

# Helene flooding damages Mountain Island Lake homes

Some blame Duke Energy for it

BY GAVIN OFF  
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Few people in Mecklenburg County suffered more from Hurricane Helene than residents whose homes border the Catwaba River south of Mountain Island Lake.

Floodwater there covered streets. It gushed into homes and filled backyard out buildings with near ceiling-level brown water. A preliminary assessment found four homes to be total losses, said Paige Grande, a spokesperson for Charlotte-Mecklenburg Emergency Management. People living in about 100 houses were displaced.

Lake Drive resident Erik Jendresen, who's sued Duke Energy before over flooding, says the power company shares the blame.

Jendresen lives just downstream of Mountain Island Lake, where water levels were above Duke Energy's target in the days leading up to Helene's arrival, according to the company's website.

Water levels at Lake Norman, just north, were near target levels but above minimums, data show.

Jendresen questioned why the power company didn't release some water — at Mountain Island Lake and others — in anticipation of the influx of water streaming down from the mountains. Lowering the water levels ahead of time and increasing the lake's storage capacity would have prevented the lake from sending so much water over the spillway at once, Jendresen said.

A smaller spill means a smaller impact on communities downstream.

"They could have taken steps well in advance to drastically lower levels at all lakes in the 11-lake system to the bare minimum they're allowed to," said Jendresen, 64. "There's a perception that Duke is like the evil empire. They've earned it."

In an email to The Charlotte Observer on Wednesday evening, Ben Williamson, a Duke Energy spokesperson, said all of the company's lakes were at or below target levels when the hurricane's flood waters reached them.

He said Lake Norman's large size makes it difficult to lower the reservoir quickly, since all of the released water must flow through the much smaller Mountain Island Lake.

"Due to the size of Mountain Island Lake and the historic amount of rainfall from this event, any additional



A resident stands at the end of Hart Road and Riverhaven Drive near Mountain Island Lake on Sept. 28. The flooding occurred as Duke Energy worked to move Helene's floodwater through its system and, eventually, to the ocean.

storage that would have been created in the lake would not have prevented the flooding associated with the storm," Williamson wrote to The Observer. "If Duke Energy began aggressively moving water downstream before a reliable or accurate forecast was available, it could have risked the entire region suffering severe water shortages (including drinking water) if the storm missed the region, or dry weather persisted."

## FLOOD OF RECORD

Brandon Jones has been the Catawba Riverkeeper since 2018. He's never seen the river flood like it did last week. It's likely no one else has, either.

"This will be the flood of record," Jones said. "We talk about the great flood of 1916. This is bigger. This has more damage. This is more catastrophic."

Helene dumped nearly two feet of rain on some parts of Western North Carolina. Eighteen inches fell onto part of McDowell County, which sits in the Catawba River basin, according to North Carolina State University.

The river, which changes to the Wateree River in South Carolina, starts in the Blue Ridge Mountains and runs 225 miles through 26 coun-

ties across the Carolinas.

Jones said one of the river's bottle-necks is the Mountain Island Lake dam. Unlike other dams along the Catawba, the one south of Mountain Island Lake doesn't have flood gates. Water can only move through the dam's spillway or hydroelectric turbines, Jones said.

"The important thing to remember is Duke is not able to quickly move water through the system," he said. "They need a long run-up time because the reservoirs were not designed for flood control. So when the forecast changes quickly or worsens, they are unable to adjust."

Jones said Mountain Island Lake's turbines can move about 10,000 cubic feet of water per second — or about 75,000 gallons per second. He said the influx of water into the lake peaked at about 100,000 cubic feet per second.

"I would expect this to be a 1,000-year flood," he said. "It's terrible. And all of these people just recovered from the last flood in 2019."

## CATAWBA RIVER FLOODED HOMES IN 2019

In June 2019, after three days of rain, Duke released what was then the largest amount of water ever from

Lake Norman. Water poured into more than 100 homes, including many on Lake and Riverside drives near Mountain Island Lake.

The rush of water filled Jendresen's home with about five feet of the swollen, muddy river.

He and roughly 40 other families sued Duke Energy. They accused the power company of negligence and negligent infliction of emotional distress and settled the lawsuit last year.

Jendresen rebuilt after the 2019 flood, but he did so on 12-foot pilings. He told the Observer on Tuesday that his home was 8 inches away from flooding again. He said his house was one of only a few on Lake or Riverside drives that wasn't harmed by the recent surge.

Many weren't so lucky.

"Nobody got hurt," he said. "But there's a lot of hurt feelings and a lot of ruined lives."

Grande, with Mecklenburg County Emergency Management, said an official assessment of the damage on Lake and Riverside drives will begin Wednesday. The assessment, she said, would take about a week.

