



TRAVIS LONG tlong@newsobserver.com

Jen Dombrowski arrives in downtown Marshall to help a friend clean up her business on Tuesday after the French Broad River caused catastrophic flooding. The remnants of Hurricane Helene caused widespread flooding, downed trees and power outages in western North Carolina.

## Starlink reconnects Western NC reeling from Helene; who gets credit becomes political

BY BRIAN GORDON AND EMILY VESPA, CORRESPONDENT  
bgordon@newsobserver.com

To reconnect emergency responders and residents after Hurricane Helene, the Federal Emergency Management Agency has shipped dozens of Starlink satellite systems to rural Western North Carolina.

On Monday, FEMA announced 40 Starlink systems were in the region to assist emergency communications, with plans to deploy one system to each county affected by the storm. Another 140 systems will be sent to aid "with communications infrastructure restoration," the White House said in a Sept. 30 statement on relief efforts.

A subsidiary of Elon Musk's SpaceX, Starlink has positioned more than 6,000 satellites in low-Earth orbit to beam broadband internet service to on-the-ground terminals. The first North Carolina households installed Starlink in 2021, and since then the system has been used in the aftermaths of natural disasters and war worldwide where traditional internet infrastructure faltered. Ukraine fighters, for example, have relied on Starlink in their battle against Russia.

On Tuesday, North Carolina mountain counties reported Starlink enabled emergency responders to receive calls and residents to check in on family. In Ashe County, north of Boone, the emergency management department has established connection at more than half-dozen fire stations. Residents are advised to turn on Wi-Fi calling on their phones to link to this satellite service.

Many areas across Western North Carolina, from Cherokee to Asheville to the Blue Ridge foothills, have struggled to find consistent internet and cellular connectivity since Friday, after the remnants of Hurricane Helene dumped feet of water and caused destructive flooding. As of Monday, close to 70% of the region's cellphone towers and equipment were out of service, federal communications data showed, as cut fiber-optic cables prompted widespread blackouts, according to the nonprofit news outlet Asheville Watchdog.

### STARLINK SERVICE GETS POLITICAL

Outside the region, the deployment of Starlink to North Carolina became politicized after false claims spread that former

President Donald Trump had arranged the deployment of Starlink systems to storm-affected areas after the current administration failed or refused to do the same.

Trump said Monday during a speech in Valdosta, Georgia, that he had spoken to Musk about delivering Starlink systems to storm-affected areas. Early the next morning, Musk, who has endorsed Trump's reelection bid, announced his coordination with the Republican candidate. On the platform X, which Musk also owns, the SpaceX founder wrote

"Earlier today, @realDonaldTrump alerted me to additional people who need Starlink Internet in North Carolina. We are sending them terminals right away."

On Tuesday, North Carolina state Sen. Danny Britt, a Republican who represents the Sandhills counties of Robeson, Hoke and Scotland across the state from Western North Carolina, posted on X that he had asked Trump "for help restoring communications to Western NC, and he delivered."

"Within hours, President Trump got Elon Musk on the phone and a commitment of as many Starlink devices as we need to help save North

had been marred by widespread fraud would not hold up in court. But Trump seemed not to care.

"The details don't matter," the brief quotes Trump as saying.

Around the same time, the brief says, Pence also sought to convince Trump that he had lost the election. During a private lunch in mid-November 2020, for example, Pence suggested to Trump that he accept defeat and run again in the next presidential race, but Trump did not want to hear about it.

"I don't know," the brief quotes him as saying, "2024 is so far-off."

Trump criticized the brief and its release, portraying it as a political act. "They should have never allowed the information to be -- to come before the public," he said in an interview on NewsNation on Wednesday.

Smith's 165-page brief was initially filed under seal last week. It was designed to help Chutkan, who is overseeing the case, to determine how much of the indictment can survive the Supreme Court's landmark ruling in July granting Trump a broad form of immunity against prosecution for many official acts while in office.

Instead, Trump looked at the aide and said only, "So what?" according to grand jury testimony newly disclosed in the brief.

Much earlier, the brief says, one of Trump's lawyers gave him an "honest assessment" that his false claims that the election

Carolinians."

However, the White House says the Starlink systems were on their way before these conversations occurred. FEMA announced Starlink's presence in North Carolina on Sept. 30, the same day Trump spoke in Valdosta.

On X, White House spokesperson Andrew Bates commented on the Starlink deployment chronology, responding to an article about Trump and Musk's conversations by stating, "This is already happening." Trump's daughter, Ivanka, visited Hickory on Wednesday to deliver 300 Starlink systems in a visit coordinated by Medic Corps, a group running relief operations out of the Hickory Regional Airport. Ivanka Trump took photos with pilots, airport staff and volunteers.

### WHAT HAPPENED TO GRANT FUNDING?

Some on social media claimed that President Joe Biden or the Federal Communications Commission previously revoked from Starlink more than \$900 million in grant funds to expand high-speed internet access in rural North Carolina. That's not accurate.

In fact, the FCC had reviewed the grant applications in a two-phase process. Starlink was one of 379 applicants — called "winning bidders" — that made it past the first phase.

But funds for the winning bidders were contingent on a second-phase, in-depth application. After Starlink filed that application, the FCC determined that it didn't qualify for funding.

