) Author: Chantal Allam, News & Observer | Section: north carolina | 371 Words OpenURL Link

In addition to losing their homes and belongings, thousands of residents in Helene-ravaged Western North Carolina are facing another hard reality: They may not be covered by their insurance policies.

Less than 1% of households in the state's hardest-hit inland counties are protected by the National Flood Insurance Program (NFIP), according to an N&O analysis of Census Bureau and NFIP data.

In Buncombe County, home of Asheville, only 0.7% of the county's 137,000 housing units have flood insurance, data shows.

By contrast, some 44.3% of Dare County households on the Outer Banks have coverage.

The result: Many of the million-plus people living in the declared disaster area likely don't have protection for the damage they've suffered. Standard homeowners' policies do not cover flooding, landslides or anything caused by moving water.

NC flood insurance policy by county map embed

The lack of flood insurance is "a huge problem," State Insurance Commissioner Mike Causey told the N&O. "We had flood education classes around the state in 2019. That education effort increased the number of flood policies by 25% but we're still just scratching the surface."

The lack of coverage will make recovery complicated. And the threat isn't going away.

Citing climate change, "more devastating weather events are coming," state Sen. Natasha Marcus, the Democratic nominee for state insurance commissioner, said this week. "Many will face hurdles due to gaps in their insurance coverage."

The NFIP, managed by the Federal Emergency Management Agency, accounts for more than 95% of the nation's flood insurance policies.

Some lenders require it for homes in high-risk zones. Outside those areas, it's optional but often wise. Still, many remain unprotected. In North Carolina, less than 3% of households are protected with flood insurance, NFIP data shows.

Part of the problem, say experts, is that many homeowners underestimate the risk.

Georgina Sanchez, a research associate at NC State's Center for Geospatial Analytics, faults FEMA's existing flood maps that show where people are required to buy flood insurance.

She said these maps often fail to account for intense rain events and sea level rise. They're also not quickly updated.

"FEMA's designation of high-risk flood zones can mislead communities and encourage development that borders the floodplain, resulting in greater damages when flood events exceed design levels," Sanchez said in an NC State news publication.

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Chantal Allam, News & Observer, 'Areas hardest hit by Helene flooding in NC are the least likely to have flood insurance', *News & Observer, The: Web Edition Articles* (online), 5 Oct 2024 https://infoweb.newsbank.com/apps/news/document-view? p=AMNEWS&docref=news/19C6027CE6F65D80>



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

October 5, 2024 | News & Observer, The: Web Edition Articles (Raleigh, NC) Author: Avi Bajpai, News & Observer | Section: north carolina | 895 Words OpenURL Link

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

1,500 active-duty troops deploying to Western North Carolina

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

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

Helicopter loaded at Fort LibertyParatroopers assigned to the 82nd Combat Aviation Brigade load a CH-47 Chinook before departing Simmons Army Airfield at Fort Liberty, North Carolina, Oct. 2, 2024.

On Sunday, the North Carolina National Guard told The News & Observer that remaining active duty troops from Fort Liberty who hadn't yet been deployed were expected to reach Western North Carolina by the end of the day.

Spokesman Capt. Tim Marshburn said that in addition to the active duty troops, the N.C. National Guard had 1,782 of its soldiers and airmen on the ground.

Marshburn said the soldiers and airmen have been helping with search and rescue operations, distribution of essential supplies, clearing debris, and "earthmoving" and construction support throughout the region.

There are thousands of National Guard members from other states helping with the response as well.

In a statement Sunday, Biden also said he had approved a request from Gov. Roy Cooper for additional troops, and had ordered another 500 active-duty soldiers "with advanced technological assets" to move to Western North Carolina.

Those troops, from the 101st Airborne Division at Fort Campbell in Kentucky, left on Saturday.

"With a total of 1,500 troops now supplementing a robust on-the-ground effort - including more than 6,100 National Guardsmen and more than 7,000 Federal personnel - my Administration is sparing no resource to support families as they begin their road to rebuilding," Biden said.

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

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

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

Marshburn said the helicopters were "engaged in commodity deliveries and rescue and recovery efforts," and had been sent to Asheville, from where they would be directed to other parts of the region as needed.

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

See drone footage of flood-damaged western NC townsNews & Observer visual journalist Travis Long shows the damage from Helene in the towns of Clyde and Canton in Haywood County, out in the western part of North Carolina.

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

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

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Huge cinnamon roll comforts UNC Hospitals patients, families at 'home away from home'

October 5, 2024 | News & Observer, The: Web Edition Articles (Raleigh, NC) Author: Tammy Grubb, News & Observer | Section: orange county | 1203 Words OpenURL Link

At 3 feet across and roughly 35 pounds, it's not the world's biggest cinnamon roll ever made, but it might be the biggest in North Carolina, baker Donna Fehrenbach said.

If she's proven wrong, she said at the SECU Family House in Chapel Hill, "I'd cross off 'biggest,' and I'd put 'second biggest.'

And if another person did that, I'd cross that off and put 'third biggest,' and then I'd put 'a really big bun,' which I think would even be funnier."

That was her goal: to bring a little fun and laughter into the lives of the UNC patients and their families staying at Family House on Old Mason Farm Road. National Cinnamon Roll Day - Oct. 4 - seemed like the best time to try something new.

About half of the pastry was gone when Cheryl Laughter and her husband, Don McNair, stopped by to see it. McNair, who just had a muscle transplant at UNC Hospitals following prostate cancer and a hernia, briefly chatted with the volunteers but declined a treat.

"I'm afraid I'll get diabetes just from looking at it," he joked.

"I would love to eat it, but you'd be picking me off the floor," his wife said.

Family House cinnamon roll-portraitCheryl Laughter poses with her husband Don McNair at SECU Family House on Old Mason Farm Road in Chapel Hill on Friday, Oct. 4, 2024. The Asheville residents said they are grateful for their home away from home, especially in the aftermath of Helene.

The couple is staying at Family House a little longer after leaving their Asheville home Sept. 26 to avoid driving in Helene's tropical storm winds. Laughter said she's concerned about taking her husband home before there's clean water and food available.

Water was already pooling Thursday in the basement utility room of their home, which sits on a hill and gets enough runoff when it rains that they installed a drainage system some years ago.

The storm knocked out the power, but a neighbor who checked on their house found the sump pump still working on its 24-hour battery backup, Laughter said. They're not sure what they'll find when they get back, she said.

"It's heartbreaking to think about people that you don't know" who are dead or are suffering after Helene, Laughter said. "You just can't believe it. You couldn't even make it up."

Family House cinnamon roll-frostingThe final layer of cream cheese frosting is slathered on a giant cinnamon roll baked at St. Thomas More Catholic Church and served at SECU Family House in Chapel Hill on Friday, Oct. 4, 2024.

Made with love, and butter and sugar

Fehrenbach, 79, has been a volunteer at Family House for 10 years, showing up every Tuesday with her sidekick Colette File and other volunteers to bake homemade bread and sweet treats.

