

Helene wrecked their Western NC towns and homes. Then came the bees and fire ants

BY CATHERINE MUCCIGROSSO
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An additional struggle to western North Carolina's Hurricane Helene recovery involves an increase in stinging insects like bees, yellow jackets and fire ants. That has had led state health authorities to make a large purchase of allergy medications.

The N.C. Department of Health and Human Services does not track reports of people who have been stung or bitten by insects. But the agency has had "anecdotal reports of increased numbers of stinging insects in the affected areas of western North Carolina," spokes-

woman Summer Tonizzo told The Charlotte Observer Tuesday by email.

"We have made a large purchase of epi-pens and Benadryl," the state health agency said in a statement to The Charlotte Observer late Monday.

The state did not say how much it was spending on that purchase. A state Health Department official was not made available for an interview.

The medication is being distributed to EMS and disaster relief agencies, hospitals and shelter operators.

Helene hit North Carolina on Sept. 26 causing landslides and flooding leaving mass destruction with 27 counties

designated as major disaster areas. Gov. Roy Cooper said Tuesday there were 95 confirmed deaths and 92 people still missing.

NC MEDICAL ORDERS AND WAIVERS

On Friday, State Health Director Betsey Tilson issued a standing order authorizing pharmacists licensed or practicing in North Carolina an emergency waiver to dispense epinephrine auto-injectors for treatment of allergic reactions to stinging and biting insects, and other allergens, according to the NC Board of Pharmacy's website.

The requests can be made from people with allergies, a caregiver, fam-

ily member or friend of a person at risk of experiencing or having a history of an anaphylactic reaction.

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services also activated the Emergency Prescription Assistance Program to help uninsured residents replace lost medications or medical equipment because of the storm.

MORE CONTACT WITH INSECTS

Many of the reported insect stings were from electricians and other outdoor workers, according to the Associated Press.

"If your habitat was disturbed, you're going to go out and look for more

places to live," said Sarah Stellwagen, assistant professor of biological sciences at UNC Charlotte with a background in entomology.

As for yellow jackets, they can be easily disturbed if someone walks across their ground nest.

"As people are out there moving debris around and getting their property back in order, I think they're probably coming in contact with these things more than they normally would," Stellwagen said.

People also may be around bugs more regularly because they're living without power and spending more time outside, or because of structural damage, homes may not sealed

off.

MORE ABOUT STINGING INSECTS

Insects, just like squirrels and other animals, also are preparing for winter so there's more competition for food. "There's lots of (insects) cleaning up the organic material as well," Stellwagen said, such as waste and rot after the flood.

She suggested wearing bug spray and watch for nests during cleanup in the mountains. And this time, Mother Nature may be helpful.

"Because it's getting cooler, I think people will start seeing some relief from these things for sure," Stellwagen said, "particularly when we get some regular frosts."

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FROM PAGE 1A

JOURNALIST

reports for and edit each week and which prints once a week on Wednesdays. For the Oct. 2 edition, the first after Helene, Brennan wrote the top story on the front page and also took the 1A centerepiece photo.

The headline was stark:

"DESTRUCTION."

The newspaper decided to print close to a thousand extra copies of that edition, since many places were without power and Wi-Fi. Brennan and the staff dropped off free copies of the newspapers at central distribution areas like community centers and fire departments.

"I went to one fire department and they said, 'This is the first news we've had since Friday (five days before)," Brennan said. "It just goes to show that local journalism — and the printed paper — can still be very important."

Brennan grew up in Durham and attended high school at the Durham School of the Arts. He traveled 200 miles west across North Carolina to go to college at Appalachian State, where he majored in journalism and at one point was editor-in-chief of The Appalachian, the student newspaper.

Before he had even finished college, the Watauga Democrat had offered him a full-time job as a reporter. Brennan jumped at it — this was during the COVID era and almost all of his classes were online. When the editor job at the newspaper came open, Brennan was first appointed as interim editor and then got the job permanently — at age 22 and only three months after his college graduation.

Shortly after that, Brennan had to report on a spate of fires in Deep Gap, which is an unincorporated area in Watauga County. He grew somewhat interested in the process of fighting fires during this reporting, as well as the people who do it.

"I had always been

interested in helping people anyway," Brennan said. "That's kind of why I got into journalism, too — to tell people's stories and hopefully help them. And then the Deep Gap fire chief was like, 'Hey, if you want to come to one of our trainings, we have one on Tuesday night.'"

