

Winston-Salem Journal (NC): Page 16

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North Carolina lawmakers to vote on initial Helene relief

October 4, 2024 | Associated Press State Wire: North Carolina (NC) Author: By GARY D. ROBERTSON, Associated Press | Section: News | 468 Words OpenURL Link

RALEIGH, N.C. (AP) — North Carolina General Assembly leaders said Friday that they're prepared to approve initial disaster relief next week to address Hurricane Helene damage.

House Speaker Tim Moore and Senate leader Phil Berger said in a joint news release that details are still being worked out about exactly what is needed for now to facilitate the state's response.

The Republican-controlled legislature had already scheduled a one-day session for Wednesday.

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

Damage in the mountains is still being evaluated, so lawmakers expect this legislation will include just a down payment on the state's contribution, along with other changes to state law that would provide flexibility to agencies and displaced residents.

For example, within two weeks of the destruction caused by Hurricane Florence in eastern North Carolina in September 2018, lawmakers quickly approved \$57 million in disaster relief funds and also waived fees for displaced residents to obtain new driver's licenses and identification cards. They also passed a bill forgiving schools in the hardest-hit areas up to 20 lost instructional days to ensure workers got paid.

Election law changes also could be considered next week. In 2018, local election officials received flexibility on moving voting places after precincts were damaged by flooding.

After the initial Florence legislation, the General Assembly approved another law a couple of weeks later that spent \$400 million immediately and set aside another \$450 million for future needs.

Some agencies have already described post-Helene needs. The Department of Public Instruction is seeking up to \$166 million, nearly all of it for school repairs and renovations, technology losses and school meal needs.

The state government currently has \$4.75 billion set aside in a "rainy-day" fund and \$733 million in a disaster response reserve. Other pots of money could be tapped if needed.

Democratic Gov. Roy Cooper, who would be asked to sign any bill into law, and his administration are "working with legislators to recommend a package to help meet immediate needs," Cooper spokesperson Mary Scott Winstead said late Friday in an email.

Ultimately the storm "will require significant resources to help families and communities recover," Winstead added.

After Wednesday, the General Assembly is scheduled to reconvene for several days on Nov. 19 and Dec. 11, but lawmakers or Cooper could decide a special session sooner to address Helene is needed.

The state's top elected leaders — Cooper, Berger and Moore among them — have traveled to the mountains to see the damage firsthand.

"Our hearts are broken for the communities that have been ravaged by Hurricane Helene," Moore and Berger said.

"Despite the destruction, it has been incredible to see how North Carolinians have stepped up to help."

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By GARY D. ROBERTSON, Associated Press, 'North Carolina lawmakers to vote on initial Helene relief', *Associated Press State Wire: North Carolina* (online), 4 Oct 2024 https://infoweb.newsbank.com/apps/news/document-view?
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Thoughts While Shaving For October 4

October 4, 2024 | BladenOnline.com (Elizabethtown, NC) Author: BladenOnline.com | Section: Local News | 375 Words OpenURL Link

Thoughts While Shaving archive

Weather for Bladen and surrounding counties ... Yesterday's high temp ... 81 degrees ... Overnight low around 61 degrees.

Mostly sunny today (Friday) with a high near 83. Mostly cloudy tonight with a low around 64. Should be a great weekend, weather-wise...

Saturday, mostly sunny with a high near 84. Saturday night ... Partly cloudy with a low around 62. Sunday, sunny with a high near 83...

Average high for the month of October ... 75 degrees and average low in the 50 degree range...

Spent a time thinking about our friends in the western part of the state. Helene is now the 2nd deadliest storm to strike the area in the last 55 years, according to one service. Between 150 and 200 people lost their lives and the count continues. Only Hurricane Katrina was more deadly ... One report indicated up to 1,000 active duty soldiers have been approved to assist in the area nearly a week after Helene made landfall ... last report indicates nearly a million still without power ... Could be less by now. The path of the storm was more than 500 miles long ... from Florida to the mountains of North Carolina...

Service is still being restored, the search goes on for residents of the area ... All across the state, hundreds, thousands assisting in providing necessities to neighbors in the west ... Our area has been well represented ... many providing much needed items and there is more work to be done...

Bladen County residents have responded, as they should ... Truckloads of food and water and other supplies ... same for other counties, no doubt...

Our prayers continue for all in the area ... It will take weeks, months for many to re-establish in the area...

The weekend is just ahead ... Our thoughts and prayers for those who lost family, homes and more ... It could have been this area ... our area...

Oh yes ... Thankful for former President Jimmy Carter. He celebrated his 100th birthday recently...

"Rest and be thankful."

"I am happy because I'm grateful. I choose to be grateful. That gratitude allows me to be happy." Will Arnett

"Always have an attitude of gratitude." Sterling K. Brown

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The post Thoughts While Shaving For October 4 appeared first on .

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Atlantic Beach Fire Department welcomes home Hurricane Helene rescue team

October 4, 2024 | Carteret County News-Times, The (Morehead City, NC) Author: TODD WETHERINGTON NEWS TIMES | Section: News Times | 1169 Words OpenURL Link

ATLANTIC BEACH — A four-man water rescue team from Atlantic Beach Fire Department has returned safely after assisting victims of Hurricane Helene in the Asheville area.

According to Atlantic Beach Fire Department Fire Chief Mike Simpson, the team deployed on September 26 and returned home October 2. He said the fire department members assigned to the mission were Deputy Chief Casey Arthur, Captain Chris Lewis, Captain Christopher Register, and Firefighter/EMT Cody DeBruhl.

The team carried the department's Whaly boat, a solid hull polyethylene craft, which was purchased for the department last year with proceeds from the Atlantic Beach King Mackerel Tournament specifically for hurricane flood response.

"It's pretty much unsinkable and indestructible," Simpson said. "It was used up there but in that situation inflatable (boats) do a little better. It just depended on the situation."

Simpson said the team was originally deployed to Conover but were soon sent to downtown Asheville, where they worked until Saturday morning.

"When they got into Asheville they immediately got a rescue,' he said. "They had to go get a gentleman that was stranded in flood waters on top of his vehicle."

The team was then deployed to Swannanoa, which is located several miles west of Black Mountain, where they remained until they were demobilized Wednesday.

"They were pretty much-doing everything from search and rescue missions, building bridges, cutting trees, clearing roofs, logistics support," Simpson explained. "Anything and everything is what everybody was doing."

Simpson said fire stations and emergency services in the area "took a huge hit," with many fire trucks and ambulances destroyed.

"They were pretty much crippled," he said. "So in addition our guys were running fire and EMS calls with the local departments."

Simpson said his men described the conditions in the areas they assisted as "catastrophic and tragic."

"The things that people are seeing on the news and social media don't scratch the surface. It's pretty devastating," he commented.

The impact of Hurricane Helene has been significantly different than the damage seen from North Carolina's East Coast storms, Simpson said.

"Locally, we're going to have some water damage and some wind and stop signs are going to fly through the air. And if we have water it goes away as fast as it comes," he noted. "Up there it was anywhere from 10 feet and in some places 30-60 feet of water that was fast moving and just took out everything in its path."

Simpson said the ABFD rescue personnel experienced the storm's destructive power up close.

"Our team went across a bridge and as soon as they were across it washed out and was gone," he recalled.

The conditions around Asheville forced rescue teams to rely on creative solutions, Simpson explained.