Friday's creation started with a week of figuring, measuring and sampling to get the recipe just right, Fehrenbach said.

On Tuesday, she perfected the cream-cheese frosting, and on Thursday, they made about 30 pounds of dough in their home mixers, chilling it in the refrigerator overnight to develop the flavor.

Around 7 a.m. Friday, Fehrenbach and four other women gathered in the kitchen at nearby St. Thomas More Catholic Church to roll out the dough, top it with butter, sugar and cinnamon, and form the four quarters of the giant roll on large sheet pans.

Family House cinnamon roll-stripsVolunteers Cheryl Carnahan, at left, and Donna Fehrenbach make quick work of the dough Friday, Oct. 4, 2024, at St. Thomas More Catholic Church in Chapel Hill. Fehrenbach said the cinnamon roll was to bring some fun and laughter to SECU Family House guests.

Pulling each pan from the church's industrial-size ovens, Fehrenbach expertly checked for doneness with a thermometer. The finished pastry, still warm, was hurried across the street to Family House and assembled on a wooden platter crafted by the maintenance staff.

As the last slathering of gooey, cream-cheese icing melted into the crevices, people gathered, smiling as they got a piece. Some came back for seconds, or to get slices for a friend.

While not the world's largest - that honor goes to a bakery in Medford, Oregon, for a roll weighing 1,149 pounds - the Family House cinnamon roll had more love between the layers.

Family House cinnamon roll-FileFamily House volunteer Colette File layers strips of dough coated in butter, sugar and cinnamon on a sheet pan to form one of four quarters comprising a 3 foot wide cinnamon roll on Friday, Oct. 4, 2024.

A 'safe place' for families in medical crisis

Since 2008, the nonprofit SECU Family House has sheltered over 35,000 families and UNC Hospitals patients. The average stay is just over five days, and families have full run of the house, which has 75 guest rooms and is supported primarily by donations.

About 1,300 volunteers provide labor, working the front desk, doing laundry and other chores, and cooking dinner for 60 to 70 people each night. The activities, entertainment, and arts and crafts are a distraction from their worries.

They are grateful for the encouragement, the smiles, the hugs, and the laughter, Laughter said. Family House has been their "home away from home" more than once.

"Particularly when you feel like you're walking that terrible path of health care by yourself, and we know we're not alone. We see people here every day that my heart goes out to them," she said.

Family House cinnamon roll-laughter mcnairAsheville residents Don McNair and Cheryl Laughter chat with SECU Family House volunteer Donna Fehrenbach, center, as Georgie Clemens, right, director of Volunteer Services, slices up the remainder of a giant cinnamon roll Friday morning, Oct. 4, 2024.

Like many other guests, Laughter said she enjoys joining the volunteers in the kitchen. Fehrenbach, whose cookbook, "Rolling in the Dough," helps buy chocolate chips, pecans and other special ingredients, said the pecan sticky buns are very popular, but she prefers a fresh loaf of sourdough bread.

"There's something about a kitchen, baking, smells," she said. "They come down here. They roll out dough, and then they talk about what they're going through."

Family House was her "safe place" when her husband died in 2022, Fehrenbach said. She used to teach baking at Chapel Hill's specialty food store, A Southern Season, and still holds classes in people's homes.

"It's my test kitchen," she said. "We probably do something new just about every week - just a different filling, the holidays are coming, we make bread that looks like a pumpkin, a Christmas tree. I love to bake, and I live alone. Who am I going to bake for?"

"It gives me a sense of purpose and community, and I love that."

Family House cinnamon roll-plateThe 3-foot diameter and roughly 35 pound cinnamon roll was baked in four parts and assembled in the SECU Family House kitchen on Friday, Oct. 4, 2024, in honor of National Cinnamon Roll Day.

How to get involved

- « Donate: One-time or monthly donations support SECU Family House in Chapel Hill, Winston-Salem and Wilmington. Donations can be made online at secufamilyhouse.org/donate.
- « Fill the wish list: Family House relies on pantry donations from corporate and community partners, and individuals. Find a wish list at Amazon.com and secufamilyhouse.org/support/wish-list
- « Volunteer: Visit secufamilyhouse.org/get-involved for a list of individual and group opportunities.
- « Meals from the Heart: Help make weeknight dinners for Family House guests. Learn more: secufamilyhouse.org/get-involved/prepare-a-meal.

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Baxter plant in Marion closed due to flooding

October 5, 2024 | News Herald, The (Morganton, NC) Author: RICHARD CRAVER WinstonSalem Journal | Section: News | 538 Words OpenURL Link

The North Cove manufacturing plant of Baxter International Inc. has experienced significant flooding damage from the remnants of Hurricane Helene, the company said Tuesday.

The Marion campus is closed for production. It is Baxter's largest manufacturing facility with more than 2,500 employees.

Production primarily involves making intravenous and peritoneal dialysis solutions. Baxter is the largest U.S. manufacturer of these solutions.

"Our hearts and thoughts are with all those affected by Hurricane Helene," said José Almeida, Baxter's chair, president and chief executive.

"The safety of our employees, their families and the communities in which we operate remains our utmost concern, and we are committed to helping ensure reliable supply of products to patients.

The company said "it is working around the clock in close coordination with local, state and federal officials to assess the extent of the damage and implement a plan to bring the plant back online as quickly as possible to help mitigate supply disruption to patients."

"Remediation efforts are already under way, and we will spare no resource — human or financial — to resume production and help ensure patients and providers have the products they need," Almeida said.

The damage occurred in spite of Baxter's preparation efforts, which included evacuation plans for workers, moving products to higher ground or secure storage where feasible.

However, the company said the heavy rain and storm surge triggered a levee breach, which led to water permeating the site. The bridges accessing the site have been damaged.

The Baxter International Foundation has committed \$1.5 million in donations to help address recovery needs, including allocating additional funds to its Employee Disaster Relief Fund, and is matching employee donations \$2 for \$1 toward relief efforts.

Baster said the temporary closing of the Baxter plant is expected to "negatively impact the company's financial results."

"Once the company can more fully assess the damage, it will be in a better position to estimate any expected impact and plans to provide an update in its third-quarter earnings announcement."

On Tuesday, the N.C. Division of Employment Security listed McDowell County among 25 counties in northwest and western N.C. whose citizens have been declared eligible for federal disaster unemployment assistance benefits.

The eligibility is a byproduct of the Biden administration's declaration of a state of emergency in North Carolina.

The assistance covers individuals who are unemployed as a direct result of Hurricane Helene. Business owners and self-employed individuals affected by the storm also may qualify for benefits.

Benefits would be made retroactive to Sept. 29 and may last for up to 26 weeks.

The other counties, along with the Cherokee Indians of N.C., are: Alexander, Alleghany, Ashe Avery, Buncombe, Burke, Caldwell, Catawba, Clay, Cleveland, Gaston, Haywood, Henderson, Jackson, Lincoln, Macon, Madison, McDowell, Mitchell, Polk, Rutherford, Transylvania, Watauga, Wilkes and Yancey.

