

FACT CHECK

Here are the rumors and the reality in Western North Carolina

BY CHANTAL ALLAM AND JOE MARUSAK
callam@newsobserver.com
jmarusak@charlotteobserver.com

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 AI-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."

False rumors even spread claiming the government had created the hurricane.

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

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:

RUMOR: GOVERNMENTS AREN'T RESPONDING TO THE DISASTER.

Facts: The N.C. State Emergency Response Team is working 24/7 to save lives and provide Helene relief. The 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.

"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."



National Guard Troops from Newton and Winston-Salem, N.C. work with local officials to remove more than three feet of mud from the Old Fort Water and Waste Treatment plant on Wednesday, October 2, 2024 in Old Fort, N.C. Heavy rain from Hurricane Helene flooded Curtis Creek, forcing the plant to shut down.

ROBERT WILLETT rwillett@newsobserver.com

RUMOR: DONATIONS, VOLUNTEERS TURNED AWAY AT CHECKPOINTS.

Facts: Western N.C. roads are still dangerous and impassable 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.

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.

RUMOR: THE GOVERNMENT CREATED THE HURRICANE

Facts: Helene formed from an organized band of showers and thunderstorms in the Gulf of Mexico, the National Hurricane Center in Miami reported.

Rumors that the government created the storm were fueled by U.S. Rep.

Marjorie Taylor Greene's tweet late Thursday that "Yes they can control the weather. It's ridiculous for anyone to lie and say it can't be done."

RUMOR: THE FAA IS RESTRICTING ACCESS TO THE AIRSPACE.

Facts: The FAA is not restricting access for recovery operations but is trying to keep 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-clear 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 IS NOT 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.

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.

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.

Facts: This is false, FEMA said. No money is being diverted from disaster response needs. FEMA's disaster response efforts and individual assistance is funded through the Disaster Relief Fund, which is a dedicated fund

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.

In North Carolina 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.

The agency is on track to meet requested delivery timelines for meals and water," it said in a statement released Oct 5. "Voluntary organizations are supporting feeding operations with bulk food and water deliveries coming via truck and aircraft."

In North Carolina alone, the Salvation Army has nine mobile feeding units and has served over 7,100 meals, 6,600 drinks, and 3,700 snacks, it said.

Resources:

- Residents can visit ncdps.gov/helene to get information and additional assistance.
- Residents should not travel to western North Carolina to keep the roadways clear for search and rescue teams and utility crews.
- Residents can get in touch with loved ones by calling 2-1-1 or visiting unitedwaync.org to add them to search and rescue efforts.

RUMOR: FEMA IS IN THE PROCESS OF CONFISCATING HELENE SURVIVOR PROPERTY. IF I APPLY FOR DISASTER ASSISTANCE AND MY LAND IS DEEMED UNLIVABLE, MY PROPERTY WILL BE SEIZED.

Facts: FEMA said residents in declared counties who have applied for disaster assistance may be eligible to stay temporarily in a hotel or motel paid for by FEMA while they work on their long-term housing plan.

People do not need to request this assistance. FEMA will notify them of their eligibility through an automated phone call, text message, and/or email, depending upon the method of communication they selected at the time of application for disaster assistance.

Twenty-two shelters are housing just over 1,000 people, FEMA said. Mobile feeding operations continue to help survivors in hard-hit areas, including three mass feeding sites in Buncombe, McDowell and Watauga counties.

For current application timelines, visit disasterassistance.gov or

FEMA's state-specific

Helene disaster site for

North Carolina.

RUMOR: FUNDING FOR FEMA DISASTER RESPONSE WAS DIVERTED TO SUPPORT INTERNATIONAL EFFORTS OR BORDER-RELATED ISSUES.

Facts: This is false, FEMA said. No money is

being diverted from disaster response needs. FEMA's disaster response efforts and individual assistance is funded through the Disaster Relief Fund,

which is a dedicated fund

If you were affected by Helene, apply for disaster assistance. The fastest way is through

DisasterAssistance.gov. You can also apply through the

FEMA mobile app 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.

Chantal Allam:

919-829-4522,

@chantalallam

Joe Marusak:

704-358-5067, @jmarusak

Mayor Esther Manheimer has said it will take a while for the city's water system to work again.

"And I'm not talking about days," the mayor told the Asheville Citizen Times. "We want them to plan for longer than that."

Families stepped outside their homes on Saturday to grab what they needed as the volunteer convoys arrived, and thank their neighbors.

Soon, the convoy would go to a new neighborhood near Johnston Elementary School, and then others until truck beds ran out of water.

In an interview as he rode from house to house, Romero explained that he hasn't heard much about a government response in Emma. But people are looking out for each other.

"We're all neighbors, just looking out for people, you know?" he said.

And if he needed help, he knew they'd be there for him.

Ryan Oehrli: @oehrli

Western NC Latino community forms makeshift delivery service after Helene

BY RYAN OEHRLI
roehrlri@charlotteobserver.com

EMMA

At El Porvenir Cultural Center, volunteers who live nearby used walkie-talkies as cars came and went on volunteer missions to quickly deliver supplies to flood victims.

Usually, El Porvenir is a community center for Buncombe County's Emma, a largely Hispanic area. The center is home to quinceañeras and weddings. But since Sept. 30, it's been a lot of things.

The back — where people dropped off donations — had become a sort of volunteer-run, free Amazon-esque warehouse. Crews delivered those donations to neighbors. Others cut down trees and

repaired homes. There was a daycare, too.

They have been going through Emma, but also to communities like Swannanoa and Fletcher, said Andrea Golden, the director and founder of the community group Poder Emma.

Her group and several others made up La Milpa, an existing coalition of community groups now helping guide the operation out of El Porvenir.

'LOVE SHINING THROUGH'

Carol Alcantar made one of the day's first deliveries. She lives in East Asheville, and wanted to help Emma in particular because of her Mexican heritage.

The trip was quick and

light, only a five-minute drive to drop off some meat, tortillas and produce to a woman who lives near El Porvenir.

It proved fruitful in more ways than one. The woman who got the food explained that someone in Biltmore Village — had two trailers of supplies available for distribution.

Alcantar spoke with her in Spanish, thanked her for the information and relayed the message to others working at the distribution center.

"I think the love is shining through for the community more than anything," Alcantar said.

He and the other volunteers who filled several trucks had much more

than food and water, though. There was toilet paper, Dayquil, soap, shampoo, nonpotable water to fill buckets and bathe with, diapers and toys for kids.

Power, cell service and food have been returning to the area. Water is the biggest concern. Asheville



Diego Romero and Deydis Macario talk between stops in Emma. They were providing supplies to people in their Western North Carolina town on Saturday, Oct. 5, 2024.

'WE'RE ALL NEIGHBORS'

"Comida? Aguas?" Diego Romero asked later in the day as he went door to door on Deaverview Road.

He and the other volunteers who filled several trucks had much more

than food and water. The city's water system has been running low, and the community has been relying on volunteers to bring in supplies.

"We're all neighbors, just looking out for people, you know?" he said.

And if he needed help, he knew they'd be there for him.

Ryan Oehrli: @oehrli