

Helene damage creates election challenges in NC

October 6, 2024 | Charlotte Observer, The (NC) Author: Mary Ramsey; Staff Writer | Section: News | 911 Words Page: 9A OpenURL Link

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.

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.

Mary Ramsey: @mcolleen1996

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Mary Ramsey, Staff Writer, 'Helene damage creates election challenges in NC', *Charlotte Observer, The* (online), 6 Oct 2024 9A https://infoweb.newsbank.com/apps/news/document-view?p=AMNEWS&docref=news/19C0D08C58E1EF20



Hurricane Helene evacuees seek temporary homes in Charlotte

October 6, 2024 | Charlotte Observer, The (NC)

Author: Desiree Mathurin; Staff Writer | Section: News | 1524 Words

Page: 14A OpenURL Link

On Sept. 26, Porter Watson started to prepare for Hurricane Helene. He lives in Woodfin, a mountain town north of Asheville and uphill from the French Broad River.

He bought a few microwavable meals, got gas with no issues, along with ice. Then the rain came. The power went out, the water shut off and cell service ceased. Watson watched the river rise and rage, bringing along debris and PVC pipes the size of train cars.

Luckily his home didn't sustain any damage. But after nearby flooding receded, he knew the same couldn't be said for many other areas of Western North Carolina. He jumped into the fray, helping friends dig out from the mud and damage caused by flood waters.

Then Watson and his wife Layson made the decision to leave the area.

"The whole idea is to minimize our burden on the search-and-rescue and recovery efforts and available resources," he said. "Our house is an open shelter right now for anyone who needs it."

He's one of many western North Carolinians temporarily relocating two hours away to Charlotte and other eastern areas as emergency workers begin to fix the infrastructure damage caused by Helene. It's unclear how long it will take for power and water lines to be restored. Lack of cell service remains also an ongoing issue.

Those impacted by Hurricane Helene are looking for immediate housing from Hickory to Charlotte and Raleigh.

As they make the move, folks are either staying with family members or searching for hotels or Airbnbs, while hoping to avoid price gouging. And some folks, like Watson, are heading to Charlotte to pick up supplies for those still in need.

Finding housing in a hurry around Charlotte

For people who can leave the western area, finding housing in Charlotte is a mixed bag.

Some hotels around Charlotte Douglas International Airport said facilities have been at capacity since Sept. 27.

In Hickory and Conover, which collectively has more than 1,400 hotel rooms about an hour east of Asheville, facilities are maxed out, according to Mandy Pitts Hildebrand, CEO of the Hickory Metro Convention Center & Visitors Bureau.

Mainly, many emergency response workers are occupying those spaces.

West Asheville resident Shane Shields said he managed to secure an Airbnb in the University area of Charlotte but the options were limited.

Shields lives near the River Arts District and watched as the local businesses and art center was destroyed. His home didn't sustain any damages but like Watson, his friend, Shields left the area to lessen the burden.

"The vulnerable populations in the city as well as the rural populations in the region are not able to access a lot of

those resources," Shields said. "Many people have stayed and don't have the means to leave. But I think it's helpful in some ways that the folks that can find temporary relief do so, so that the resources that are in Asheville can go to the folks who are still there and need it most."

To help with the housing search, Angela Standish and Josie Nasife started a Facebook group to connect folks who need housing with people who can offer shelter. The WNC Temporary Housing Resources group has over 1,200 members and Standish said the group is growing rapidly.

Both women are in the housing and real estate industry, so to help with the recovery efforts they wanted to put their knowledge to use.

Nasife said the idea behind the group was to create a real-time central place for folks to search for and post free or heavily discounted housing.

"There's a lot of people that are opening their homes and willing to help," Nasife said. "We're kind of just growing the page organically, through word-of-mouth and posting on the local counties social media pages. We haven't even scratched the surface because a lot of these folks don't have cell service."

So far, Nasife and Standish said the response has been outstanding.

Locals all over North Carolina are offering their spaces, from rooms to full houses. Nasife added that some multifamily property managers, including Southwood Realty in Gastonia, are offering at least two months free rent with the option to look at future leasing options.

Some of the properties are located throughout Charlotte and the metro area.

Standish and Nasife are monitoring the group, marking posts as completed as people's offerings or needs are met. They are also making sure prices are reasonable.