The division said additional counties may be added at a later date.

Eligible individuals have until Dec. 2 to file an application for disaster unemployment assistance at des.nc.gov or the DUA Hotline at 919-629-3857.

Individuals must first apply for state unemployment benefits. For those determined to be ineligible for or have exhausted regular state benefits, they may be eligible to make a federal disaster unemployment assistance claim.

Eligibility is determined weekly, and individuals must continue to be out of work as a direct result of the disaster each week to get unemployment benefits.

rcraver@wsjournal.com 336-727-7376 @rcraverWSJ

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1 man killed in crash with tree downed by Helene wind

October 5, 2024 | News Herald, The (Morganton, NC) Author: CHRISSY MURPHYcmurphy@morganton.com| Section: News| 166 Words OpenURL Link

A tree downed by winds from Hurricane Helene killed a driver and critically injured his passenger in a wreck on Sept. 27, near Drexel.

Nick Mitchell, 52, of Morganton, was driving on Summers Road near Drexel Road about 8:30 p.m. when he hit a low-hanging tree that had dropped across the road earlier in the day, said 1st Sgt. D.J. Wakefield with the North Carolina State Highway Patrol.

Mitchell was killed in the crash, Wakefield said. A passenger, 50-year-old Michael Sparks, was critically injured and taken to a Winston-Salem hospital for treatment.

Crews spent about 30 to 40 minutes trying to remove Mitchell and Sparks from the vehicle, Wakefield said. It wasn't raining at the time of the crash, but it was windy and dark because of the power outages in the area.

Wakefield said while troopers spent most of the day Friday responding to wrecks during the hurricane, this was the most serious crash.

Chrissy Murphy is a staff writer and can be reached at cmurphy@morganton.com or at 828-432-8941.

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Morganton reports 12,900-gallon sewer spill due to Helene

October 5, 2024 | News Herald, The (Morganton, NC) Author: Sharon McBrayer | Section: Government Politics | 67 Words OpenURL Link

The city of Morganton reported another sewer spill as a result of damage from the remnants of Hurricane Helene.

The city said the 12,900-gallon spill happened on Sloan Avenue. The spill started at 5 p.m. Tuesday and ended at noon Thursday, according to a release from the city.

The spill went into Fiddler's Run Creek, the city said.

For more information, call the Morganton Water Resources Department at 828-438-5276.

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Flooding leaves Marion restaurant caked in mud

October 5, 2024 | News Herald, The (Morganton, NC) Author: CHRISSY MURPHY cmurphy@morganton.com| Section: News| 791 Words OpenURL Link

J. Hartman's restaurant on U.S. Highway 70 in Marion closed up shop on Sept. 26, after emergency management officials came by the restaurant urging people to evacuate.

With Hurricane Helene headed toward western North Carolina, heavy wind, rain and flooding were in store. Owners Jennifer and Jon Hartman were at home on the lake trying to tie off their dock to keep it from floating away if floodwaters rose too high.

"We had no idea," Jennifer said. "Just like anybody else, we didn't know the water was going to come up that high, and I felt like we were pretty safe."

The couple didn't see the restaurant again until photos started popping up on social media of flood damage.

"Someone sent me a picture of the aerial view of the restaurant. ... I was just like, 'Oh my gosh,'" Jennifer said. "I came in here the next morning. At that point, one of my daughters and my in-laws were here, and they were standing on the porch and I could just see the mud. ... My mother-in-law said, she said, 'Prepare yourself ... because it's bad.' I walked in and it was just a disaster ... I was absolutely devastated."

She said mud was covering the floor, booth seats and chairs were strewn around the restaurant.

"This restaurant's ran by myself, my husband, my two daughters, and we've got 60 staff members here," Jennifer said. "It's our livelihood, but it's the 60 staff members' livelihoods. That's been one of my biggest concerns, is how quickly can we reopen to get them back to work."

She said they've hit roadblocks ever since the storm hit.

"We just keep getting hit with more and more bad news," Jennifer said. "Insurance isn't going to cover any of the property damage. The building owner, their insurance isn't going to cover any of the parking lot cleanup. They're not going to cover any of the property damage inside.

We're just at a loss." The restaurant's next steps are unclear. She said they had to throw away about \$30,000 worth of food, filling up two dumpsters, and she doesn't know where to begin with the cleaning process for everything in the building after the water came in and contaminated everything.

"People are worried about their livelihoods," Jennifer said. "We've got an amazing staff, and I don't want them to feel lost or worried. Everybody's got so much loss and worry as it is. Them coming back to work is one of our biggest priorities, and I don't know how to do it."

Her mom, Toni Hodge, came up from Albermarle to help with storm cleanup. Hodge said she was worried about small businesses like J. Hartman's after the storm. She said she felt like big corporations would be able to recover, but small businesses may struggle with little help from insurance and limited resources. "You have to weigh so many options," Hodge said. "I think it can be done. I just think it's gonna be a long time."

While things seem bleak, employees and other community volunteers have been coming in to help clean up since Hurricane Helene hit Friday. By Tuesday afternoon, the floors were clear of any mud and most of the store's furnishings had been moved outside to be rinsed off.

"It's incredibly humbling," Jennifer said. "I don't know how else to describe it."

Pepper Strode, a manager at J. Hartman's, and Angeles Amable, a cook, were two of the employees who were helping with the cleanup at the restaurant Tuesday.

"It's how I pay my bills, and I love this family," Strode said. "They're some of the best people I've ever worked for, and I want to see this restaurant get back up and running."

Both cried when they saw the restaurant.

"My second home is here," Amable said.

Jennifer's sister, Laura Stotts, posted ways to donate on her Instagram account @diaryof_abandonment. By Tuesday afternoon, Stotts said about \$1,000 had been donated to the restaurant and another \$1,000 had been pledged. Some of the donations came from people who have never met the Hartmans or visited the restaurant.

"There's a whole lot of good people out there," Jennifer said.

She said in the first few days after the storm she felt numb, but seeing all the volunteers coming to help clean up changed that.

"I've been very emotional today. ... The first couple days I was completely numb, no emotion whatsoever, just like a zombie," Jennifer said. "And then the last few days, I can't stop crying."

Brandy Pittman originally headed to Grace Community Church to volunteer, but when the church had enough volunteers for the day, she pivoted to J. Hartman's. She made a call to Nebo Crossing Academy Administrator Dave Likins to get more volunteers on the way for cleanup.

"They're our people," Pittman said. "You don't leave your people hanging."