"They had to strap our rescue basket and rope equipment to mules and horses and cut a path up a mountain to get a lady who was trapped," he said. "She was injured and they had to bring her back down and get her across a river to get some help."

When his men returned to the fire department on the night of October 2, Simpson said their families were waiting for them.

"I sent them all home for four days so they could get some rest. They won't start coming back in until Monday," he said.

Simpson grew emotional when describing the efforts of the ABFD water rescue team to assist the state's devastated western region.

"They were working around the clock most of the time. They helped a lot of people and did us proud," he said. "Words can't express how grateful we are for their efforts."

ATLANTIC BEACH — A four-man water rescue team from Atlantic Beach Fire Department has returned safely after assisting victims of Hurricane Helene in the Asheville area. According to Atlantic Beach Fire Department Fire Chief Mike Simpson, the team deployed on September 26 and returned home October 2. He said the fire department members assigned to the mission were Deputy Chief Casey Arthur, Captain Chris Lewis, Captain Christopher Register, and Firefighter/EMT Cody DeBruhl. The team carried the department's Whaly boat, a solid hull polyethylene craft, which was purchased for the department last year with proceeds from the Atlantic Beach King Mackerel Tournament specifically for hurricane flood response."It's pretty much unsinkable and indestructible," Simpson said. "It was used up there but in that situation inflatable (boats) do a little better. It just depended on the situation. "Simpson said the team was originally deployed to Conover but were soon sent to downtown Asheville, where they worked until Saturday morning."When they got into Asheville they immediately got a rescue,' he said. "They had to go get a gentleman that was stranded in flood waters on top of his vehicle."The team was then deployed to Swannanoa, which is located several miles west of Black Mountain, where they remained until they were demobilized Wednesday. "They were pretty much-doing everything from search and rescue missions, building bridges, cutting trees, clearing roofs, logistics support," Simpson explained. "Anything and everything is what everybody was doing. "Simpson said fire stations and emergency services in the area "took a huge hit," with many fire trucks and ambulances destroyed. "They were pretty much crippled," he said. "So in addition our guys were running fire and EMS calls with the local departments."Simpson said his men described the conditions in the areas they assisted as "catastrophic and tragic.""The things that people are seeing on the news and social media don't scratch the surface. It's pretty devastating," he commented. The impact of Hurricane Helene has been significantly different than the damage seen from North Carolina's East Coast storms, Simpson said."Locally, we're going to have some water damage and some wind and stop signs are going to fly through the air. And if we have water it goes away as fast as it comes," he noted. "Up there it was anywhere from 10 feet and in some places 30-60 feet of water that was fast moving and just took out everything in its path. "Simpson said the ABFD rescue personnel experienced the storm's destructive power up close. "Our team went across a bridge and as soon as they were across it washed out and was gone," he recalled. The conditions around Asheville forced rescue teams to rely on creative solutions, Simpson explained. "They had to strap our rescue basket and rope equipment to mules and horses and cut a path up a mountain to get a lady who was trapped," he said. "She was injured and they had to bring her back down and get her across a river to get some help. "When his men returned to the fire department on the night of October 2, Simpson said their families were waiting for them. "I sent them all home for four days so they could get some rest. They won't start coming back in until Monday," he said. Simpson grew emotional when describing the efforts of the ABFD water rescue team to assist the state's devastated western region. "They were working around the clock most of the time. They helped a lot of people and did us proud," he said. "Words can't express how grateful we are for their efforts."

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AB King Mackerel Tournament casts a wide net to support local fire and rescue

October 4, 2024 | Carteret County News-Times, The (Morehead City, NC) Author: ZACK NALLY NEWS-TIMES | Section: News Times | 889 Words OpenURL Link

ATLANTIC BEACH — The Atlantic Beach King Mackerel Tournament kicked off Friday and will run from Oct. 5-26, raising funds that help save lives both on and off the water.

What started as a simple fishing competition has grown into a vital fundraiser for the Atlantic Beach Fire Department, providing life-saving equipment and services that the town's budget could not otherwise afford.

Now in its eighth year in this form, the tournament has already raised close to half a million dollars, with no salaried staff – all work is done by volunteers. The funds have gone directly to upgrading emergency equipment, purchasing resources that have saved lives on Atlantic Beach and beyond. Fire Chief Mike Simpson noted that the town has been rip-current drowning free for three years, attributing much of this success to the tournament's contributions.

"This tournament has been crucial in providing the tools we need to keep people safe," Simpson said. "Our geographic size is pretty small, but in the summer we shoot up to ranges between 35,000 and 50,000 people. The services we provide need to be top-notch, and this tournament helps make that possible."

The event's tagline, "We Fish For Life," reflects its core mission of funding equipment for Atlantic Beach Fire and Rescue. Tournament treasurer and town council member Renea Baker emphasized that while the town council tries to meet its budget needs, the tournament's funds make a significant difference in purchasing advanced equipment.

"We do our best to meet the town's needs when it comes to budget requests, but the tournament gives us the ability to go above and beyond," Baker said. "What our guys do with the fire department helps save lives, and the support they receive allows them to be even better prepared."

One of the first pieces of equipment funded by the tournament was a Kawasaki MULE, which helps responders patrol the beach for emergencies. Now, nearly every piece of equipment used in ocean rescue has come from tournament funds, including four-wheelers, jet skis, and side-by-sides.

Captain Scott Bell, a firefighter and EMT who has worked with the department for over 25 years, recalled the days before the department's current modern fleet, when the beach's lone rescue vehicle struggled through the sand.

"Back then, we had a two-wheel-drive vehicle that would get stuck," Bell said. "Now we have two all-wheel-drive four-wheelers and larger jet skis with sleds. It's made a huge difference in how fast we can respond to emergencies."

Beyond the rescue equipment, the tournament also improves the community's quality of life. A partnership with sponsors and donations has funded the purchase of eight custom-made beach wheelchairs, which allow people with mobility issues to access the beach. The chairs are available for free to anyone who requests them, and the tournament even purchased a trailer to store them.

This year, a key focus is expanding accessibility by adding Mobi-mats to the beach. These mats enable both walkers and wheelchair users to navigate the sand and reach the water more easily. Another goal for the tournament is to fund another auto-pulse machine, an automated CPR device, which has become essential in emergency response. Each machine costs about \$25,000, a hefty price that the tournament helps cover.

Over the years, the Atlantic Beach King Mackerel Tournament has evolved. It originally began as the Hardees King Mackerel Tournament, but the weather often limited participation and success. To address this, the tournament's

current leadership, including chairman Curt Winbourne, restructured it into a three-week event, providing more flexibility for anglers.

"We talked to some of the fishermen who had participated in the old tournament, in particular Skip Conklin who was the rules chairman, and they suggested spreading it out," Winbourne explained. "That way, even if the weather wasn't ideal or someone had other commitments, they could still have multiple opportunities to fish. It's made a huge difference in participation."

The Atlantic Beach Fire and Rescue Department's reach extends beyond the town itself. It serves surrounding areas like Fort Macon State Park, Pine Knoll Shores, Morehead City and Newport. Recently, the department deployed personnel and equipment to western North Carolina in response to Hurricane Helene.

The team used a Whaly boat, a durable rescue vessel funded entirely by the tournament, to perform water rescues in flooded areas. The boat's versatility, designed for use in both ocean and flood conditions, has proven invaluable for the department.