Right now, they are seeing a need for immediate housing but as things progress, the group will begin to focus on long-term spaces.

"It's just one way to get people connected and help," Standish said "This need is going to be here for a long time."

Housing resources for people displaced by Helene

There are a number of open shelters throughout the counties affected by the storm. A list can be found at ReadyNC.gov.

The Federal Emergency Management Agency has activated its Transitional Sheltering Assistance program for displaced residents in these counties: Alexander, Alleghany, Ashe, Avery, Buncombe, Burke, Caldwell, Catawba, Clay, Cleveland, Gaston, Haywood, Henderson, Jackson, Lincoln, Macon, Madison, McDowell, Mitchell, Polk, Rutherford, Transylvania, Watauga, Wilkes and Yancey counties. The program is also available for those in the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians.

The program will cover the costs of hotel and motel temporary stays, including room, taxes and non-refundable pet fees. The program is available for those who applied for disaster assistance.

FEMA said residents do not need to request the housing assistance. They will be notified by the agency of their eligibility through automated contact.

Airbnb is also offering free temporary housing through their nonprofit, Airbnb.org. The organization is offering temporary stays for 10 to 14 days free of charge, according to Christoph Gorder, executive director of the organization.

Gorder said North Carolinans who are in need of shelter can reach out to 211 to determine eligibility and to be given access to the free Airbnb sites. Going onto Airbnb's regular website will not show the free offerings.

Current hosts can reach out to Airbnb to offer their listings for free. Gorder added that if someone isn't a host but is interested in becoming one during the emergency, they can reach out to Airbnb.

Price-gouging complaints

Price gouging laws went into effect immediately after the storm, making it illegal for businesses to raise costs to make a profit during the emergency.

As of Oct. 3, N.C. Attorney General Josh Stein's office has received over 150 complaints including for high fuel, groceries and hotel costs.

One person in Cleveland County said they were charged \$10 for a loaf of bread. Another person in Hickory said they spent \$45 on a 24-pack of water. In Boone, one person said a Quality Inn and Suites that usually charges \$100 for a room per night is now charging more than \$388.

In Charlotte, a Google search showed that prices were relatively normal for hotels around the airport and in Uptown.

North Carolinians may submit complaints of price gouging online or by phone. To report potential price gouging, call 1-877-5-NO-SCAM or go to ncdoj.gov/pricegouging.

Next steps for displaced residents

For Watson and Shields, it's unclear when they'll return to their homes but they are going back to Asheville and nearby cities with supplies.

Shields has already made one trip back to Asheville with the help of a friend's truck.

"Many folks have stepped up in bringing supplies in from runs that they've done in Charlotte or wherever they might be," Shields said. "I know that there are a lot of governmental agencies and institutions and public workers that are working tirelessly around the clock. But because the community is small... a lot of folks have jumped in to help however they can, and not wait for everybody to be checked on through those agencies."

Outside Watson's temporary space in the Elizabeth neighborhood of Charlotte, 8x10 trailers and SUVs were stuffed with loaded gas canisters, water, diapers and other essential supplies.

Asheville is a small city, Shields said, and that's allowed for grassroots effort to form to help Western North Carolina.

The group gathered Wednesday evening prepping for a trip out west. Watson said so far he's received thousands of dollars in donations, all of which are being used to purchase supplies. The trailers were also gifted for the ride.

The plan is to be as helpful as possible without interfering with federal aid, according to Watson. They plan to disperse the donations throughout the places they can reach including the towns of Marshal, Spruce Pine and Asheville.

They also intend to do wellness checks for anyone in need and just be a source of information for residents.

While the team was packing, random neighbors were approaching them with money and whatever supplies they had on hand, including open packages of water.

Shields and Watson said the city of Charlotte and residents throughout North Carolina have stepped up to help in the effort. And they'll need to continue doing so for a long time.

"We're going to try to be that satellite, that supply source that people need right now, because people aren't getting the appropriate support they need," Watson said. "The two aims that we're trying to accomplish... are getting supplies to people and getting people gas and car maintenance so that they can get off the mountain."