Curious, Brennan stopped by and was enthralled by the work. He lived only 10 minutes from the station. So he joined Deep Gap as a volunteer firefighter in January 2022. A few months later, he got trained as an emergency medical technician (EMT). By February 2023, he had also joined the Watauga County Rescue Squad, also as a volunteer. Since he was volunteering, Brennan could mostly pick

and choose what calls he assisted on and make sure he had time for his reporting and editing.

"My journalism job is flexible enough that if I'm not in the middle of an interview or a deadline, I can typically leave work if it's a serious enough call," Brennan said. "I probably go on a couple of calls a week. The majority of calls are medical, but there is the occasional car crash or fire."

With input from his bosses, Brennan said he decided early on that he shouldn't and couldn't report on calls that he was working on as a first responder. Compartmentalization would be key.

As for Brennan himself,

he was fortunate. He lost power for only three hours during Hurricane Helene.

Wi-Fi has been a thornier issue. Brennan has filed some stories from McDonald's (this is an age-old reporting trick, since McDonald's are often open late and generally have reliable Wi-Fi).

As the rescue calls have slowed and Western North Carolina concentrates on recovery, Brennan has been more focused on the reporting side of his life lately. As for his long-term plans, he said: "I really don't know what the future holds. I just know that I love what I do right now — both the rescue side and the journalism side."

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FROM PAGE 1A

MILITARY

Along the route, many businesses are closed. Parking lots like Wendy's and Dollar General are caked in mud, while shopping centers are now stagnating areas for utility crews. A gem mining sign says "rain or shine," but it's closed.

A passing pickup driver gives a thumbs up. A woman rolls down her truck window, shouting, "Thank you for coming!" It's a sentiment shared throughout the day.

Turning onto NC 226 E, a manned barricade allows only relief crews and local traffic through.

Too many uprooted trees to count mar the landscape. About halfway up the mountain, a portion of the road is gone, as washed-away trees give way to a cliff drop with a view of the majestic mountains.

Army Sgt. Jared Marshall warned us it was coming. Road crews work to rebuild the outside lane as our military vehicle rumbles over the rock and gravel path.

During the hour-long ride, Marshall shared how Hurricane Helene affected his own family.

His in-laws fled their Fairview home, about 11 miles southeast of Asheville, and are staying at his house in Fayetteville.

"We're here trying to do everything we can to help out," Marshall said. "To see them happy that we're here, it brings happiness to me and all of the soldiers."

THE WORST I'VE SEEN'

Arriving at Harris Middle School in Spruce Pine, mountains of bottled water sit stacked on pallets out front. Inside the closed school's gym are boxes, bags and bins filled with donations.

The soldiers answer a call for help from a line crew over an excavator stuck in mud. Dylan Myers of Oklahoma, working alongside about 200

lineworkers from Ohio, New York and Connecticut, has been on several storm damage recoveries before in Florida and Louisiana.

"This is probably the worst I've seen," the general foreman said. "I've never seen so many in distress."

'WHEN THEY LOSE EVERYTHING IT'S A DISASTER'

At 10:44 a.m., at Dayton Elementary School, about a tenth of a mile away from the middle school, pallets of livestock and animal feed, along with firewood, sit outside near more bottled water mounds. Inside, classrooms are filled with donations. Paper signs by the doors read pet food, baby supplies, cleaning supplies, hygiene and home goods.

In the library, soldiers unpack and stock bookshelves with food.

By the next week, people will be able to come in and choose what they need, said Melissa Martin, a special education teacher at Mitchell High who was sorting boxes of canned food in a classroom.

"My students have

hardly anything to begin with," Martin said, her voice cracking. "And when they lose everything it's a disaster."

Residents still struggle without power, water service and cell service.