"The Whaly boat is unique because it looks like an inflatable, but it's not," Bell said. "It's perfect for our needs here at home with oyster beds and rocks in the water, but it's also great for floods, like we've seen up in the mountains."

While the tournament's main focus is the fishing competition, its broader mission to improve community safety is evident. In addition to enhancing the fire department's equipment, it has played a key role in educating the public about beach safety, helping reduce the risk of accidents through better rip current awareness and flag systems that warn swimmers of ocean conditions.

As the tournament continues, Baker and Winbourne hope to see even more community involvement. Those who aren't able to fish can still support the cause by donating through the tournament's website, wefishforlife.com.

"We're not just a fishing tournament, we're a lifeline for our community," Winbourne said. "If you're going to be setting aside some money in your budget to donate for doing some good in the community, give our tournament a thought."

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'The nation has your back': Biden joins Cooper for Helene flyover, promises recovery aid

October 4, 2024 | Charlotte Observer, The (NC) Author: Adam Wagner; Staff Writer | Section: News | 679 Words Page: 2A OpenURL Link

After taking an aerial tour of damage inflicted by Tropical Storm Helene in Western North Carolina on Wednesday, President Joe Biden visited North Carolina's Emergency Operations Center in Raleigh to promise that the federal government will continue to help with the state's recovery.

"The United States, the nation, has your back. The nation has your back. We're not leaving until you get back on your feet completely," Biden said to a roomful of emergency management officials and members of the National Guard.

Gov. Roy Cooper told Biden about challenges ranging from washed-out bridges and roads to damaged water systems and electrical grids to lost homes and businesses.

"An entire region of our state is still in a dangerous situation," Cooper said.

Earlier Wednesday, Biden approved additional federal resources for the response, including up to 1,000 active duty U.S. Army soldiers from Fort Liberty and 22 aircraft.

"Simply put, we've got the capabilities to get the job done and we're going to get it done as fast as possible," Biden said.

Biden also said he'd approved a request Wednesday from Cooper to cover all of the costs of debris removal for the next six months. And 50 StarLink satellite links have been deployed, Biden said, with more on the way..

"Folks, it's going to cost us billions of dollars. It's going to cost billions of dollars to deal with this storm and all the communities affected, and Congress has an obligation to ensure that states have the resources they need," Biden said.

NC Emergency Management Director Will Ray told Biden that North Carolina still has about 350,000 people without power, five days after Helene barreled through.

Ray said 24 North Carolina search-and-rescue teams are working in Western North Carolina, along with 13 from other states and 18 from the federal government. Those teams have had more than 5,000 interactions - from rescues to evacuations to shelter inspections - since Helene response began.

"The teams continue to do really incredible work in some pretty austere conditions," Ray said.

North Carolina is also operating 26 aircraft in Western North Carolina that have airlifted more than 700,000 pounds of supplies, Ray added.

Biden said that since becoming president in 2017, he'd flown over so many downed trees that they would cover an area larger than the state of Maryland, largely from wildfires.

"I've seen a lot, but looking at Asheville and just imagining what it must have been like sitting along those rivers and streams as all of that rain came down ... You could see homes that were removed clearly from one side of the river, down the river, to the other side of the river," Biden said.

Biden thanked Cooper and South Carolina Gov. Henry McMaster, a Republican, for focusing on the response instead of prioritizing politics. Tuesday, Biden called former President Donald Trump a liar after Trump said he was hearing reports that Cooper and Biden, both Democrats, were not helping parts of the state where large proportions of Republicans live.

"In a moment like this, we put politics aside. Or at least we should put it all aside, and we have here. There are no Democrats or Republicans, only Americans," Biden said.

Biden closed by saying it is clear that the climate crisis is having an impact in the United States, including strengthening storms like Helene. Those storms like Helene are going to get stronger and stronger as oceans continue to warm, he said.

"Nobody can deny the impact of the climate crisis anymore," he said. "At least I hope they don't. They must be brain-dead if they do."

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UNC Asheville, App State extend class cancellations for weeks due to Helene's impacts

October 4, 2024 | Charlotte Observer, The (NC) Author: Korie Dean; Staff Writer | Section: News | 642 Words Page: 8A OpenURL Link

As Western North Carolina continues to grapple with the destruction and devastation left by Hurricane Helene, classes at someof the region's universities won't resume for several weeks.

UNC Asheville Chancellor Kimberly van Noort announced Tuesday that classes will be suspended at least until Oct. 28 as a result of the storm and its lingering impacts. Appalachian State University announced Wednesday that classes won't resume on that campus until after Oct. 15.

Both campuses had originally planned to remain closed for about a week, but then extended their respective closures and cancellations as recovery efforts in the area continued.

UNC Asheville

UNC Asheville first canceled classes on the morning of Thursday, Sept. 26, as Helene approached the area, and the university has remained closed since then.

UNCA will remain in Condition 3, or closed, until at least Oct. 14. Under Condition 3, campus operations are suspended and only essential employees are permitted on campus. If the university moves to another, less-severe condition level after Oct. 14, some operations may resume and additional employees may be permitted on campus, but classes will remain canceled until Oct. 28.

The campus "sustained minimal structural damage" from the storm, but has been without power, running water or internet since Friday, Sept. 27, van Noort said.

"Communication with our campus and the broader community has been extremely limited due to impaired communications infrastructure, but slowly, we are gradually regaining our ability to connect," she said.

All on-campus students were relocated within 72 hours of the storm hitting Asheville, van Noort said. The university assisted students in finding safe travel routes off campus and providing them with gas for their cars, she said. "A very small number of students" were relocated to another UNC System campus.

The university was housing about 1,600 students on-campus prior to the storm, and about 1,300 students remained during the storm, a total that was confirmed "through a coordinated door-to-door and room-to-room effort" led by the university's student affairs division. Students that remained during the storm "were provided daily with drinking water, three meals and support services" until they relocated.

"Throughout the last few days, we've worked diligently to ensure we knew where every student was on campus and to meet their needs," van Noort said.

Though students are not on the Asheville campus, they can continue to access mental health care through all other UNC System schools.

"Bulldogs, you are resilient and we look forward to when we can welcome you home," van Noort said.

Further updates from UNC Asheville regarding Helene's impacts are available at new.unca.edu/bulldogalert.

Appalachian State

Appalachian Statewill not hold classes until Oct. 16 at the earliest, according to an emergency alert message from the university. The university's fall break was originally scheduled for Oct. 14-15, and classes will remain canceled until the break ends.

Any updates about the "modality and locations" of classes will be communicated by Wednesday, Oct. 9.

The university will remain in Condition 3 status, meaning the university is closed and only mandatory employees report to work, until Oct. 11 at 5 p.m. If the university moves to a less severe status after Oct. 11, the university may open on a limited basis, but classes would remain canceled until at least Oct. 16.

No residence halls are "structurally compromised" and campus dining, health and recreational services remain operational.

The main impact to campus from the storm was "unprecedented levels of flooding," interim Chancellor Heather Norris said at a press conference Tuesday. Norris added that "several academic buildings have significant water damage."

Further updates from Appalachian State regarding Helene's impacts are available at appstatealert.com.

University disaster relief

Both universities have established disaster relief funds.

- * UNC Asheville's fund is available online at giving.unca.edu.
- * App State's fund is available through the homepage of its website: appstate.edu.