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• Citation (aglc Style)

Desiree Mathurin, Staff Writer, 'Hurricane Helene evacuees seek temporary homes in Charlotte', *Charlotte Observer, The* (online), 6 Oct 2024 14A https://infoweb.newsbank.com/apps/news/document-view?p=AMNEWS&docref=news/19C0D08D161D7020



Avery County residents salvage what remains - 'It's gone'

October 6, 2024 | Charlotte Observer, The (NC) Author: Josh Shaffer; Staff Writer | Section: News | 733 Words Page: 8A OpenURL Link

MINNEAPOLIS Bob Tatum stared over the Toe River bridge and pointed out the pieces of his house, smashed to splinters and wedged in the rocks below.

There's his wife's jewelry box, red and round.

There's the solid walnut mantle piece, cut by his father-in-law.

There's a cushion from his paddle boat, hanging from a tree.

"I might start crying," said Tatum, 74. "I'm raw. I don't know what day it is. You wake up in the middle of the night and you think, 'I don't have a house.' Your heart's pounding and you start to jump out of your skin."

Before Hurricane Helene washed his entire house downriver and drowned both of his horses, Tatum woke his wife to say, "Edwina, we need to get out of here."

"We grabbed our dogs and a little cash," he said Wednesday. "Not thinking we weren't going to come back in a day or two. We've been through hurricanes before. I was in Vietnam. This is worse."

The not-quite-a-town of Minneapolis took some of Helene's worst, to the point everyone around can rattle off the names of half a dozen friends now homeless, and more than a few know a police officer who's pulled a body from the mud and debris.

Dogtown residents alone without power after Helene

Though named Minneapolis, the tiny hamlet in Avery County with a population of 185 near the Tennessee border more often goes by its nickname: Dogtown.

"At one time, there were more dogs than people," said Randy Pitman, a longtime local. "They called it Dogtown."

When the storm hit, neighbors fretted about Beulah Young, better-known as "Bootsy," who is 96.

She lives a quarter-mile upriver, with her son Champ Robert, wheelchair-bound since a motorcycle wreck his senior year of high school in 1977.

Now the mudslides blocked the steep mountain road to her house, leaving the two of them alone without power or water for three days.

"We had to hike in there with the mud up to our knees," said Larry Jones, her son-in-law. "I carried 30 pounds of water in a backpack. My wife had her legs all torn-up from rocks in her boots. They're infected. We just got some antibiotic."

The rescuers found the Young's barn swept away, and the yard replaced by river rocks.

"Do you think she said 'Glad to see you?'" asked Della Wright, laughing at the memory. "She said, "Don't come in here with that mud on your shoes!"

On Wednesday, "Bootsy" left her house for the first time since Friday, riding in Jones' pickup to collect her mail.

Neighbors busy shoveling mud out of their basements, crowded around her. Just last summer, the 96-year-old Dogtown native was grand marshal of the Independence Day parade.

"We just prayed that God would let our house be there," said "Bootsy." "The Good Lord just left my house."

'I hurt for Spruce Pine. I hurt for Asheville.'

Back on the bridge, Tatum continued his survey. Since the storm, he has been unable to return to the spot he shared a house with Edwina, their maltipoo named Puppy and their border collie, Hitch.

"That's where I go to church right there," he said pointing to Minneapolis Baptist, where walls leaned at 45-degree angles and thick mud coated the ground. "My wife taught school right there."

He leaned back over the bridge, noticing some of the former walls in the water, and teared up while struggling to remember the words to a Psalm.

He isn't able to get blood pressure medicine.

He hasn't been able to find orthopedic shoes.

Everything he had sat in the river below.

"I know all these people," said Tatum, a retired Avery County school administrator. "I hurt for Spruce Pine. I hurt for Asheville. It's not just us.

"You realize you went from having a beautiful home, a beautiful place. Retired. Feeding the fish. Feeding the horses. Petting the horses. Now you know it's gone."

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• Citation (aglc Style)

Josh Shaffer, Staff Writer, 'Avery County residents salvage what remains 'It's gone", *Charlotte Observer, The* (online), 6 Oct 2024 8A https://infoweb.newsbank.com/apps/news/document-view?p=AMNEWS&docref=news/19C0D08D2007BCD0



In off-the-grid Egypt, NC, not even helicopters can get close enough to deliver relief

October 6, 2024 | Charlotte Observer, The (NC) Author: Julia Coin; Staff Writer | Section: News | 625 Words Page: 22A OpenURL Link

Egypt, North Carolina, doesn't show up on most maps.