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CHRISSY MURPHY cmurphy@morganton.com, 'Flooding leaves Marion restaurant caked in mud', *News Herald, The* (online), 5 Oct 2024 https://infoweb.newsbank.com/apps/news/document-view?p=AMNEWS&docref=news/19C04F9B086F39B8



Silver Creek restaurant, Ingles clean up from flooding as Morganton businesses begin to recover

October 5, 2024 | News Herald, The (Morganton, NC) Author: Sharon McBrayer| Section: Business | 730 Words OpenURL Link

A thick layer of dried mud blankets parts of Morganton, while other parts of the city appear untouched by the path of destruction left behind by Hurricane Helene on Sept. 27.

A week later, businesses in Morganton were cleaning up and some have started the process of rebuilding.

Silver Creek Restaurant on West Union Street suffered flooding that reached halfway up the building. On Friday, the place had been gutted down to the brick inside and work to rebuild had started.

John Hipple, owner of Mobile Services in Morganton, ate at Silver Creek a lot with his grandson before he took him to school.

Hipple said the company started gutting the restaurant the Monday after the storm.

Ryan Cook, who is helping with the rebuild of Silver Creek, said owner Tom McCombs expects it will be 60 to 90 days before the restaurant will be ready to open.

Cook said it will be a new restaurant except for the walls.

Silver Creek is just one of about two dozen businesses that Mobile Services is helping clean up from the flood. Hipple said another one they will be working on is Ekornes, which had around 2 feet of water inside. Ekornes is a furniture producer off N.C. Highway 181 and N.C. Highway 126.

"There's just so many places, so many places that you wouldn't think would flood," Hipple said.

Hipple said while all of the businesses he's working with won't need to be gutted, many need 3 to 4 feet up the walls to be pulled out and redone.

"I've never seen a storm like this before," Hipple said. "Nothing in my whole life."

The restaurant was one of many businesses in the city on Friday that had a yellow sticker either on the door or window.

The city of Morganton has inspected most of the businesses that were impacted by flooding from the storm and tagged them with either a yellow or red tag, city officials said.

Businesses that have a yellow tag on the door are not open to the public. The yellow tag says the structure is unsafe and unfit for human habitation.

Businesses that have a red tag on the door are not safe for anyone to enter at all, according to the city.

There have been no businesses that have been given a red tag, city officials said.

Across the street from Silver Creek sits Mimosa Hills Shopping Center. It is home to Kimbrell's Furniture, Ollie's, Planet Fitness and Dollar General, among others. All of the businesses in the shopping center had yellow tags on the doors and all appeared to be cleaning up from the flooding on Friday. Nearby KFC also appeared to be cleaning up.

Meanwhile, for McDonald's at the top of the shopping center parking lot it appeared to be business as usual on Friday.

A little farther down the road, Ingles Markets grocery store had a yellow tag on its door. Work crews were inside on Friday and some workers were throwing items away in a dumpster sitting between the parking lot and one of the entrances.

Even businesses that didn't suffer flooding and destruction lost thousands of dollars in product.

Dara Phrakousonh, owner of Pho Lao restaurant in the Magnolia Plaza shopping center on Burkemont Avenue, lost power and water to the business. She got power back to the restaurant on Sunday and spent Monday throwing out food due to the power loss.

She opened back up Tuesday but saw few customers, Phrakousonh said. She spent several days searching for and buying food she needs for her business.

Phrakousonh said she hasn't been able to get some items she regularly uses in her dishes.

"The customers, they're very nice," Phrakousonh said. "They understand."

While keeping her restaurant going, Phrakousonh still didn't have power at her home on Friday. She's been boiling water on a small propane stove to bathe and carries water to flush the toilet at home. She said it's made her reflect on how her grandmother lived. And it has taught her patience, she said.

"So I bet it's a lot of people it's going to have to learn, this one is going to be a very expensive lesson for everybody to learn how to survive without all this internet and modern conveniences," Phrakousonh said. "Because you kind of get used to the modern (conveniences) and you forget what you're supposed to do, which is going to be a lesson for some from now on. That something like this happen, we'll be OK."

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'IT'S DEVASTATING'

October 5, 2024 | News Herald, The (Morganton, NC) Author: SHARON MCBRAYER smcbrayer@morganton.com| Section: Its Devastating| 335 Words OpenURL Link

Justin Davis summed the damage caused by Tropical Storm Helene to his Morganton restaurant in one word Monday afternoon: "Heartbreaking."

Davis is one of the owners of Town Tavern in the River Village shopping center on Sanford Drive in Morganton. He said flooding from the adjacent Catawba River rose about 5 feet into the restaurant.

"It's devastating. It's pretty sad to see," Davis said.

He said the damage to the restaurant is substantial.

"I guess they call it a hundred-year flood," Davis said. "I hope I never see nothing like it again in my lifetime."

He said he hopes to rebuild, but the owners, like everyone else, are taking it day by day. He said the restaurant will have to be gutted and renovated from scratch.

"Build back bigger, better," Davis said of starting over.

The restaurant opened in its River Village location in March 2021, Davis said.

He said it was a beautiful restaurant that people seemed to enjoy. Other locations of Town Tavern are in Blowing Rock and Banner Elk. Even though those two towns suffered devastating destruction, the Town Taverns in those locations faired much better than the Morganton location, Davis said.

"We were real fortunate that all of our locations are good, but all around us is just so much destruction everywhere," Davis said. "Roads washed out, trees, roads, homes destroyed and flooding. It's just so much to process. All the office buildings in that strip (in Morganton) all washed out, all destroyed."

He said he is thankful none of the employees were hurt and said things can be replaced.

"It is sad for the staff," Davis said. "We have so many key employees. Great and wonderful employees."

He hopes there are some programs they can get in place for the restaurant's staff to help them out until the restaurant can rebuild.

"It's just going to take some time," Davis said. "But we look forward to getting back open and seeing all of our family and friends and people in the community come back in and pick up right where we left off.

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2,400 gallons of sewage spilled in Wilson's Creek

October 5, 2024 \mid News Herald, The (Morganton, NC) Author: FROM STAFF REPORTS news@morganton.com \mid Section: News \mid 81 Words OpenURL Link

The city of Morganton reported Tuesday that it had a sewer spill at one of its pump stations.

The city said the sewer spill happened on Monday at Lost Corner Pump Station. It started at 3:30 p.m. and ended at 5:30 p.m., according to a release from Morganton. The 2,400 gallons of spilled sewage discharged into Wilson's Creek, it said.

The city said the sewer spill is related to damage from Hurricane Helene.

For more information, call the Water Resources Department at 828438-5276.

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No school in Burke Monday and Tuesday

October 5, 2024 | News Herald, The (Morganton, NC) Author: FROM STAFF REPORTS | Section: News | 714 Words OpenURL Link

Burke County Public Schools will be closed for students on Monday and Tuesday, according to an email from Public Relations Officer Cheryl Shuffler. Monday and Tuesday will be optional workdays for staff.

The schools have been closed all week after the remnants of Hurricane Helene hit the area.

"While most of our schools are back and up and running with power, water and internet, in talking with law enforcement, emergency personnel and other county leaders, we are concerned about the "While most of our schools are back and up and running with power, water and internet, in talking with law enforcement, emergency personnel and other county leaders, we are concerned about the them," Shuffler said. "It is not in the best interest of our county to add school traffic to these roads and already strained emergency response services."