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After Helene, can NC businesses and tourist sites restore 'the magic of Asheville'?

October 4, 2024 | Charlotte Observer, The (NC) Author: Desiree Mathurin; Staff Writer | Section: News | 1037 Words Page: 4A

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

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

Some water guickly turned into unprecedented flooding.

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

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

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

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

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

Economic impact of the storm

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

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

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

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

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

Charlotte Observer.

The Biltmore Estate after Helene

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Next steps after Helene

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

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

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

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

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

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

and effort within Asheville and that's really special.

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

Desiree Mathurin: @Dez_AM

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Helene leads to push for disaster relief funding in Congress

October 4, 2024 | Charlotte Observer, The (NC) Author: Danielle Battaglia; Staff Writer | Section: News | 1428 Words

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Members of Congress saw Hurricane Helene coming.

Last week, they had planned to be in Washington through Friday, and then recess for the month of October to focus on the election. But as Helene strengthened while approaching Florida, they announced an early dismissal to get home ahead of the storm.

Now, lawmakers from the states devastated by Helene are asking for help from congressional leadership, including the possibility of coming back in October to fund the relief efforts.

And costs could be high.

"I've heard numbers in the \$150 billion range, particularly in North Carolina," said Sen. Ted Budd, a Republican from Davie County, who spoke to McClatchy Tuesday night. "If you consider the volume and the velocity of water in the mountains, it's devastating."

Both Budd and Sen. Thom Tillis signed a letter Tuesday to Majority Leader Chuck Schumer, Minority Leader Mitch McConnell, Appropriations Chair Patty Murray and Vice Chair Susan Collins asking for help.

"Although the true level of devastation is still unfolding, it is clear that Congress must act to meet the unmet needs in our states and address the scope and scale of destruction experienced by our constituents," the senators wrote. "This may even require Congress to come back in October to ensure we have enough time to enact legislation before the end of this calendar year."

Government shutdown

Congress recessed Wednesday and instead of passing 12 appropriation bills to fund the government, members approved a continuing resolution to keep the government operating at its current levels until Dec. 20. Congress isn't scheduled to return until after the election to take up the budget again.

The CR included an increase in funding for the Secret Service after two attempts on the life of former President Donald Trump.

But multiple lawmakers raised concerns about the lack of emergency relief aid in the the bill. And they were forced to vote on the bill or risk a government shutdown after Sept. 30.

Both Budd and another Republican from North Carolina, Rep. Dan Bishop, voted against the CR.

How close the country came to a government shutdown while Helene ripped through Western North Carolina is something Rep. Chuck Edwards, a Republican from Flat Rock, has thought about a lot as he's tried to help his constituents in the days since.

"I think it's important to realize how critical it is that our federal government continues to operate, and we should take a moment to take note that we were within hours, yet again, of the federal government shutting down," Edwards told McClatchy Monday. "I can't imagine what Western North Carolina would be like right now were we in a government shutdown."

Edwards said that should be enough of a wake-up call for Congress that it needs to get work done ahead of time.

Begging for emergency relief

The reality wasn't lost on lawmakers on the Senate and House floors as they had to make that decision.

Both Rep. Rosa DeLauro, a Democrat from Connecticut, and Sen. Brian Schatz, a Democrat from Hawaii, expressed their concerns that they were once again voting on a bill at the last minute; and neither liked that it lacked funding for relief efforts. But to vote against the bill had catastrophic consequences.

For Schatz, it was personal. The Democrat from Hawaii is still fighting for additional relief for his constituents whose lives were ripped apart in the fire that tore through Maui in August 2023.

"All across the country, in more than 20 states and territories, millions of Americans are reeling from disasters," Schatz said, on Sept. 12, on the Senate floor. "Wildfires, hurricanes, droughts, floods. And having lost their homes, their communities, and their livelihoods, they're counting on the federal government for help."

Schatz told his colleagues that that was one of their basic jobs in Congress.

Tillis joined Schatz and eight other senators who wrote to leadership Sept. 13 asking for additional disaster relief funding through a supplemental appropriations package.

But when the bill was signed, it excluded billions in requested dollars for emergency relief.

On Tuesday, Speaker Mike Johnson told reporters that the CR replenished funds for the Federal Emergency Management Agency, and that that money could address the immediate response needed for Helene, The Hill reported.

His remarks come just two days after Biden said he may call back Congress to fund Helene relief, and less than 24 hours after Budd and Tillis sent their letter to Senate leadership along with the every senator from South Carolina, Georgia, Florida, Tennessee and Virginia.

All of those states experienced devastation from the storm, and Budd said that added an extra complication to relief efforts. He said typically neighboring states would come to each other's aid, but right now each needs to focus on its own people.

Missing and hurting people

Budd said it will take years to rebuild, but for now, North Carolina is still in a search and recovery phase.

"The search and rescue is still going on," Budd said. "People are still being extracted. There are people that need oxygen, they need diabetic medicine, insulin, they need critical care, they're elderly."

Budd said the first goal is to get them to safety; simultaneous with that is getting communications up and running and power restored.

"You know, this part of North Carolina is resilient mountain people. Given them a chainsaw, five gallons of gas, they're going to be able to take care of themselves and their neighbors and if you give them some clean water, they'll be OK - and a little food."

Damaged infrastructure

Budd, Tillis and Edwards, along with Reps. David Rouzer and Greg Murphy and Commissioner of Agriculture Steve

Troxler, took an aerial tour of the storm damage in North Carolina Tuesday.

President Joe Biden planned to take the same tour Wednesday afternoon.

"There is so much damage to critical infrastructure," Budd said. "Bridges are gone, roads are gone."

He said there's an added complication that normally these types of disasters strike flat areas, where sand can be easily moved out of the way, but right now they're dealing with rough terrain and downed trees.

Budd said state lawmakers had been fiscally responsible and maintained a rainy day fund of \$5 billion, but the cost to rebuild will surpass that by leaps and bounds.

He said money is needed to repair Interstate 40, Interstate 26, bridges, roads and other infrastructure.

"That's what we need support in, and we want to make sure that it's as clean as possible," Budd said. "That no one's taking advantage of anybody, and that the money gets to repair what we say it's doing. That it's not doing some sort of social justice program, but it's really just helping rebuild Western North Carolina, and of course the other states: eastern Tennessee, North Georgia, southwest Virginia."

Damaged crops

Then there's the state's farmland.

"In regard to agriculture, so much of the fertile ground that we have in North Carolina is in riverbeds, creek beds, or floodplains," Budd said. "It doesn't get flooded that often, but when it does, it's usually not this bad, and it's just devastating."

Budd said everything from tomato crops to orchards were affected.

"There's so much produce that comes out of Henderson County," Budd said.

On Tuesday morning, Rep. Deborah Ross, a Democrat from Wake County, helped lead a group of 33 members from both chambers and parties in sending a letter to Schumer, McConnell, Johnson and House Minority Leader Hakeem Jeffries saying it is "imperative that Congress make appropriations as soon as possible upon the completion of damage assessments to fully fund unmet agricultural disaster relief needs in our states and across the nation."

The lawmakers added: "Farmers and growers nationwide, not only those damaged by Helene, have now faced multiple growing seasons without sufficient federal support. Our constituents are counting on us to act swiftly."