Less than 800 people lived there before the floods of Helene rushed roads and widened rivers on Friday. How many survived? Unknown.

On Wednesday, five people could be spotted from a helicopter lowering toward the township's tin-roofed volunteer fire department. A shoulder-width hole was sawed out of the top.

"Oh, so that's how the firefighter got out," said pilot Gary Heavin, who hovered above the cracked, cliffed road now caked with orange paste - a mixture of mountain dirt and water.

"This is a job only helicopters can do," Heavin said. But his black chopper with a United States of America seal stickered on couldn't do this job.

The ravished lanes below - the only border between total ruin and semi-salvageable devastation - were too narrow to land on. The closest field was too sloped, the next clearing too far away.

Heavin pulls up. None of the five people flag down his helicopter that's holding three others - an N.C. fire marshal, a friend and a Charlotte Observer reporter. He assumes the people visible down below have what they need to survive, for now.

He flies south, to Burnsville, to drop the supplies stacked in his "bird," as he and everyone else flying supplies west out of Hickory via Operation Airdrop call their copters.

Everyone is ready to pivot.

"The mission is to do whatever needs to be done," says Sam Parks, Heavin's friend from Statesville.

Bringing people out of flooded areas

The day before, they rescued a woman with Stage 4 cancer and looked for two kids. The kids were gone, possibly dead somewhere beneath branches and sludge, he said.

In Burnsville, Gordon Higgins, a volunteer firefighter of nearly 30 years, waves the chopper into a field adjacent to powerlines. Heavin unloads some of the 300 Starlinks flown in by Ivanka Trump hours before.

And the water in the back will go to the 50 rescued from Pensacola, N.C., - a town next door, where Hurricane Helene's remnants pushed houses into rivers, says volunteer Kayti Ledford.

"It's just horrible in Florida, too," she said. "But at least there it's flat. Here, there's no quick rebuild. The landscape isn't just changed. It's gone."

Heavin, the founder of Curves fitness franchise from Waco, Texas, volunteered to fly with Operation Airdrop, a nonprofit that drops supplies and leads rescues to help those stranded in disasters.

He and most of the other 50 volunteer pilots at Hickory Regional Airport were ready to rebel against a no-fly order as President Joe Biden descended into Asheville on Wednesday.

The Federal Aviation Administration issued a temporary flight restriction Wednesday afternoon over the area, with some exceptions. Matt McSwain, the nonprofit's Hickory organizer, said he wouldn't abide by it. He wasn't going to stop pulling people out of the rubble for one person to visit it, he said.

A U.S. official told The Charlotte Observer flights coordinated with the North Carolina Emergency Operations Center or that otherwise make it known they intend to deliver aid could proceed without any delay. But the restrictions could have affected other types of aircraft that were "freelancing," the official said.

Heavin lifted off 10 minutes into the modified no-fly order, spotting military helicopters not showing up on his radar. Minutes after he lifted off, his radio went down; no one could hear him trying to get approval to touch down.

He called the tower on his cell, an unlit cigar between his bottom lip and the phone's microphone. They told him to land anyway, and the 73-year-old woman and her dog stepped out and into nurses hands.

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• Citation (aglc Style)

Julia Coin, Staff Writer, 'In off-the-grid Egypt, NC, not even helicopters can get close enough to deliver relief', *Charlotte Observer, The* (online), 6 Oct 2024 22A https://infoweb.newsbank.com/apps/news/document-view?
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Missing after Helene - Torn apart by landslides and floods, families frantic for news

October 6, 2024 | Charlotte Observer, The (NC) Author: Virginia Bridges; Staff Writer | Section: News | 1342 Words Page: 6A OpenURL Link

John Norwood last saw Julie le Roux around 10 a.m. Friday morning.

In Helene's chaos, Norwood and his fiancée took refuge at a neighbor's mountain home in Marion. As they watched water rise around them, a wave of debris and dirt roared into the home, crumbling a chimney beside them.

Norwood stepped to one side. Le Roux stepped to the other. Then the roof collapsed, crashing down on them.

"It happened so fast," said Norwood, 32. "All I remember is a bunch of crashing noises, and then I was underwater, and that was it."