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## Helene damage creates election challenges in NC

BY MARY RAMSEY  
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Western North Carolina damage from Hurricane Helene may shake up the presidential election in the critical battleground state, which could have national implications, state politics experts say.

State officials have confirmed more than 50 deaths in North Carolina, a number that's expected to rise, and President Joe Biden declared a major disaster in 25 counties. Hundreds of thousands were still without power as of Tuesday as power crews, the North Carolina National Guard and other relief workers tried to reach areas cut off by impassable roads.

The general public is more focused on helping others and surviving in Helene-devastated communities than a race where state polls show Republican former President Donald Trump leading Democratic Vice President Kamala Harris by less than one percentage point, experts say.

"It's just not a priority right now," said Susan Roberts, a political science professor at Davidson College.

But a drop in turnout due to the storm could swing the presidential race.

"It affects so many people that it will certainly have an effect on the election," said Eric Heberlig, a political science professor at UNC Charlotte. "... Those small changes in turnout could very much make a difference in who wins and who loses."

## VOTER DEMOGRAPHICS IN WESTERN NC

Trump in 2020 won 23 of the 25 counties now included in the federal disaster declaration for Helene, most of them by double digits, on his way to a narrow

victory in North Carolina. Biden carried just two — Buncombe County, home to Asheville, and Watauga County, which includes the town of Boone.

The heavy Republican lean in the western portion of the state is a cause for concern for the Trump campaign, Heberlig said.

"If this damage significantly depresses turnout in most areas out there, that's more likely to have an impact on the Republicans than the Democrats," he said.

The population differences between many of those rural, red counties and more liberal population centers such as Asheville complicates the electoral math, Heberlig added.

"You can have a 10% drop in turnout in many of the rural counties, but a 10% drop in Asheville has a lot larger numerical impact, just because it has many more people," Heberlig said.

Roberts said the situation probably doesn't give Harris a chance to pick up many votes in the affected areas, but she could benefit from lower turnout in rural areas.

"The rural vote has been decidedly for former President Trump ... Should Trump lose North Carolina by 1% or less than 1%, then it's all going to come back to, were there free and fair elections in Western North Carolina?" she said.

## SHAKING UP CAMPAIGNING AND ELECTION PLANNING

The devastation in Western North Carolina is so severe people may struggle to cast their ballots, even if state officials give voters and election boards flexibility, Roberts predicted.

"It's not all going to be solved by making exceptions for absentee ballots," she said.

Election officials face a short window,

with Election Day on Nov. 5 and early voting scheduled to start even sooner, to address disruptions to the postal service, destruction of polling places and voters with missing or damaged IDs.

"It's a huge logistical feat to put on an election under normal conditions, let alone under these," Heberlig said.

The campaigns will also have to adjust their strategies, he added.

"Any kind of grassroots door-knocking or mobilization activities that were planned in those counties, those plans are severely disrupted," Heberlig said.

A likely point of emphasis for both campaigns, according to Heberlig: finding ways to reach affected voters and educate them about their options for casting ballots.

Both campaigns also have to be careful to avoid creating a backlash by appearing insensitive to the loss of life and property in their next moves, Roberts said. That means not getting in the way of emergency response and avoiding a lot of negative messaging, she said.

"The last several weeks prior to an election is when you see more of a deluge, if you will, of negative ads. Would that be the wise choice for the Asheville media market now? I'm not sure that it would," she said.

**IN 2020, TRUMP WON 23 OF THE 25 COUNTIES NOW INCLUDED IN THE FEDERAL DISASTER DECLARATION FOR HELENE, MOST OF THEM BY DOUBLE DIGITS, ON HIS WAY TO A NARROW VICTORY IN NORTH CAROLINA. BIDEN CARRIED JUST TWO — BUNCOMBE COUNTY, HOME TO ASHEVILLE, AND WATAUGA COUNTY, WHICH INCLUDES THE TOWN OF BOONE.**

## WILL HELENE IMPACT NC ELECTION RESULTS?

In addition to Republicans and Democrats' turning out their respective bases in Western North Carolina, there's also the question of how unaffiliated voters — North Carolina's largest affiliation — will react to the storm, Roberts said.

"The natural disaster may mean that those people just won't show up to the polls ... It might be too inconvenient," Roberts said.

In a state where unaffiliated voters are critical to winning elections, a natural disaster can be a real blow to turnout, Heberlig said.

"People who are marginally interested in politics anyway are hard to turn out, but when you have a home and family to worry about, that's obviously going to take precedence," he said. "So for lots of people, worrying about the election is going to be No. 47 on the list of things that they want to worry about."

More could happen to change the dynamics of the presidential race in the last month of the campaign, but Heberlig predicts Helene's aftermath "is big enough" to "certainly affect turnout."

"Our statewide races tend to be so close that just about anything can swing it one way or another," he said.

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