Tillis, Edwards, Murphy, Bishop and Reps. Don Davis, Kathy Manning, Alma Adams, Wiley Nickel and Jeff Jackson also signed onto the letter.

Coming back to Congress

Budd told McClatchy he wasn't sure whether Congress would need to return in October to help with relief efforts, but he was ready to respond to whatever North Carolina needs.

"I'm pushing for funding," Budd said. "How that happens and the timing of it, I don't know."

Budd said that in the past, funding was able to be provided through unanimous consent.

But he wants to see any legislation before he cast his vote.

"You want to hold the government accountable, while having excellent use of taxpayer dollars," Budd said. "So I

think we need to see the bill and see where the money would be appropriated."

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Donors with Charlotte ties give millions to Helene relief

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The Charlotte-based Leon Levine Foundation committed \$5 million this week to Hurricane Helene relief efforts in the devastated North Carolina mountains - the latest big donation from a foundation, company or individual based in or with a strong presence in Charlotte.

"This is a time our broader community must come together to help those in need," Tom Lawrence, Leon Levine Foundation president and CEO, said in a statement.

Helene killed at least 143 people in the Southeast, CNN reported Tuesday afternoon. Authorities confirmed 57 deaths in Buncombe County, home of Asheville, Sheriff Quentin Miller said Tuesday. The storm erased downtown Chimney Rock and other areas of the mountains and left thousands homeless..

An initial \$1 million went to the Community Foundation of Western North Carolina to help in 18 counties, Lawrence said. The foundation also has accelerated payments of scheduled 2025 grants and given more grants to its nonprofit partners in the mountains, he said.

Leon Levine, founder of the first Family Dollar store in Charlotte, established the foundation in 1980.

Other big donations to help Helene victims

On Tuesday, American Airlines, which has a hub at Charlotte Douglas International Airport, announced that AAdvantage members have donated more than \$2 million to American Red Cross Helene relief.

And wireless provider Spectrum committed \$1 million to Helene relief in the Carolinas, Florida and Georgia.

The Connecticut-based company will donate \$50,000 each to the NC Disaster Relief Fund, OneSC Fund and Volunteer Florida Foundation, the company announced Tuesday.

Spectrum will give an additional \$100,000 to local organizations in areas hardest hit by Helene, including in and around Asheville; Spartanburg, South Carolina; Georgia and the west Florida coast. Spectrum is giving \$750,000 in free public service announcements to the organizations.

Last Saturday, the foundation headed by the owners of the Carolina Panthers and Charlotte FCcommitted to an initial donation to Helene relief in the Carolinas. The David and Nicole Tepper Foundation, and the Teppers' two local sports organizations, announced an initial pledge of \$3 million.

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In Western NC, a lack of flood insurance deepens the damage

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For western North Carolina, Hurricane Helene brought a flooding disaster

Next comes an insurance disaster.

Residents in North Carolina's mountains have felt secure from the flooding that increasingly swamps the state's low-lying coastal plain. But when Hurricane Helene - along with a rainstorm that preceded it - dropped more than 40 trillion gallons of water on the region, that security was washed away.

Now, homeowners in the state's mountain counties are learning that their homeowner's insurance doesn't cover flooding, landslides or anything else caused by moving water. Many will wish they had paid for policies through the National Flood Insurance Program (NFIP).

State Sen. Natasha Marcus, the Democratic nominee for state insurance commissioner, said there are less than 6,000 NFIP policies in the western North Carolina disaster area. In Buncombe County, home of hard-hit Asheville, she said, less than 1% of the county's 137,000 housing units have flood insurance.

Marcus said the hurricane's destruction "really drives home what is happening with the changes in our climate. It's just a startling reminder that it is real and how exposed we are. Of course, now it's too late to get flood insurance. So I'm very worried about how we are going to rebuild western North Carolina."

It's understandable that homeowners in high elevations didn't regard massive flooding as a likely threat. The last event to approach Helene's magnitude in western North Carolina was more than 100 years ago - the great flood of 1916.

But climate change is making flooding more frequent as storms developing over warming seas carry more moisture inland. The North Carolina State Climate Office blog said the rainfall during Helene and a preceding storm dwarfed historic standards: "In Asheville, the three-day total of almost 14 inches goes well beyond the 1-in-1,000 year total for a 72-hour period. ... Likewise, the 24.41 inches over three days at Mount Mitchell is off the charts compared to the 1-in-1,000 year amount of 16.5 inches."

Lack of flood insurance is a problem even where floods are common. State Insurance Commissioner Mike Causey told me that when Hurricane Florence engulfed parts of eastern North Carolina in 2018, only 2 percent of the damaged homes were covered by flood insurance.

"It is a huge problem," Causey said. "We had flood education classes around the state in 2019. That education effort increased the number of flood policies by 25 percent, but we are still just scratching the surface."

Hurricane Helene has added intensity to the contest between Causey, a Republican, and Marcus in the insurance commissioner's race.

Causey supports adopting a statewide version of a coastal program that serves as a market of last resort for vulnerable properties. He also wants to increase participation in the state fortified roof program

Marcus says North Carolina's insurance commissioner should be a stronger advocate for adopting building code and infrastructure changes and making people more aware when they are buying in flood-prone areas by updating flood

maps.

"Unfortunately, efforts to modernize these maps have been stalled by political gridlock, leaving communities unprepared for the realities of our changing climate," she said.

Days before Hurricane Helene made landfall, three beachfront houses fell into the ocean in Rodanthe. It's a far different place than Asheville, but it's the same phenomenon. The climate is changing. So are the risks.

Yet at a time when climate hazards are rising, more people are moving into areas vulnerable to floods, winds and wildfires. That development drives up the cost - both in human life and in property - of natural disasters.

It's time for sane development and construction laws that acknowledge the threat of climate change. It's past time to reduce the risks by barring development in flood-prone areas, improving building codes to better withstand storms and encouraging the purchase of flood insurance across the state.

Associate opinion editor Ned Barnett can be reached at 919-404-7583, or nbarnett@ newsobserver.com Copyright (c) 2024 The Charlotte Observer

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Starlink reconnects Western NC reeling from Helene; who gets credit becomes political

October 4, 2024 | Charlotte Observer, The (NC)

Author: Brian Gordon and Emily Vespa, correspondent; Staff Writer | Section: News | 772 Words

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To reconnect emergency responders and residents after Hurricane Helene, the Federal Emergency Management Agency has shipped dozens of Starlink satellite systems to rural Western North Carolina.

On Monday, FEMA announced 40 Starlink systems were in the region to assist emergency communications, with plans to deploy one system to each county affected by the storm. Another 140 systems will be sent to aid "with communications infrastructure restoration," the White House said in a Sept. 30 statement on relief efforts.

A subsidiary of Elon Musk's SpaceX, Starlink has positioned more than 6,000 satellites in low-Earth orbit to beam broadband internet service to on-the-ground terminals. The first North Carolina households installed Starlink in 2021, and since then, the system has been used in the aftermaths of natural disasters and war worldwide where traditional internet infrastructure faltered. Ukraine fighters, for example, have relied on Starlink in their battle against Russia.

On Tuesday, North Carolina mountain counties reported Starlink enabled emergency responders to receive calls and residents to check in on family. In Ashe County, north of Boone, the emergency management department has established connection at more than a half-dozen fire stations. Residents are advised to turn on Wi-Fi calling on their phones to link to this satellite service.