Norwood is one of so many - no one has an exact count - waiting for word on whether missing loved ones survived Helene. With cell phone and internet service still dark in many hardest-hit locations, connecting in the usual ways has been impossible.

More than 55 have been confirmed dead by the state, but an untold many remain unaccounted for. Local officials have been deluged with requests for help finding the missing.

Bulletin boards with notes seeking assistance have cropped up in mountain towns. People are posting cries from the heart on social media and calling into radio stations.

And as each day passes after Helene's historic assault, the worry grows more frantic.

"I'm praying for a miracle," Norwood said in a telephone interview from a hospital room in Morganton.

Facebook groups at work

On Wednesday, pleas for help continue to roll in on social media, including in the newly created Hurricane Helene Missing People group.

There, a mother looks for a daughter who was living on the streets of Asheville during the storm. A woman wants someone to find her sister in the Candler area. A man knows of an elderly couple in Lenoir that someone must check on.

"They need help! Food, water and oxygen. I've posted in multiple areas, but no response," he wrote.

The waiting is torture, said Jasmin Colon, 36, who lives in Cape Coral, Fla. She is looking for her Uncle Billy, a 79-year-old longtime Spruce Pine resident.

"My biggest fear is that he stayed in his camper and that it got either crushed by a tree or the landslides took it out," she said Wednesday.

Family last spoke with William "Bill" Smith, a retired parachute instructor on Wednesday. He told Colon's dad by phone that he was keeping an eye on Helene.

But when they followed up after that, Smith did not answer or respond to texts.

They reported him missing to the state and the American Red Cross. And Colon joined a local Facebook community named Let's Talk Spruce Pine. She added his name to a spreadsheet she found online of missing people, and checked community lists of people who have been found, including those who were seen getting meals at a local church.

Jeffrey Kupiec, 35, also searched Facebook for anything about his 84-year-old grandfather Brent Pitman and his 56-year-old aunt Cheryl Pitman, also residents of Spruce Pine. Their home was Sunny Hill Senior Living Apartments.

"It just seems like a lot of what you're seeing now is just unknown," said Kupiec, who is a K-9 trainer working on a job in Indiana, on Wednesday.

'We need to go'

Norwood, a blacksmith originally from Pittsboro, and le Roux, a 33-year-old artist from Georgia, had dated for three years before he proposed last summer.

Norwood woke up around 6 a.m. Friday and saw a nearby creek creeping close to his place, nestled with about a dozen other homes on the side of a mountain by Pisgah National Forest in McDowell County.

"We need to go," he told le Roux, who helped round up their cats, Ginger and Lily, in a crate. Carrying the bags they packed the night before, they loaded up their Subaru Outback.

First they drove up the mountain. As they rounded a corner, mud and rocks, deposited by a slide, blocked the road. Then they drove down, but were stopped again, by fallen trees laying flat.

Norwood pulled out his chainsaw and tried to clear a path.

"It was so windy and rainy that more and more trees just kept falling all around us, and we just agreed that it was too dangerous to be out here," said Norwood.

The couple drove back to the house in the dark rainfall.

Refuge turned dangerous

Around 8:30 a.m., they walked to a neighbor's with a generator and a Starlink satellite phone.

Norwood texted his mother and his sister to let them know they were OK. As they sat and watched the water rise, they saw it push cars around and knock more trees down.

Then, through a window, he saw a wave of water, tree limbs and rocks sweeping down the mountain. It soon hit them.

"We looked up and there was this wall of water and debris coming towards us, and a split-second later, the whole house was coming down," Norwood said.

And they were swept into a rushing river of mud and debris.

Norwood struggled to keep his head above water as branches, rocks and pieces of houses hit him in the face and pulled him under, pulling off his sandals and shirt.

"I fully kind of accepted that I was going to die there," he said.

In no time, the water took Norwood about a quarter-mile, where he found himself stuck on a growing pile of tangled

houses and debris atop something snagged below.

His arms were free and his head was above water, but two large pieces of wood had crushed his legs under the surface. A big log pushed at his back.

Norwood heard his neighbor yelling. But he didn't hear his fiancée.

"I was just screaming, 'hey, I'm here. Help. Please. Help,' " Norwood said.

As Norwood's neighbor dug him out, pain in his legs set in. He started screaming for le Roux.