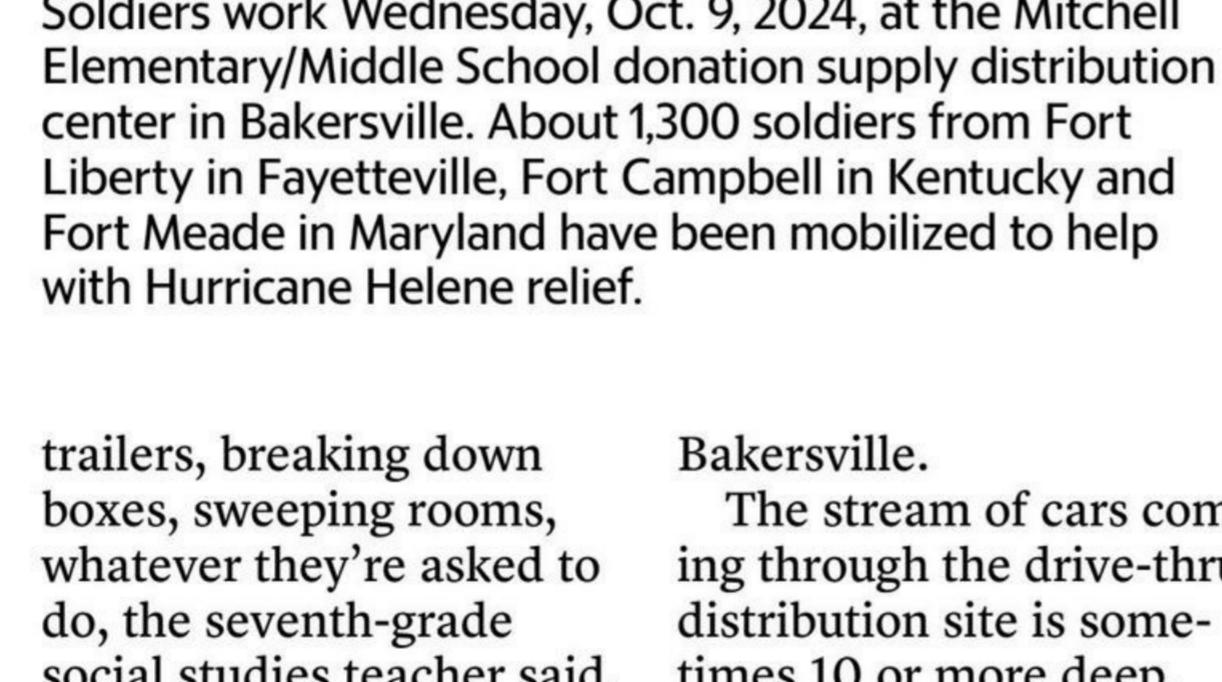
"Some still can't get out," Martin said. She and Sarah Margaret Smith of Watauga Opportunities logged 55 miles checking on students the day before. Most of the students have been accounted for, but they're still looking for some, she said. "We know they're safe but where did they go?"

Wearing a purple T-shirt with block white letters reading "We are still one," Lori Jones is coordinator at the Dayton site. The soldiers help by unloading



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The gym of Harris Elementary Middle School in Spruce Pine is overflowing with donations and supplies for families affected by Hurricane Helene in Mitchell County on Wednesday, Oct. 9, 2024.



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Soldiers work Wednesday, Oct. 9, 2024, at the Mitchell Elementary/Middle School donation supply distribution center in Bakersville. About 1,300 soldiers from Fort Liberty in Fayetteville, Fort Campbell in Kentucky and Fort Meade in Maryland have been mobilized to help with Hurricane Helene relief.

trailers, breaking down boxes, sweeping rooms, whatever they're asked to do, the seventh-grade social studies teacher said.

Seeing the soldiers brings her a feeling of safety and security.

"It gets better every day," she said. It's a statement echoed throughout the day by other volunteers and residents.

"It's a blessing to all of us here because the simple things we take for granted have been taken away," teary-eyed Duncan said.

"We couldn't make it without all the help."

'WE COULDN'T MAKE IT WITHOUT ALL THE HELP'

At 1:23 p.m., we headed about five miles away to the new Mitchell Elementary/Middle School in

Bakersville.

The stream of cars coming through the drive-thru distribution site is sometimes 10 or more cars.

Wanda Duncan came for electrolytes. Soldiers and volunteers race to cars with arms full of water cases, Band-aids and wipes. Some people arrive not knowing what they need, while others have lists.

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"We couldn't make it without all the help."

'IT'S A BLESSING TO ALL OF US HERE BECAUSE THE SIMPLE THINGS WE TAKE FOR GRANTED HAVE BEEN TAKEN AWAY'

But people are beginning to smile and joke more.

Small groups of volunteers have popped in from the Charlotte area too. Then the Army showed up

A sweet, familiar scent wafts through the area. Auntie Ruth's family-owned doughnut and pretzel business from East Tennessee gives out freshly made glazed doughnuts and coffee from a borrowed food truck. "We're happy to do something," said Jolene Kauffman, the owner's daughter. "It's something to brighten their days."

Lyle Hendrix of Hendersonville arrives in a pickup truck with donations collected by DSSOLVR brewery in downtown Asheville. His right wrist is covered in poison ivy blisters from cutting down trees in his neighborhood to get himself and others out. But he's fine.

"This has shown me that people really are good," he said. "Everyone is a hero."

Dale Blevins, 66, has been overseeing supplies and donations since the distribution center opened Oct. 1. "You could see the distress on their faces," he said.

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