Many areas across Western North Carolina, from Cherokee to Asheville to the Blue Ridge foothills, have struggled to find consistent internet and cellular connectivity since Friday, after the remnants of Hurricane Helene dumped feet of water and caused destructive flooding. As of Monday, close to 70% of the region's cellphone towers and equipment were out of service, federal communications data showed, as cut fiber-optic cables prompted widespread blackouts, according to the nonprofit news outlet Asheville Watchdog.

Starlink service gets political

Outside the region, the deployment of Starlink to North Carolina became politicized after falseclaims spread that former President Donald Trump had arranged the deployment of Starlink systems to storm-affected areas after the current administration failed or refused to do the same.

Trump said Monday during a speech in Valdosta, Georgia, that he had spoken to Musk about delivering Starlink systems to storm-affected areas. Early the next morning, Musk, who has endorsed Trump's reelection bid, announced his coordination with the Republican candidate. On the platform X, which Musk also owns, the SpaceX founder wrote "Earlier today, @realDonaldTrump alerted me to additional people who need Starlink Internet in North Carolina. We are sending them terminals right away."

On Tuesday, North Carolina state Sen. Danny Britt, a Republican who represents the Sandhills counties of Robeson, Hoke and Scotland across the state from Western North Carolina, posted on X that he had asked Trump "for help restoring communications to Western NC, and he delivered."

"Within hours, President Trump got Elon Musk on the phone and a commitment of as many Starlink devices as we need to help save North Carolinians."

However, the White House says the Starlink systems were on their way before these conversations occurred. FEMA announced Starlink's presence in North Carolina on Sept. 30, the same day Trump spoke in Valdosta.

On X, White House spokesperson Andrew Bates commented on the Starlink deployment chronology, responding to an article about Trump and Musk's conversations by stating, "This is already happening."Trump's daughter, Ivanka, visited Hickory on Wednesday to deliver 300 Starlink systems in a visit coordinated by Medic Corps, a group running relief operations out of the Hickory Regional Airport. Ivanka Trump took photos with pilots, airport staff and volunteers.

What happened to grant funding?

Some on social media claimed that President Joe Biden or the Federal Communications Commission previously revoked from Starlink more than \$900 million in grant funds to expand high-speed internet access in rural North Carolina. That's not accurate.

In fact, the FCC had reviewed the grant applications in a two-phase process. Starlink was one of 379 applicants - called "winning bidders" - that made it past the first phase.

But funds for the winning bidders were contingent on a second-phase, in-depth application. After Starlink filed that application, the FCC determined that it didn't qualify for funding.

According to a letter from the FCC chairperson, the agency found that Starlink:

Couldn't provide internet at the required speed set by the FCC.

Would have imposed "high start-up costs on rural consumers," requiring subscribers to buy a \$600 dish to access internet.

Proposed using some funds to provide internet to places like parking lots and road medians, which are not underserved rural households like the program intended.

Julia Coin of the Charlotte Observer contributed.

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Fake, misleading images of Helene spread on social media. Here's how to spot them.

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Author: Emily Vespa and Caitlyn Yaede, correspondents | Section: News | 574 Words

Page: 16A OpenURL Link

Amid the fallout from Hurricane Helene, deceptive images claiming to show the storm are circulating on social media.

One video on Facebook that claimed to show footage of Helene in North Carolina spliced a series of flood videos with the sound of screams and gunshots. But many clips are outdated and from other locations, a reverse Google image search of several frames shows: One seems to be of flooding in Sioux Falls, South Dakota; another shows a bus operated by a city in Ontario, Canada; and one is July footage of Aguascalientes, Mexico.

Another image, widely shared on X, Threads and right-wing social media site Gab, shows a herd of cows following four dogs swimming through a river.

"Farm dogs leading away from flood waters in NC," one user captioned the photo in a post that garnered nearly 10,000 likes.

The photo, which is at least seven years old, isn't of Helene. It was posted after several hurricanes, but it appears to have first surfaced online after Hurricane Irma swept across Florida in 2017.

Other photos are generated using artificial intelligence. Many seem designed to evoke an emotional reaction and depict dogs or other animals stranded in floodwaters or being rescued by humans.

In one fake image posted on Facebook, a man lifts a dog from a roof as he stands in torso-deep water. The man has six fingers and a disfigured face, both signs of an Al-generated image. Even so, the post fooled some.

"This man is my hero," wrote one commenter.

How to spot misleading images

If you suspect an image is deceptive, link or upload it to Google's reverse image search to trace its origin. If you want to search for a video, take a screenshot of a frame and upload it.

Similar to Google's tool is TinEye, a free website that allows you to search an image and sort results by "most changed" to identify manipulated images.

How to spot Al-generated images

Josephine Lukito, an assistant professor at the University of Texas at Austin's School of Journalism and Media, said being able to detect artificial intelligence is becoming an important part of media literacy. "But," she added, "it is also something that will become increasingly challenging."

Al-generated images may appear too perfect, yet they tend to poorly depict details. In fact, Lukito said details can be the biggest hint that an image or video is artificially generated.

"Several giveaways tend to be if you look around kind of the edge of the individual, or you look at kind of nuanced details, things like fingers or patterns," she said. Text in photos and videos may also appear misspelled or incomprehensible.

A set of Al-generated images postedon Facebook ostensibly showed boaters conducting "deer rescue operations" in floodwater. In one, a deer's antlers appear unnaturally thick, almost like a tree branch. A man's arm blends into a deer's torso in another.

People in Al-generated photos may have:

Unlikely body proportions

Extra or missing fingers or limbs

Overly shiny eyes

Waxy skin

Also look for implausible situations, like a photoshared on Facebook of a dog wearing sunglasses and floating through floodwater in an inner tube. A closer look at the image reveals that a glass appears to be hovering on top of the float, violating the laws of physics - another indication of an Al-generated image.

Also, consider the account that posted the photo. If it frequently shares Al-generated images, be wary.

"I do think that these sorts of cases are becoming increasingly common, especially in video and audio form," Lukito said of artificially generated content.

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UNC Health offers free virtual visits for Helene storm victims in Western NC

October 4, 2024 | Charlotte Observer, The (NC) Author: Chyna Blackmon; Staff Writer | Section: News | 294 Words

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Sore throat

As recovery efforts continue for thousands of North Carolinians impacted by Hurricane Helene, UNC Health is now stepping up to provide free virtual care for those in need.

The Triangle-based healthcare system announced that any Western North Carolina residents 18 years or older can be treated virtually through UNC Health Virtual Care Now with a smartphone, laptop or other speaker and cameraenabled device at no cost.

"Our patients and teammates in Western North Carolina are dealing with widespread power outages, extreme flooding, mudslides, road closures and more," Dr. Wesley Burks, CEO of UNC Health said in a media release. "We will support our patients, teammates and communities in this time of greatest need. We want to offer free virtual services for those who have stable Internet access - and will continue to provide in-person care at our clinics and hospitals."