Monday's Board of Education meeting will still take place at 6 p.m., Shuffler said.

"YMCA beforeand after-school (care) will be open at Ray Childers, Hildebran, Salem, Valdese, Mountain View and Oak Hill," Shuffler said. "You must be enrolled at Mountain View and Oak Hill to attend those sites. You do not have to be enrolled to attend the other locations. ... These will be available on firstcome-first-serve basis."

For more information regarding the YMCA, visit ymcacv.org, Shuffler said.

Burke County boil advisory

A boil water advisory remains in effect for water customers who get water from Burke County Government.

The boil water advisory is in place until further notice, according to the county. The advisory applies only to customers who get their water bills from Burke County. It does not include water customers of Morganton, Valdese, Brentwood or Icard, the county said Thursday. Morganton, Valdese, Brentwood and Icard water no longer have boil advisories for customers.

Burke County water customers should boil all water used for drinking, cooking and preparing food for at least one minute to make sure it is safe to consume.

Power outages in Burke County

As of Thursday at 1 p.m., 33% of people in Burke County were without power, according to poweroutage.us.

The city of Morganton said it would be working on several streets on Thursday:

- " Forest Hill Street
- " Asheville Street
- " " Riverside Drive
- " " Raintree Lane off of James-town Road
- " " Carbon City Road area

There are service trucks starting to hook power back to individual houses, a release from the city said. There were 2,200 still without power Thursday, down from the original outage number of 8,800, the release said.

The city has suspended utility late fees and disconnection utility fees before Oct. 1, the city said.

The city is also creating payment plans for customers.

Storm trash and debris

Garbage pickup has resumed a normal schedule for Morganton. Burke County has hired a debris hauling service for the entire county to collect storm debris and trash. The debris can be placed on the side of the road in three piles: vegetation, white goods and building materials. The hauler will make two to three trips in each area, according to Burke County.

Debris should not be taken to the landfill.

Where to get food, water, supplies

Burke County established new points of distribution for emergency supplies throughout the county on Tuesday.

The supplies include water, nonperishable food, toiletries, diapers, baby wipes, batteries and other essential items. The items are available at no cost, the county said.

The county said there are no time constraints for accessing the items; if you see someone at the distribution point, you are welcome to stop and collect the items you need.

The new locations are: "

- George Hildebran Fire/Rescue, 7470 George Hildebran School Road, Connelly Springs.
- "• Longtown Fire Department, 7765 South Mountain Institute Road, Nebo. "
- Enola Fire/Rescue, 2510 Enola Road, Morganton
- " Jonas Ridge Fire Department, 8224 Buckeye Hollow Road, Newland.

Need a shower?

Phifer Family YMCA is open to the public for showers or to charge electronics. The center is opened from 5:30 a.m. to 8 p.m. Monday through Friday and from 8 a.m. to 2 p.m. on Saturday. No exercise or swimming activities are currently taking place at the center, according to the YMCA.

It is located at 2165 S. Sterling St., Morganton.

The Valdese Recreation Department has opened to allow the public to shower for free. People using the showers are asked to bring their own towel and toiletries, the town said.

The showers are available from 5:30 a.m. to 8:30 p.m.

Call 828-879-2132 for details.

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'WAIT AND SEE'

October 5, 2024 | News Herald, The (Morganton, NC) Author: JUSTIN EPLEY Sports editor | Section: Wait And See | 1337 Words OpenURL Link

LOCAL SPORTS

All things considered, Burke County's high school athletic departments have emerged on the other side of Hurricane Helene better than might otherwise be expected.

Yes, Freedom High School's football stadium in Morganton was flooded and, yes, there is additional damage to some facilities at local schools caused by heavy rains and high winds, but Freedom, Draughn, East Burke, Patton and NCSSM-Morganton are more or less in a holding pattern while other harder-hit conference schools in surrounding counties sort through the devastation.

"It's a wait and see right now," Freedom athletic director Rob Scott said. "There are way more important things right now than playing a ballgame going on around us. Yeah, we all want to get back to some sort of normal, but we've got to get our community to normal first before we worry about ballgames." For long time Patriots like Scott, previous flooding from 2004's Hurricane Frances provided a blueprint for this time around.

"We were smart enough to evacuate," Scott said. "Equipment-wise, we could play a game tomorrow if we needed to. Not at home, though. It'll be a minute before we're back in the stadium. It's a muddy, flooded mess. Those buildings won't be useable for a while. But the plan is to build back better.

"It's unfortunate, but we evacuated the things we had to evacuate right then. We'll come out of it alright on the other side. What happened (in 2004) was huge for now because we knew to evacuate. That's the biggest thing. You can't move everything out of a building, but we knew what had to go and the things you have to have to play a game, we were able to get. I'm tickled the school system is working with us. They're going to put us back in good shape and take care of the facilities for us. We'll live to play games on the other side of this in the same stadium we've used for years."

Also of concern is the red rubber track around Freedom's football field, a new addition to the stadium in recent years.

"We had the folks come in and evaluate it," Scott said. "We've just got to get it washed off, is basically what they've told us. We've got to get it washed off and then, they can further evaluate it."

Whenever football is able to start back for this season, it is likely that the Patriots will have to play at Patton High School or another venue while repairs are being made.

"We're still in the talking stages for anything like that," Scott said. "We don't know where we're going to play 100% for sure, yet."

Freedom High School is holding out hope that Senior Night's game versus Alexander Central, originally scheduled for Nov. 1, can be played on campus. "That's going to depend more on the electricity and things like that. I think the surface of the field will survive," Scott said.

What the schedule looks like going forward is something that is still under discussion with the Northwestern 3A/4A Conference.

"We're meeting again (Friday) as a conference to iron through more of that," Scott said. "We're still hoping for

guidance from the NCHSAA, too, whether they're going to extend the fall season like they have in the past. That would be nice."

In the meantime, however, teams are able to hold voluntary practices thanks to a recent decision by Burke County Public Schools.

"We're under workday rules right now, so we're having optional practices," Scott said. "Nothing mandatory, nothing critical for the kids one way or another, but the school system opened it up to optional practices based on the workday schedule. It's been on a case-by-case basis based on kids being able to get there and all those kinds of things."

In Valdese, Draughn High School, in particular the Wildcats' football team, has been hard at work to try to help out suffering neighbors in the mountains in the Western Highlands 1A/2A Conference, particularly Avery County. Draughn has taken supplies to Newland for donation and distribution and members of the coaching staff have worked to clear downed trees.

The path back to play for the Western Highlands Conference may be quite long.

"So far, everybody we've come in contact with has said it's going to be weeks, if not months, before they can get going again in our conference. We're the only ones back in our school right now, as far as I know. We could almost go back to school today," Draughn athletic director Eric Shehan said Thursday.