"Julie, Julie, Julie," he yelled, he said, for 20 minutes.

But she never answered.

"I kind of just went into shock and panic after that," he said.

'Please, God, let her be somewhere safe'

Unable to walk, Norwood crawled barefoot about 100 feet up the top mountain on his hands and knees, getting a birds eye view of the destruction.

"I see nothing. There's no road anymore. There's no way out of there," he said.

He leaned up against a tree and passed out for an unknown amount of time before the cold woke him up and sent him searching for shelter.

He shimmied down the mountain on his rear and found a woodshed, he said, where he waited for a few hours before seeing a cabin with a hand-made sign that said "Alive inside."

He opened the door and found his neighbors, but not le Roux.

"Please, God, let her be somewhere safe. Let her be okay somewhere," Norwood said he kept saying to himself.

Eventually, they saw people nearby but on the other side of rushing water, which muffled their yells as they tried to communicate.

Rescue teams strung a thick rope across the creek, and pulled Norwood and his neighbors across in metal baskets.

Firefighters carried them to vehicles that drove them about four miles to land clear enough for ambulances to reach those rescued from the mountain, Norwood said.

They took him to the hospital, where he remains, with muscle damage and a staph infection.

His biggest concern remains the same. He hasn't heard from le Roux.

Update: Brent and Cheryl Pitman, Jeffrey Kupiec's grandfather and aunt, were found safe on Thursday, Oct. 3.

Virginia Bridges covers criminal justice in the Triangle and across North Carolina for The News & Observer. Her work is produced with financial support from the nonprofit The Just Trust. The N&O maintains full editorial control of its journalism.

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How to report

a missing person

To report a missing person or request non-emergency support, call NC 211 or 1-888-892-1162 if calling from out-of-state.

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• Citation (aglc Style)

Virginia Bridges, Staff Writer, 'Missing after Helene Torn apart by landslides and floods, families frantic for news', *Charlotte Observer, The* (online), 6 Oct 2024 6A https://infoweb.newsbank.com/apps/news/document-view? p=AMNEWS&docref=news/19C0D08B25C8F170>



Helene washes away Asheville's River Arts District

October 6, 2024 | Charlotte Observer, The (NC) Author: Martha Quillin; Staff Writer | Section: News | 467 Words Page: 24A

OpenURL Link

Asheville Asheville's River Arts District, where painters, sculptors, potters and others found outlets for their creative wares, took a direct hit as the French Broad River raged through the west side of the city during flooding from Hurricane Helene.

When barricades blocking access to Riverside Drive were removed on Tuesday, local residents ventured into the area where Interstate 240 and a railroad trestle cross the river. Last week, an array of businesses lined the river on the south side of the trestle: White Duck Taco Shop; a music venue called The Salvage Station; an auto parts dealer, a crematorium and a river outfitter.

Upstream, on the other side of the bridge, were galleries and shops.

But when the river came out of its banks, water at least 10 feet deep swept through the buildings, pushing their contents so hard in the current that exterior walls were broken or bulged outward.

It was an eerie scene near sunset. Parking lots were mud plateaus, and power poles, street signs and the remains of small trees were snagged with bits of plastic and ragged fabric that fluttered in the breeze, making the place look like it was occupied by ghosts and bones.

It was nearly incomprehensible to Sonia Pitts of Weaverville, who works for the nonprofit Open Heart Arts Center in Asheville.

Looking at the devastation along Riverside Drive, Pitts was near tears.

"I don't even know how to describe how I feel," she said. "I feel hopeless and helpless, like I need to be doing more to help other people."

Pitts said her family came through the storm safely, though there were tense hours when she couldn't reach her grown children or get word on more distant relatives.

When she was able to travel down Riverside Drive, Pitts got out of her car and pulled on her mud boots to walk around, using her phone to photograph the graffiti on the concrete railroad trestle supports. The bright colors of the art stood out against the tall piles of tangled debris that had jammed against the bridge during the flood.

"These are some of my artists," she said.

During the flood, Pitts had stood on the highway bridge above the water watching the deluge, which looked like it was boiling with huge metal containers and big propane tanks that rolled over and over against the supports before finally passing under the railroad trestle.

From Riverside Drive, Pitts walked up a bank to stand on the rail line, closed by fallen trees and other debris, and gasped at the sight of a black bear lumbering away down the tracks.