How to make a free virtual appointment

Virtual services through UNC Health Virtual Care Now are available everyday from 6 a.m. to 10 p.m. If you have a medical emergency, you should call 911, but UNC's virtual care providers assist patients with a wide range of conditions, including:

conditions, including.
Seasonal allergies
Asthma
Colds, coughs and the flu
Diarrhea
Female urinary problems
Fever
Insect bites
Mild headache/migraine
Mild stomach ache
Pink eye
Rash
Sinus infection

Appointments are not needed but you must register and have a My UNC Chart account to book a provider. Here's what to do if you need to make an appointment:

Visit unchealth.org/care-services/virtual-care#virtual-care-now

Select "Get in Line"

Enter your information to join the queue and then complete the eCheck-in process.

You can find more information about UNC's virtual care services online at unchealth.org/care-services/virtual-care.

Chyna Blackmon: @chynablackmon

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President Biden orders Fort Liberty troops to Western NC as part of Helene response

October 4, 2024 | Charlotte Observer, The (NC)

Author: Adam Wagner; Staff Writer | Section: News | 490 Words

Page: 18A OpenURL Link

A thousand soldiers from Fort Liberty will "immediately" be deployed to Western North Carolina as part of the response to Tropical Storm Helene, President Joe Biden announced Wednesday morning.

"These soldiers will speed up the delivery of life-saving supplies of food, water and medicine to isolated communities in North Carolina - they have the manpower and logistical capabilities to get this vital job done, and fast. They will join hundreds of North Carolina National Guard members deployed under State authorities in support of the response," Biden said in a statement.

The soldiers headed to Western North Carolina are part of an infantry battalion task force, the White House said in a statement. Their unit includes a forward support company that can station key resources like fuel, water and mechanics in areas that are still without power or water nearly a week after the storm.

Soldiers will help with the delivery of key commodities like food and water, according to the White House. They will also help FEMA and other agencies participating in the response reach hard-hit areas that remain inaccessible due to catastrophic damage to the region's roads and bridges from flooding and landslides.

Additionally, the Department of Defense will send 22 helicopters to help with search-and-rescue operations and "dozens" of high-water clearance vehicles.

The National Guard has activated more than 700 members to work on the delivery of supplies and to conduct search and rescue missions in the region. There were 15 aircraft and 275 vehicles involved in that mission as of Tuesday morning, according to a press release from Gov. Roy Cooper's office.

At a Tuesday press conference, Cooper said he and Biden had recently discussed deploying troops to Western North Carolina to help with the relief effort, saying there was a particular focus on aircraft to help deliver supplies.

"I want to make sure we get every single resource that we possibly can into North Carolina for what may be a long haul to make sure that we're continuing to get water and supplies all across Western North Carolina," Cooper said.

Biden is scheduled to visit South Carolina and North Carolina on Wednesday, with the president expected to view storm-battered Western North Carolina from the air before receiving a briefing in Raleigh.

"Hurricane Helene has been a storm of historic proportion. My heart goes out to everyone who has experienced unthinkable loss. We are here for you - and we will stay here for as long as it takes," Biden said in a statement.

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Pilot makes emergency landing at Hickory airport during Helene supply runs

October 4, 2024 | Charlotte Observer, The (NC) Author: Joe Marusak; Staff Writer | Section: News | 134 Words Page: 5A OpenURL Link

A pilot made an emergency landing at Hickory's airport Wednesday afternoon, shortly after Ivanka Trump visited the airport to deliver Hurricane Helene disaster relief supplies.

Pilot Jordan Seth Faught, 41, of Lenoir, escaped injury after his single-engine Cessna experienced a mechanical failure as he returned from flying supplies to storm-damaged Avery County in the North Carolina mountains, State Highway Patrol Trooper Christopher Casey said in a statement.

Faught made the emergency landing on the airport runway at about 12:45 p.m., Casey said.

Troopers secured the scene, and the FAA will investigate the cause of the failure, Casey said.

Trump, daughter of former president Donald Trump, flew to the Hickory airport earlier Wednesday to deliver 300 Starlinks to be flown to western North Carolina. The devices will help Helene flood victims connect to high-speed internet.

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Helene cancels - South Carolina music festival featuring - Eric Church, others

October 4, 2024 | Charlotte Observer, The (NC) Author: Joe Marusak; Staff Writer | Section: News | 233 Words Page: 7A OpenURL Link

Organizers of the inaugural outdoor Field and Stream Music Fest in Winnsboro, South Carolina, have postponed the Oct. 4-6 event due to Hurricane Helene, organizers said Saturday.

Eric Church was among the headline acts scheduled to perform along with Lainey Wilson, Lynyrd Skynyrd, ZZ Top and many others.

"It is with heavy hearts that we announce the postponement," organizers said in a statement. "Given the state of emergency and challenging conditions on the ground, this decision has been made out of an abundance of caution."

Hurricane Helene damage "has been severe, with widespread flooding, downed trees and blocked roads," organizers said. "Power is still out on site, deliveries have been delayed, and some areas of the festival grounds remain inaccessible."

The production team for the event and site engineers determined it wouldn't be safe to proceed.

"While we are deeply disappointed, the safety of our fans, sponsors, staff, and crew remains our highest priority," according to the announcement. "Our thoughts and prayers go out to all those affected by the storm."

To help recovery efforts, festival equipment, including restroom trailers, generators, and food supplies will go to assist FEMA and emergency services, organizers said.

"We are heartbroken but excited to bring you an unforgettable experience next year," organizers said. "New dates will be announced soon. Tickets and camping will automatically roll over to the rescheduled dates, and refunds will be available."

Refunds will begin within two weeks.

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Helicopter pilot flies supplies - to NC Helene flood victims

October 4, 2024 | Charlotte Observer, The (NC) Author: Julia Coin; Staff Writer | Section: News | 1031 Words Page: 1A

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Help.

Hickory Right now in North Carolina, an index card could save a life.

Blue-lined, 3-by-5-inch papers sit in a grid on a plastic folding table inside Hickory Regional Airport, listing coordinates and what those stranded in Hurricane Helene's aftermath need:

Baby formula.		
Insulin.		

A patchwork group of pilots inside the two-room airport grab three or four cards at a time, head to their helicopters and fly west. Fuel is expensive. If they end up unable to land on the rickety terrain in the mangled Appalachian Mountains, they need more cards, more options before turning back. Organizers realized that halfway through their second day of missions.

But Andy Petree, a retired NASCAR analyst for ESPN, takes just one card at 5:56 p.m. Monday. The sun will set in about two hours. This is his sixth and last trip of the day. His first was 12 hours ago, when he flew his son out of their hometown, Hendersonville, and dropped him at Petree's Lake Norman house, one with its own helipad, near Charlotte.

For his second to last trip, Petree flew out to Black Mountain, where he rescued a family of three and their dogs.

Now, Petree loads Pampers diapers, Similac baby formula, his wife's PB&J sandwiches and a Charlotte Observer reporter into his private helicopter and lifts off from the landing strip that's about three football fields long.

The 66-year-old is one of 37 pilots offering their private aircraft to Operation Airdrop, a nonprofit that sends volunteer pilots and their aircraft with essential supplies after disaster.

In Asheville, Swannanoa, Lake Lure, Marshall, and many parts of western North Carolina, people are only reachable by air. Roads, shredded by the floods, have turned into narrow dirt paths, riverbeds or cliffs into the orange, murky water below.

Hickory, a North Carolina town of about 44,000 known as a furniture manufacturing capital of the United States, is about an hour drive from Charlotte, Asheville and Boone. That's about 30 minutes in Petree's helicopter.