"We'd have to have limited bus runs, but a lot of our teams are coming in and practicing," Shehan said. "Most of our teams are taking advantage of it, volleyball, soccer and football. Football had a check-in day where they just brought everybody in and checked on their well-being and made sure they had everything they needed because most of the football staff is out cutting trees off of houses. (Head coach) Chris Powell has been nonstop helping people with the rest of the coaching staff."

"Maintenance came up here and a couple staff members and we've got all out advertising banners back up," Shehan said. "The homecoming banners are back up. We've got some plastic we used to cover the field with. If we get that off the ground, you wouldn't even know a storm's been here at the school."

The schedule may look vastly different when the Wildcats get back into action.

"We've got a bunch of teams calling us, offering to play us in football, volleyball and soccer because they know our conference probably isn't going to play anymore," Shehan said. "So, we've got options. We're just waiting on clearance to say, 'Yeah, we'll take on some games now."

North Carolina School of Science and Math in Morganton, which also fields teams in the WHC, doesn't have much information on the path forward, either.

"With the state (the conference) is in, I don't know what we're going to do," said Jonathan Browning, a member of the school's athletic administration.

The situation at Draughn is similar to that at Patton High School, which suffered minor damage but plays in a Mountain Foothills 7 1A/2A Conference that has many schools in western mountain counties.

"Facilities and equipment, we're doing really well," said Panthers athletic director Lee Crawford. "We had some damage to our fences at the football stadium and softball field, but everything else is OK. I checked it all through the weekend and checked it again (Thursday) when I got here for a workday. So, everything's in good shape so far.

"Currently, we have not been able to have a meeting with our conference," Crawford said. "All of our conference is to the west of us. Rutherford County is torn up, Polk County is torn up, Henderson County is torn up and Transylvania is torn up, so we've not been able to meet as a conference, yet, because our normal meeting place,

you can't get to it. And to be able to get on Zoom would require WiFi from everybody, and that's not something that everybody has yet."

Crawford said the plan of voluntary practices while Burke schools operates on workday schedules is the limit to the current roadmap.

"Beyond that, we're still talking about it and trying to figure out where we go from there," Crawford said. "I know that Draughn and Freedom are a lot like us where their conference members have been hit really hard. Freedom has some conference members that are still able to play that are to the east of us, but us and Draughn have conferences that exist in the mountains and the west, so we don't know yet."

The situation is pretty solid at East Burke, whose facilities are in good shape. The Cavaliers also play in the Catawba Valley 2A Conference, whose more eastern geography limited damage to member schools. Some CVAC games already have been held since the hurricane blew through the region.

"We have an A.D. meeting (Friday) at 11 o'clock (a.m.) and should know (more) then," said East Burke High School athletic director Chip Watts.

Justin Epley can be reached at jepley@morganton.com or sports@morganton.com.

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My heart breaks for families in western North Carolina

October 5, 2024 | News-Topic, The (Lenoir, NC) Author: MIKE CAUSEY | Section: Archives | 352 Words OpenURL Link

As North Carolina Commissioner of Insurance, my heart breaks for the families impacted by this terrible storm. I hope you and your families are currently safe.

Hurricane Helene devastated much of western North Carolina, other parts of the state, and the neighboring states of Virginia, Tennessee, Georgia, South Carolina and Florida. The mountains were hit hardest, with severe flooding and landslides, leaving many communities in ruin.

Special Agents from the Department of Insurance's Criminal Investigation Division are on the ground and have been since the flooding began. A special thank you to the 12 agents that went door to door to homes and businesses evacuating people to save lives.

Sadly, too many people have already lost their lives to this storm and floodwaters.

The Department of Insurance is coordinating with law enforcement agencies, emergency management, fire departments, rescue squads, charities, churches and civic groups to do everything we can at the state and local level to assist the victims. NCDOI will be coordinating on ways to reach those on the ground with insurance claims and other needs in the coming days and weeks.

Check the Department of Insurance website for updates: www.ncdoi.gov/helene

You can also donate to the North Carolina Disaster Relief fund at: https://pay.payitgov.com/ncdonations

Most importantly, if you are safe, please check on your friends, family members and neighbors. If your community buildings, churches and other buildings are unscathed, please consider opening it up to allow first responders, emergency personnel, or the community to use as a base of operations. Let us act immediately to help our neighbors.

The Department of Insurance is receiving reports of damage and insurance claims in areas of need. Please call 911 for immediate emergencies or report to local authorities first, then to Emergency Management. For assistance with insurance matters, contact the Department of Insurance's Consumer Services Division at 855-408-1212.

We are coming together to help rebuild and restore our communities. Every human being, pet and livestock needs to be accounted for and make sure they're safe.

Please pray for our first responders, volunteers and public officials leading this rescue and recovery mission at this critical time.

May God bless each and every one of you.

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Letter: A Sandhills Kindness

October 5, 2024 | Pilot, The (Southern Pines, NC) Author: Staff Writer | Section: Opinion | 260 Words OpenURL Link

My son and his 13-year-old daughter live in Hendersonville, and he teaches in Brevard. Although everyone knew Helene was coming and were prepared, no one expected the destruction and death the storm would leave in its wake.

After four days without power, food gone and schools canceled indefinitely, my son managed to get them off the mountain, and they are here with me. Both of them are still in shock at the enormity of Helene's aftermath.

My son awoke the next morning to a flat tire with a problem he couldn't fix, so he took the tire off and put it in my car. He noticed Thomas Tire and decided to drop the tire off there. When the employee taking his information learned my son was from Hendersonville, they gave the tire problem priority, and, when done, there was no charge.

This deeply touched and impressed my son. He said that unexpected kindness was a blessing, no matter where you are or what's happening. I join him in saying a heartfelt thank-you for the kindness shown to my son in this stressful situation. It was true Sandhills kindness.

Jeanne Dennis

Southern Pines

Publisher's Note: This is a letter to the editor, submitted by a reader, and reflects the opinion of the author. The Pilot welcomes letters from readers on its Opinion page, which serves as a public forum. The Pilot is not in the business of suppressing public opinion. We are a forum for community debate, and publish almost every letter we receive. For information on how to make a submission, visit this page:

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Column: Leadership Is Crucial to See In Storm's Wake

October 5, 2024 | Pilot, The (Southern Pines, NC) Author: JOHN HOOD Columnist| Section: Opinion | 665 Words OpenURL Link

I got it wrong. Deeply wrong. Embarrassingly wrong.

It was a few days after Hurricane Floyd struck the coast on Sept. 16, 1999. I'd been covering North Carolina politics for more than a dozen years by then, penning my syndicated column and appearing regularly on radio and television. Our discussion program "N.C. Spin" had debuted the previous fall on the Triangle's Fox affiliate and was in the process of expanding to some two dozen TV and radio stations across the state.

During a segment of the show devoted to the destruction wrought by Floyd, I said something to the effect that North Carolina's emergency personnel, government agencies, utilities, private contractors and relief organizations knew what to do and how to do it. They didn't need politicians holding press conferences and yapping incessantly about matters beyond their ken.

