

Helene creates piles of debris in Western NC that foretell long cleanup ahead

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People in Western North Carolina still lack potable water, power and other basics after Tropical Storm Helene, and the search for the missing continues.

But some of the longer-term challenges of recovering from the storm are starting to come into focus, including how to deal with the mountains of fallen trees, shattered buildings and other debris.

Jonathan Kanipe, town manager of Biltmore Forest in Buncombe County, said Helene felled an “uncountable number” of trees in his heavily wooded community of 1,500. A debris removal company estimates it will collect 100,000 cubic yards of trees and limbs from the 3-square-mile town, Kanipe said.

“To visualize that, imagine a football field covered with material to a depth of 56 feet,” he said at a press conference Thursday. “It’s highly likely the final number will be greater than this.”

The floodwaters that scoured Western North Carolina carried shattered pieces of farms, homes, country stores and campgrounds down the hills and valleys. Mangled cars and washing machines, propane tanks and the possessions of thousands of people are now snagged in tangled piles of trees felled by the wind and water.

The huge number of downed trees makes the task of cleaning up after Helene more daunting than after most hurricanes, said Joe Hack, a

senior project manager for Mecklenburg County’s solid waste department and president of the state chapter of the Solid Waste Association of North America, a trade group.

“It’s probably going to take months, maybe years, to get some of the debris up from some of the back areas,” Hack said in an interview.

For most communities, clearing that debris is not yet a priority. Buncombe County is still in the “cut-and-clear” phase, moving trees and debris off to the side of blocked streets and roads, said county manager Avril Pinder.

But Pinder said the county has begun talking with municipalities about where that material will go. They have designated storage areas for storm debris, she said, but with the sheer volume created by Tropical Storm Helene, “we have to expand that tremendously.”

Pinder said Buncombe County has also begun talking to state regulators about possibly burning some vegetative debris. State law prohibits most outdoor burning, but trees and other plants can be burned under certain conditions, according to the state Division of Air Quality.

As for building materials, furniture and other non-vegetative waste, the county is talking with companies that take construction and demolition debris, Pinder said.

“We know of a couple of places close by that we can haul that to,” she said. “We’re working with them now on contracts and what that will look like.”

LANDFILL SHORTAGE COULD BECOME WORSE

The state Division of Solid Waste Management regulates and helps coordinate debris cleanup after a storm, Hack said. The Federal Emergency Management Agency will likely provide money to help pay for it. In Raleigh on Wednesday, President Joe Biden said he’d approved a request from Gov. Roy Cooper to pay the entire cost of debris removal for at least the next six months.

But it will primarily be up to each county and town to determine how to clean up, in concert with private hauling and disposal companies, Hack said.

“Each community will evaluate the best way to handle it as they go,” he said. “There’s a lot we don’t know yet.”

Hack said much of the material will be hauled to emergency debris sites, where some effort is made to separate trees, cars and refrigerators, household trash and hazardous materials, so each can be shipped to the right disposal facility.

Some counties have landfills that can take the material; others usually ship their waste out anyway and will need to find some place to take storm debris.

“Long-term, there is ultimately a landfill shortage or disposal capacity shortage in North Carolina,” Hack said. “And this is just going to accelerate filling up some of the facilities.”

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