

Helene prompts evacuation of 2,000 inmates from NC mountain prisons. Where are they?

BY JOE MARUSAK
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Buses and some vans evacuated at least 2,000 inmates this week from five prisons in the North Carolina mountains, after Hurricane Helene damaged community water and electrical utility systems that serve the prisons, state prison officials said.

On Monday, about 400 women were bused from Western Correctional Center for Women in Swannanoa and the Black Mountain Substance Abuse Treatment Center for Women in Black Mountain to other correctional facilities for women, according to the N.C. Department of Adult Correction.

On Tuesday, 841 men incarcerated at Avery-Mitchell Correctional Institution in Spruce Pine

were taken to seven other prisons across the state on Department of Adult Correction buses, department officials said.

And more than 800 men were bused Wednesday from Mountain View Correctional Institution in Spruce Pine and Craggy Correctional Center in Asheville, officials said.

The 248 men in Craggy Correctional were taken to Alexander Correctional Institution in Taylorsville, while the 557 men in Mountain View were bused to six prisons in central and eastern parts of the state, according to the department.

The six prisons are Granville Correctional Institution in Butner; Maury Correctional Institution in Maury; Neuse Correctional Institution in Goldsboro; Pender Correctional Institution in Burgaw; Warren Correctional Institution

in Manson; and Pamlico Correctional Institution in Bayboro.

"All offenders are safe, and (the department) is taking appropriate steps to ensure continued health and safety of staff and offenders," officials said in a news release.

Family and friends should not call the prisons where people were moved, officials said. Inmates were able to make phone calls after they arrived.

Check the department's online Offender Locator site to confirm your loved one's new temporary location, prison officials said. The site will be updated with a person's new location within 24 hours of their move.

Officials decided Sunday to evacuate the facilities based on the damage, according to the announcement.

Some of the 360 minimum-custody inmates at Western Correctional Center for Women were moved to Anson Correctional Institution in Polkton, and others to North Carolina Correctional Institution for Women in Raleigh.

The 45 people receiving in-patient alcohol and drug treatment at the Black Mountain treatment center are now at the North Piedmont Confinement in Response to Violation facility in Lexington.

Inmates at Avery-Mitchell Correctional Institution were taken to Scotland Correctional Institution in Laurinburg; Tabor Correctional Institution in Tabor City; Nash Correctional Institution in Nashville; Eastern Correctional Institution in Maury; Southern Correctional Institution in Troy; Maury Correctional Institution in Maury; and Harnett Correctional Institution in Lillington.

It's unknown how long repairs to the prisons will take.

"There's a very long time frame for those repairs – particularly for water," Keith Acree, spokesman for the Department of Adult Correction, told The Charlotte Observer on Thursday. "Our understanding is that Spruce Pine, Asheville and Swannanoa are not expected to have water restored for weeks."

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Ivanka Trump flies to Hickory, NC, to help donate Starlink devices for Helene victims

BY JULIA COIN
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loads of supplies delivered from nearby communities.

The White House on Monday announced dozens of Starlink satellite systems would be launched to provide high-speed internet access in North Carolina.

"Since the Hurricane Helene disaster, SpaceX has sent as many Starlink terminals as possible to help areas in need," SpaceX CEO Elon Musk wrote in a post on the social platform X. "Earlier today, @realDonaldTrump alerted me to additional people who need Starlink Internet in North Carolina. We are sending them terminals right away."

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SUPPLY CHAINS

power and had to throw out fresh items will result in higher prices and harder-to-find items "probably within days," he said Wednesday afternoon.

"Short-term, predominantly we'll probably see fresh vegetables, fruits, anything being imported from South America. To a lesser degree, Europe."

Ferguson isn't aware of loss of power at cold storage facilities, where food stocks are kept before going to supermarkets. But when they and grocery stores have to restock, it could be difficult getting items from the West Coast.

"The strike would create that by itself. But it's going to be amplified by the hurricane because existing inventories are depleted," Ferguson said. "It's going to be up and down the East Coast from the port shutdowns, but particularly the Carolinas, Florida, Georgia."

The port strike could impact anything from larger European auto parts used in South Carolina's BMW or Volvo plants to French or Italian wines, German beer or cheeses. Large appliances like washing machines or heavy machinery from Europe could become

difficult to get.

The strike also could impact produce from the West Coast. How long consumers see those impacts will depend on the strike.

"That's going to be a problem until the ports reopen," Ferguson said.

"There's not really an economical way to get fresh food to the East Coast, other than the threat of panic buying."

