

Catawba Falls trail closed again

One overlook washed away in storm

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Catawba Falls trails near Old Fort reopened in late May after a two-year closure for improvements. Now, the trails are closed again after Hurricane Helene swept through as a tropical storm and devastated the area.

Despite the damage, the newly built stairs that take visitors to the waterfalls remain largely intact.

The U.S. Forest Service's Grandfather Ranger District manages the Pisgah and Nantahala national forests. In response to the widespread damage caused by Helene, all recreation sites on the Pisgah and Nantahala now remain closed until hazardous conditions improve and assessments can be completed, according to the website for the U.S. Forest Service.

That includes Catawba Falls near Old Fort. The trail leading to the falls had previously been closed for two years as it underwent major improvements to add retaining walls, boardwalks, staircases and overlooks to improve the trail and visitor safety. About 580 stairs, three overlooks and an observation tower were added. It reopened May 31 this year.

Lisa Jennings, the recreation manager with the Grandfather District, said the stairs that were built to Catawba Falls only suffered minor damage from Helene and are 90% intact.

The upper overlook was washed away by Helene but the staircase and the tower were untouched, Jennings said. The U.S. Forest Service will need to further inspect the stairs and the trails as the process of reopening moves forward, she said.

"There will need to be additional assessments and repairs and/or bypasses around dam-



PHOTOS SUBMITTED

There is no timeline as to when the Pisgah National Forest and Catawba Falls could open again.



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aged sections prior to opening," Jennings said. There is no timeline as to when the Pisgah National Forest and Catawba Falls could open again, she said.

"Visitors must heed those closures," Jennings said. Jennings said Catawba Falls and the surrounding national forest will not reopen until the



Lisa Jennings with the U.S. Forest Service said that the upper overlook at Catawba Falls was washed away by the storm but the staircase and the tower were untouched. This photo was taken after Helene swept through McDowell County.

Old Fort community is ready to welcome back visitors.

Old Fort suffered heavy flooding and damage during the storm. "We will be working with local officials and emergency managers to reopen Catawba Falls as soon as feasible so that the community can have the recreation

support that drives much of its economy," Jennings said. "However, we know that will take time. Damage to infrastructure in this area was major. The fact that the majority of the new staircase and overlooks were not damaged is some good news in an otherwise tough time."

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