We head to Lake Lure in his Robinson 44 Raven 2 - a four-person helicopter he bought to get from his Hendersonville home in western North Carolina to the NASCAR tracks in the middle of the state, close to Concord and the Lake Norman home where his son now sits with 200 pounds of supplies.

Three days ago, as Helene passed over his home state Friday, Petree was in Port Canaveral, Florida, canceling plans to travel from where he and his wife were about to get onto a cruise ship.

He had to help, he said.

The rest of the volunteers, some dropping supplies and clothes and airlifting people out, have similar stories. Some are in matching black pants, black shoes and black shirts that say "Academy of Aviation," some are in military camo, and some are in jeans and T-shirts that show their neck tattoos.

Hodgepodge helicopters help Helene's victims

Pockets of destruction rest between Hickory and the Appalachian Mountains. Some areas seem fine, with outdoor furniture unmoved or at least reset. Then a smear of downed trees that will die before their leaves turn into a cluster of colors this year.

Then a river. Then a lake. Then a whole town tattered into pieces.

"That hurricane basically picked up the whole Gulf of Mexico and dropped it right there," Petree says, pointing to the thick layer of branches, roofs, umbrellas and siding sitting where Chimney Rock used to be.

I tell him this summer, on a trip back to Charlotte from Topton, a town further out west that escaped total ruin Friday, I considered stopping at the quaint lake town. I didn't.

"Now you'll never see it," he says.

Those with homes still intact won't be able to get to them, he says. Those with their homes and belongings whisked away won't see it rebuilt. Those dead in the ruin won't be found for a few more days, months, maybe years, he says.

As of Monday, officials said more than 100 Americans had died in the 10 states hit by Helene. By Tuesday afternoon, there were 57 people confirmed dead from the storm in just Buncombe County in North Carolina, according to Sheriff Quentin Miller. Hundreds are still missing.

Petree, who was in the rubble talking to people earlier Monday, said the people there are just awestruck. The devastation is unimaginable. And for those who don't have to imagine - those who heard the freight-train-sounding rush of water and woke up to their neighbor's homes in the water - it's incomprehensible.

At 6:45 p.m., after circling above the coordinates listed on Petree's index card, finding no place to land and seeing no people waving us down, we land on a bridge next to Bat Cave Volunteer Fire Department between the demolished Chimney Rock and Gerton, the next unincorporated community west. The makeshift landing pad is marked with two orange Xs. The next bridge over is marked with black, capitalized words: DO NOT LAND.

The people who asked for diapers and baby food aren't there, but one bleary-eyed volunteer firefighter with muddy camo boots and a gun in his waistband is. He's with a few others.

Their eyes are all the same. Wide open, glazed, processing the monster storm that hit their town - one once dubbed a "climate haven" by some for its long distance from the coast and relatively high elevation.

"Everyone is gone," says Marie O'Neill, a butterfly-booted woman who lives on a slope above the fire department. "The people, the animals."

We don't have time to stay long.

She waves as we take off, the setting sun shielded by clouds - remnants of the storm that's passed and plagued the state.

We fly back over the ruin and land back in Hickory at 7:27 p.m. Inside one of the airport's rooms, 50 volunteers - pilots, runway golf cart drivers, regular people - eat pizza and hot dogs when a director comes in.

Lt. Gov. Mark Robinson's niece is out there, somewhere. She asks who is certified to fly at night. One person is. Two people are needed.

They grab an index card and rush out of the building, looking for a second certification - and hoping to save one more life.

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Still no cell service in much of battered western NC. Why is it so tough to fix?

October 4, 2024 | Charlotte Observer, The (NC) Author: Ames Alexander and Nora O'Neill; Staff Writer | Section: News | 789 Words Page: 5A OpenURL Link

Time and again over the past several days, Canton mayor Zeb Smathers has heard desperate pleas.

"I've had tears fill my eyes (because) of random people reaching out to me, looking for their loved ones, because they cannot communicate," said Smathers, whose town of 4,400 was among many in western North Carolina ravaged by Tropical Storm Helene.

"I pray that the inability to reach people didn't cost any lives," he said.

In the hours and days after the storm, widespread cellphone and internet blackouts made a devastating situation worse. Thousands of people couldn't contact loved ones in western North Carolina. The blackouts also hurt efforts to help during a historic crisis, Smathers said.

"If I need to say, 'Hey, you come get water at the police department,' and I can't do that... it makes every other problem worse," said Smathers, who spoke with Charlotte Observer reporters by satellite phone because he didn't have a cell signal.

Nearly half of cell sites - locations with antennas and other electronic communications equipment vital to cell phone communication - were still out Tuesday in western North Carolina counties affected by the storm, the Federal Communications Commission says. In Buncombe County, more than 60% of cell sites weren't working. And in Yancey County, more than 90% were out.

Getting things working again is a huge challenge, one slowed by power outages, flooding, blocked roads and downed power lines, according to Verizon, AT&T and Spectrum. And companies have not predicted when the work would be completed.

"Access into the region, as well as moving within the area, have been an insurmountable challenge the last few days," Verizon said in a Sept. 29 update about their repair work.

AT&T said Tuesday it restored more than 60 percent of the cell sites in areas impacted by the storm.

Smathers said he knows cellphone companies are working hard to repair the damage. But he wonders whether they did enough before the storm to prevent widespread outages.

"There are going to be a lot of questions," he said.

Storm damaged fiber cables

Officials in Buncombe County say they've received more than 11,000 requests from people trying to reach loved ones. And many people outside the hardest hit areas have turned to social media to express their worry and desperation.

"Urgent message from a family member re Tropical Storm Helene: Hendersonville NC folks need help with network satellite service," one person said on X Saturday. "This little town is under water from Helene and they have no contact to the outside world."

Many communication blackouts in western North Carolina were caused by power outages and damage to the fiber cables that connect cell sites to other parts of the network, Verizon says. Debris, flooding and high winds damaged the fiber cables, according to the company.

"We're getting reports from AT&T and Verizon," Gov. Roy Cooper said during a press conference on Monday. "Their initial problems were significant in that landslides cut major fiber lines for them."

Repairs - and questions - continue

Verizon and AT&T said their teams are working around the clock to make repairs. At the same time, they've set up equipment to provide alternative connections.

Dozens of Starlink satellite systems have been shipped to North Carolina in recent days to provide high-speed internet access, FEMA said. Starlink, developed by Elon Musk's SpaceX company, uses a network of satellites to provide internet access globally.

Spectrum says it has opened more than 33,800 "access points" in the Carolinas where the public can connect to WiFi. (The locations are detailed in Spectrum's out-of-home WifFi page.)

Verizon and AT&T said they've also brought mobile equipment to western North Carolina to restore cellphone service. Both companies have even launched drones to provide cellphone coverage from the sky.

Before the storm, Verizon says it did take steps to prepare. The company put portable communications equipment - including drones and generator-powered cell sites - in places where it could be deployed rapidly if service was interrupted.

But many still struggle to get a phone signal.

Last weekend, an Ingles supermarket on Asheville's Patton Ave. was closed. But the parking lot was jammed. The reason: It was one of the few sites in that part of town where many could get reliable cellphone service.

And on Tuesday, Mayor Smathers said he saw people in his Haywood County town holding their cellphones in the air as they walked, hoping to find a cell signal.

"It is unacceptable and disgusting that in our time of need, cellular service for the entire region is blocked out," he said.

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