I thought I was praising the skill and determination of those at the forefront of the response to Hurricane Floyd, which devastated much of eastern North Carolina and killed an estimated 85 people, including 51 North Carolinians. I thought I was championing policy expertise over political exploitation.

What I was really doing was exhibiting my ignorance.

One "N.C. Spin" viewer was particularly incensed: then-Gov. Jim Hunt. One of the targets of my criticism, he let it be known through a mutual acquaintance that he considered my argument poorly reasoned. I don't remember the specifics of what got passed on to me, but it was something to the effect that in times of crisis, political leadership is crucial.

Emergency responders aren't necessarily sure what to do when. Agencies butt heads. Harried public and private actors misinterpret, miscommunicate and inadvertently misinform. Sometimes they move too slowly, making people wait too long for rescue and relief. At other times they react recklessly, misspending scarce resources on lower priorities rather than waiting to make wiser decisions with a firmer grasp of the facts on the ground.

It is the task of leaders, elected and appointed, to make such judgment calls, to focus minds and referee disputes, to comfort the suffering, and to offer hope and reassurance to a panicky public.

Now, as North Carolinians grapple with the tragic aftermath of another monstrous storm, Gov. Roy Cooper and other political and civic leaders must rise to the challenge Hunt helped me grasp a quarter-century ago.

Helene has ravaged western North Carolina. Her path of destruction is broad, deep, jaw-dropping. Homes, businesses, entire towns crushed or swept away. At this writing, hundreds of thousands of people remain without power, some trapped in place by gaping holes or raging rivers. The death count, already heart-rending, will grow as more of the missing are found.

North Carolina will recover. We will rebuild. We've done it before. But there's nothing automatic about the process. And we all have parts to play in it, whatever our roles, wherever we live.

If you have family or friends in the affected areas, keep trying to reach them. Once you do, offer help and comfort. If you'd like to contribute money, supplies or volunteer time to relief and recovery efforts, there are many organizations well-situated to deploy your gifts effectively, including Samaritan's Purse, Baptists on Mission, Catholic Charities USA and Operation Airdrop.

At the state level, lawmakers have prudently accumulated \$4.75 billion in our rainy day fund plus billions more in unreserved credit balance. That rainy day is here. Localities will spend additional dollars from their own reserves, as will utility companies, cooperatives and municipal agencies.

There are many tough decisions to be made, some now, some weeks or months from now, as the full extent of the needs and priorities comes more clearly into view. That's something else I learned from past disasters. Some funds originally earmarked for reconstruction after Hurricane Matthew in 2016 have still not been expended.

Through it all, North Carolinians will look to our leaders for guidance and reassurance. Pray for them, and for us all.

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

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Schools, citizens, organize supply drives to help the victims of Hurricane Helene

October 5, 2024 | RockinghamNow (NC) Author: Jim Sands | Section: Rockingham Now | 875 Words OpenURL Link

As details continue to unfold regarding the true extent of the devastation left in the wake of Hurricane Helene in western North Carolina, the citizens of Rockingham County are lending a helping hand to those in need.

The category four hurricane made landfall on the west coast of Florida on Thursday, Sept. 26 and rolled through Georgia, The Carolinas and Tennessee, cutting a 500-mile swath of destruction before eventually moving out to the Atlantic Ocean. Hurricane Helene, with winds reaching 140 miles per hour when it first hit land, was downgraded to a tropical storm by the time the eye passed through the Carolinas. Nevertheless, results were catastrophic and state and federal officials say recovery and construction could cost untold billions of dollars when all is said and done.

National casualties had risen to over 200 as of Friday and could continue to climb as search and rescue crews work to reach victims isolated due to the destruction of roads, and in some cases, entire communities.

"To say this caught us off-guard would be an understatement," Asheville Sheriff Quentin Miller declared.

Locals lending a helping hand

Several Rockingham County fire, police and EMS crews volunteered to make the trip out to Western North Carolina to help with rescue, treatment and the recovery of victims.

Meanwhile, the citizens of Rockingham County held multiple projects over the last week with supply drop sites just trying to provide some form of relief for their fellow North Carolinians in need.

Rockingham, Reidsville and McMichael High Schools all held supply drives and packed several vehicles with vital necessities bound for State Emergency Operations Centers impacted by the natural disaster.

Rockingham County High School officials and students held a Stuff the Bus event Tuesday afternoon.

Rockingham County head soccer coach Timothy Buck approached RCHS Athletics Director Adrian Doss last weekend about putting together a supply drive for the victims of the storm. Several dozen student-athletes lent a helping hand to meet donors and load the bus.

"It was an overwhelming success. We ended up with three pallets of water, two pallets of food, cleaning supplies, diapers, formula, feminine products – we covered just about everything. People thought of things that I never thought of. It was just amazing. The bus was literally stuffed and when we got to Southern States, those guys helped us unload it and put it on pallets, wrapped it up, put it in a trailer then off to Canton, North Carolina," Doss said.

Canton is located southwest of Asheville, just off I-40 near the Tennessee border.

Representatives of Southern States Cooperative of Reidsville met Doss and the bus and transported the supplies to emergency sites free of charge.

New Reidsville head baseball coach Mike Elrod approached RHS Principal Ericka Blackwell and Athletics Director Joe Walker to help organize an event earlier this week as well. Elrod and the Rams JV and varsity players set up two locations for citizens to make donations earlier this week.

Elrod, who is also a sergeant with the North Carolina State Highway Patrol, learned first-hand of the devastation from some of his local troopers that made the trip to the western part of the state to help with recovery, rescue and cleanup.

"Anytime something like that happens, you know people in that area are going to need stuff we sometimes take for granted. Last Friday, we sent our first squad of troopers up, and they told me the types of stuff the victims needed. I started brainstorming and thinking – what can we do to where our guys can see what it is like to help others immediately, and we came up with the supply drive. Our guys, our parents, fans and supporters got together, and the reaction was overwhelming with people that wanted to help," said Elrod.

Thursday afternoon, Elrod assisted by North Carolina State Highway Patrol 1st Sgt. James Chinnici, Trooper Keith Benfield and Trooper Ben Kirby, worked shoulder-to-shoulder with the Reidsville players and assistant coaches loading the truck.

Another regional company, Nickelston Industries out of Stokes County, loaded up a 26-foot box truck for the Reidsville supply event. Driver Tim Nickelston said it's a difficult feeling because people want to help their fellow citizens. He decided one of the ways he could contribute to the recovery effort was to donate and volunteer his time to get much-needed supplies to emergency workers and thousands of misplaced victims.

McMichael Senior High School also held a similar event Thursday afternoon and filled up the back of Phoenix Athletics Director Robert Lamberth's pickup with vital supplies bound for western North Carolina.

Doss remembers how devastating a natural disaster can be. His hometown of Stoneville suffered tremendous damage from an F3 tornado in 1998, but he said Hurricane Helene levied a different kind of devastation on a whole other scale.