According to a letter from the FCC chairperson, the agency found that Starlink:

- Couldn't provide internet at the required speed set by the FCC.
- Would have imposed "high start-up costs on rural consumers," requiring subscribers to buy a \$600 dish to access internet.
- Proposed using some funds to provide internet to places like parking lots and road medians, which are not underserved rural households like the program intended.

*Julia Coin of the Charlotte Observer contributed.*

*Brian Gordon:  
919-861-1238,  
@skyoutbriout*

## Belmont lifts boil water advisory, investigates cause of discoloration in some areas

BY JEFF A. CHAMER  
jchamer@charlotteobserver.com

Belmont residents are no longer being asked to boil their water before drinking it or using it for things like brushing their teeth, the city said in a press release Tuesday.

The boil water advisory was lifted.

The city issued the advisory on Monday after discoloration was found in multiple areas of the city. The city doesn't know what the cause of the discoloration was and is still investigating it, the press release said.

The discoloration in water is called "turbidity," the city said, and is frequently monitored at the treatment plant. Turbidity does not pose a health risk, but can "interfere with disinfection."

"This tells us whether we are effectively filtering the water supply," the city's Monday press release said.

"Test results on our treated water at the plant indicate the removal of all turbidity after treatment, which points to an issue in the distribution system beyond what the treatment plant can control."

The city flushed hydrants and will continue to flush hydrants in impacted areas, the press release said, but water samples tested showed normal chlorine levels and clear of bacteria.

*Jeff A. Chamer:  
@jchamer*

## 'Gone': The main route through the NC mountains will take a long time to rebuild

BY RICHARD STRADLING  
rstradling@newsobserver.com

westbound lanes will be usable while the east-bound lanes are rebuilt, Uchiyama said.

Of all the roads that need fixing in Western North Carolina, none will pose a bigger challenge than Interstate 40 in the Pigeon River Gorge.

The swollen river scoured the earth below the four-lane highway, washing away the east-bound lanes in several places. The largest section, about 4 miles from the Tennessee line, gave way around noon on Friday.

Remarkably, no one has reported any cars or trucks tumbling into the river, according to the State Highway Patrol.

But the highway is closed in both directions, severing the busiest connection between North Carolina and Tennessee, which is about 15 miles long.

Usually the threat comes from above, as rocks slide down the walls of the gorge onto the highway on both sides of the state line. A slide on the North Carolina side in October 2009 closed the interstate in both directions for six months, as crews cleared debris and stabilized with rock face.

During that closure, westbound drivers were encouraged to take I-26 north from Asheville to I-81 at Johnston City, Tennessee.

But that's not an option now. Floodwaters knocked down twin spans that carried I-26 over the Nolichucky River in Erwin, about 40 miles from the North Carolina line. Tennessee DOT spokesman Mark Nagi says there's no timeline set for rebuilding them and reopening the highway.

For now, traffic apps are advising drivers wishing to go west toward Knoxville and Nashville from the Triangle to take I-77 north to I-81 near Wytheville, Virginia. Drivers leaving Charlotte are advised to take Highway 321 to I-40 west to US 25/70 to I-81.

*Richard Stradling:  
919-829-4739,  
@RStradling*

## Judge unseals new evidence in election case against Trump

BY ALAN FEUER AND CHARLIE SAVAGE  
NYT News Service

In a sprawling legal brief partly unsealed Wednesday, special counsel Jack Smith laid out his case for why former President Donald Trump is not immune from prosecution on federal charges of plotting to overturn the 2020 election.

The redacted brief, made public by Judge Tanya Chutkan of U.S. District Court in Washington, adds new details to the already extensive public record of how Trump lost the race but attempted nonetheless to cling to power.

Part of the brief focuses, for example, on a social media post that Trump sent on the afternoon of the attack on the Capitol on Jan. 6, 2021, telling supporters that Vice President Mike Pence had let them all down. Smith laid out extensive arguments for why

that post on Twitter should be considered an unofficial act of a desperate losing candidate, rather than the official act of a president that would be considered immune from prosecution under a landmark Supreme Court ruling this summer.

After Trump's Twitter post focused the enraged mob's attention on harming Pence and the Secret Service took the vice president to a secure location, an aide rushed into the dining room of the Oval Office where Trump was watching television. The aide alerted him to the developing situation, in the hope that Trump would then take action to ensure Pence's safety.

Instead, Trump looked at the aide and said only, "So what?" according to grand jury testimony newly disclosed in the brief.

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had been marred by widespread fraud would not hold up in court. But Trump seemed not to care.

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Trump criticized the brief and its release, portraying it as a political act. "They should have never allowed the information to be -- to come before the public," he said in an interview on NewsNation on Wednesday.

Smith and his deputies used their brief to paint all of the indictment's many individual allegations as fair game, depicting them as examples of Trump pursuing electioneering activity in his private role as a candidate for office, not as protected acts taken in his official capacity as president.

The defendant asserts that he is immune from prosecution for his criminal scheme to overturn the 2020 presidential election because, he claims, it entailed official conduct, "prosecutors wrote."

"Not so. Although the defendant was the incumbent president during the charged conspiracies, his scheme was fundamentally a private one."

Still, despite its narrow legal purpose, the expansive brief also served as something like a trial brief, setting forth Smith's fullest exposition yet of what he has learned in his nearly two-year-long investigation of Trump.

The filing was accompanied by a lengthy sealed appendix of many of the fruits of that inquiry -- FBI interviews, search warrant affidavits and grand jury testimony -- some of which could also soon be revealed to the public.

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