Companies that trade in non-perishable items, particularly large retailers, pre-ordered inventory ahead of the strike to have a month or so of supply.

"I don't see a real need to panic buy things like electronics, toys, Christmas presents," Ferguson said. "These big retailers were anticipating strikes."

Prices are likely to rise on construction materials, due to port availability and tremendous need in Helene's path, he said.

"There's going to be a lot of rebuilding," Ferguson said.

If the strike lasts longer than the month most companies stocked up for, then consumers will begin to feel a steeper impact, he said.

PANIC BUYING COULD IMPACT PRODUCT AVAILABILITY

Because retailers began prepping for a possible dock worker strike during the summer, impacts on customers should be minimal for the first couple of weeks, said University of South Carolina research economist Joey Von Nessen.

That's if — and it's a big if — consumers follow normal buying patterns.

For communities that remember how fast toilet paper flew off the shelves during the height of the COVID pandemic, or tried to buy milk and bread on a snow day, there's always the threat of panic buying.

"Anticipated shortages can sometimes lead to current shortages," Von Nessen said. "That creates that self-fulfilling prophecy."

Both sides of the worker strike have incentive to resolve in quickly, he said, since both are consumers themselves and know how critical that work is to the region's infrastructure.

The port in Charleston contributes to one of every nine South Carolina jobs and has an annual economic impact of \$87 billion, Von Nessen said.

Unlike bananas that may spoil if they have to take a longer, more expensive route through the West Coast due to the strike, South Carolina's main exports or vehicles,

tires and agricultural products. "All of those are non-perishable items," Von Nessen said.

But if the strike goes beyond two weeks, price increases and product shortages could start to rise, he said. It's an unusual time to forecast, with variables from labor negotiations to markets and roads wiped away by the hurricane and unable to receive goods.

"It is very unusual to have two events like this happen at the same time," Von Nessen said. "It just magnifies the challenge. It's important to keep in mind not to panic."

INTERSTATE LOSS TO DRIVE REGIONAL CONCERN

Even without the dock-worker strike, the Carolinas would be facing logistical concerns.

"I-40 and 26 are major thoroughfares for a lot of freight for the east coast," Handfield said. "So it is hitting many different areas of the country, which will likely impact many different categories. One of the biggest concerns is healthcare supplies for the patients in Helene's path, which typically do not have a lot of inventory."

It likely will be months before logistical channels improve.

"We need to be thinking about the infrastructure — cell phone towers, roads,

power lines and many other elements," Handfield said. "This will take months to repair and get this community working again."

PRICE GOUGING AT RETAIL SHOPS

Too many retailers to name have donated millions of dollars worth of supplies to places ravaged by Helene, said Andy Ellen, president and general counsel for the 2,500-member North Carolina Retail Merchants Association.

Yet there's still a cost to all those diverted trucks and manpower.

"Those are some of the items that would have moved from a distribution center into a store that wasn't impacted by the hurricane," Ellen said.

He doesn't expect a short-term problem getting water, cleaning supplies or plywood rebuilt from the storm. But he does see potential issues with the dockworker strike. About 40% of what ends up on store shelves in the country pass through those ports, Ellen said.

Even if the strike ends quickly but workers get the wage increases they're seeking, he said, markets could feel it. "That will also potentially impact price points," Ellen said.

The group negotiating for the ports has offered 50% raises over the six-year life

of the contract, while the union has demanded 77%.

Consumers should expect to see some price increases, including staples like coffee, Ellen said. Customers also can help or hurt supply based on how they shop.

"Regardless of the hurricane and regardless of this strike, it is not a time for consumers to panic," Ellen said. "We've had that before."

Avian flu drove up egg prices in the past, and the war in Ukraine impacted wheat. COVID stressed items across the supply chain. As prices increase and people buy what they can find, either for themselves or to donate, some people might mistake the natural supply and demand of pricing with price gouging, Ellen said.

"That doesn't mean that the retailer is doing anything wrong," he said.

Ellen is hopeful conditions will improve by the holiday shopping season.

He's also concerned as the country is still recovering from high prices due to inflation.

How long the port strike lasts will determine whether it's a blip or something closer to the COVID-era supply chain challenges.

"We could see some of that in the future," Ellen said. "If this strike is elongated, we will see higher prices on store shelves."

FROM PAGE 1A

PILOT

able 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 He-

lene 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 air-lifting 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 furni-

ture 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 years, months, maybe years.

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 Geronimo, 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 camouflage 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 Rob-

inson'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 build-

ing, looking for a second

certification — and hoping

to save one more life.

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