"It's one thing when a natural disaster hits a real small area and a small population. You've still got neighbors to help you out, but these people don't have any neighbors left in some cases. Everybody got wiped out up there, and the mode of transportation in and out was wiped out. A lot of stuff is having to be taken in by helicopters. It's just a tragedy. I'm glad that we could help out a little bit, and I hope it gets to the people that need it the most," Doss said.

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McMichael and Rockingham remain undefeated in league play

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Only two weeks remain in regular season play, and the McMichael and Rockingham volleyball teams are sitting in the driver's seat with Mid-State titles in their sites.

Thursday night, the Cougars defeated Dudley 3-0 (26-24, 25-16, 25-17). Rockingham (13-0, 17-3) has won 13 games in a row and was undefeated in the month of September. The victory marked a sweep of the Panthers (8-4, 12-4) in regular season play. The Cougars look forward to making it official and wrapping up their second Mid-State Conference 3A regular season title next week.

Rockingham head coach Deanna Revis said the primary focus is not on the postseason but the final two games of the season. The Cougars are looking for a second-consecutive undefeated regular season.

"There's still work to be done, and there's always room for improvement. Just talking, gelling together – passing and just working together as a team. I believe in these girls."

Rockingham travels to Northeast Guilford (6-5, 6-13) on Oct. 8, then hosts Atkins (4-7, 6-10) to close out the regular season on Oct. 10. The Mid-State 3A Conference tournament begins Oct. 14 with the higher seeds serving as host.

McMichael (10-0, 20-2) had a strong week as well as they reached the 20-win plateau on Wednesday with a 3-1 (25-23, 25-27, 26-28, 23-25) victory over a very good 18-win Grimsley team.

Unfortunately, the game had to be McMichael's final out-of-conference test of the season. The Phoenix had originally planned to compete in the Forsyth Central High School Tournament in Cummings, Georgia, against several elite east coast teams last week, but the dangers to travel during Hurricane Helene changed all of that.

"Obviously, there is nothing you can do about it. The safety of our student-athletes is the most important thing, and my heart breaks for all of the people in Georgia and North Carolina. I mean they are devastated. Some of them don't know if they will be able to get back to school in the next month or so. We are disappointed as a team, obviously, because we invested a lot of time finding a place where the competition would be and pushing ourselves to the limit and that's what we wanted," McMichael Hall of Fame head coach Marty Woods said.

"Right now, we are really inconsistent. We can go on really good runs, and then we go on really negative – mistake after another mistake and that's not characteristic of us. We are not getting pushed every single time we step on that court. And it's nothing against anybody else. We like to play fast, and we like to play hard and the harder they push us, it seems the better that we respond," said Woods.

Wednesday's win, where the Whirlees gave the Phoenix all they could handle in four sets decided by two points or less, was a great sign McMichael is ready for postseason play.

It was McMichael's sixth win in a row as they get ready for their final two regular season games games versus T.W. Andrews (1-8, 4-14) Oct. 8 and a road showdown with second place West Stokes (7-1, 14-3) Oct. 10.

Morehead's postseason aspirations are all within their hands. They are currently sitting a game above .500 is in a bubble position regarding earning a postseason bid. The Panthers (6-4, 9-8) have an out-of-conference home game versus Martinsville (3-8) for Senior Night Monday, followed by the final regular-season contest of 2024 versus North Forsyth (0-10, 1-18) Oct. 10. Two wins next week would likely be enough to earn the Panthers a playoff spot.

Both the Mid-State 2A and 3A Conference tournaments begin Oct. 14 and will be hosted by the higher seeded team.

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Doug Creamer: Recovery from storms

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Doug Creamer: Recovery from storms

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By Post Lifestyles

By Doug Creamer

Most of you know that I am a weather fanatic. I am watching storms days before weathermen on TV mention them. I watch the long-term models and keep track of current developments. My parents thought that I might pursue becoming a meteorologist, but for me it is more of an obsession.

I was watching Helene when it was just a cluster of thunderstorms down in the Caribbean. I was amazed at how consistent models were with the path of the storm and how the storm followed the predicted path. Very few storms show such consistency between model runs and between the various models.

The suffering that people are enduring from this storm is unimaginable. They desperately need more than our prayers. People need physical assistance to help them recover. The recovery effort will take months. For some roads and many bridges it could take years. The mental and emotional anguish the victims are experiencing is incomprehensible.

The damage from this one storm runs through multiple states. Helene is not a name that many people will soon forget. Some of my readers have suffered from this storm, whether it was the loss of power or trees down in your yard. We all probably know people who are going through some very rough times right now.

I woke up Friday morning to the strongest winds and the heaviest rains. I watched out my windows as the storm raged. In the end, we had standing water in our yard and the cable and internet were out. We were among the lucky ones. The lack of news and internet kept us unaware of the devastation that others were enduring.

When our services returned, we were stunned by the pictures and videos of all the damage in the mountains, especially in the Asheville area. I reached out to family and friends and was relieved to know that while they may be struggling, they are OK. The images I have seen have kept me praying late at night and very early in the morning.

While those who suffered the huge losses need to be a priority in our prayers, we also need to remember to pray for the frontline workers, utility workers, rescue workers, emergency and firefighter workers, and now the organizations who going in to offer aid and support. Pray for the supply chains to get resources into these hard hit communities. People need the basics of life. They also need a loving and caring shoulder to cry on.

If you are planning to offer help, please research and make sure you are supporting reputable organizations. Sadly, there will be many scammers out there trying to take advantage of people who are already suffering. There are many ways you can help people you have never met through churches and other aid organizations who are on the ground helping in practical ways. Don't forget that there may be neighbors or people in your own community who are also suffering and in need of your help.

The people who are suffering right now need faith, hope and love. Jesus is broken-hearted over the loss, pain and suffering of the people who have been affected by this storm. This is an opportunity for the church to rise up and

show those who have been affected that God cares deeply about what they are experiencing. We get to be His hands, feet and mouth to the broken and wounded. We need to bring the light of hope to their dark world. We need to let them know that they are loved by coming alongside them in their hour of need. They need an impartation of our faith that will help them endure and make it through this tragedy.

I want to encourage you to do your part, whether it is prayer, buying and sending supplies, donating money or finding another way to help show the love of God to those in need. Helping a neighbor in need is just as important as sending aid to an unknown victim. Listening to someone's story and offering words of love, compassion and encouragement can be just as valuable as sending aid. Both can change the life of another person and demonstrate to them that they are not alone in their hour of deepest need. Many people who are suffering wonder, "Where is God in the midst of my suffering?" The answer can be in the eyes of His people. We have the opportunity to demonstrate God's love by both our words and actions. Be light in the darkness. Show love through your deeds. Share your faith and hope. Be the church. Pray!

Contact Doug Creamer at PO Box 777, Faith, NC 28041 or doug@dougcreamer.com.

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