Pitts took the bear sighting as a sign of nature's resilience.

Wildlife will bounce back, Pitts said. "And humans will too."

Martha Quillin: 919-829-8989, @MarthaQuillin

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• Citation (aglc Style)

Martha Quillin, Staff Writer, 'Helene washes away Asheville's River Arts District', *Charlotte Observer, The* (online), 6 Oct 2024 24A https://infoweb.newsbank.com/apps/news/document-view?p=AMNEWS&docref=news/19C0D08C5E27DD28



Pensacola's battered lone road adds twists to Helene response in remote Western NC town

October 6, 2024 | Charlotte Observer, The (NC) Author: Brian Gordon; Staff Writer | Section: News | 543 Words Page: 23A OpenURL Link

Stanchions of trees, embedded vehicles and mangled trailers line the only road through Pensacola, North Carolina, a week after Tropical Storm Helene crashed into the small Yancey County town. But the worst physical damage, locals say, isn't as evident.

"There are a lot of homes where you wouldn't know they were ever there if you hadn't lived here your whole life," said Noah Davis, a local handyman. "There's going to be a before-the-storm and after-the-storm Pensacola."

Consecutive days of heavy rains late last week overwhelmed the remote community of around 500 people in Pisgah National Forest - 22 miles and a world away from Asheville. Pensacola lays south of Burnsville in a holler between two hillsides. The Cattail Creek runs down one mountainside and the Cane River flows below.

Early Friday, the creek flooded and sent a torrent toward the town while at the same time, the river swelled and encroached. "We were surrounded by water," said resident Joyce Maness. "Our floors were giving in."

After three days, Christa Robinson felt the creek had receded enough to leave her house in the Cattail Creek community, which sits above Pensacola. With her 7-year-old daughter Lilly, she walked - and at times slid - into Pensacola, where they spent the next night at the local fire station.

Robinson remembers the immense local flood of 1977. Unlike then, she felt the entire mountain move last week.

"The highway is gone," said Mark Harrison, medical officer for the Pensacola Fire Department. "Most of the homes are gone."

Rescue and recovery began over the weekend as volunteers drove four-wheelers along rutted, muddy passageways. Pensacola Road is the town's only direct connection to the rest of Western North Carolina, and by Thursday, enough of the eroded blacktop had been cleared to allow trucks to narrowly inch through.

U.S. Army personnel arrived on the ground Thursday to hand out supplies as helicopters delivered medicine, appliances and food to hard-to-reach areas. Search-and-rescue teams from Charlotte, Pittsburgh, Kansas and elsewhere visited each standing home to document the destruction. Civilians pitched in further, offering neighbors their services as mechanics, movers and transporters.

"The lack of roads has been the biggest thing logistically," said Davis, who estimated he has evacuated at least 30 people on his four-wheeler.

Another major hurdle is accounting for everyone affected. The Cattail Creek community in particular has a sizable number of vacation homes. Were their owners out of town during the storm? Or are they now missing?

These are the questions people want answered.

"After COVID hit, a lot of people came in here, and we have no idea how many are residents," Harrison said. "We've evacuated all of the critical people that we could. Now, it's more or less preventative."

As for fatalities, Harrison declined to share a specific number but said "it's obvious" people have been killed. Donations in recent days have poured into the fire station, the community's makeshift recovery hub. Asked what

Pensacola residents still need, Harrison listed medications, including antibiotics and methadone.

Brian Gordon: 919-861-1238, @skyoutbriout

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• Citation (aglc Style)

Brian Gordon, Staff Writer, 'Pensacola's battered lone road adds twists to Helene response in remote Western NC town', Charlotte Observer, The (online), 6 Oct 2024 23A https://infoweb.newsbank.com/apps/news/document-view? p=AMNEWS&docref=news/19C0CD5703C1EDE8>



Free legal assistance available for Helene storm victims in NC. How to get help

October 6, 2024 | Charlotte Observer, The (NC)

Author: Chyna Blackmon; Staff Writer | Section: News | 231 Words

Page: 13A OpenURL Link

As thousands of North Carolinians continue to pick up the pieces from the destruction left behind by Hurricane Helene, free legal help is now available to help those in need.

The North Carolina Bar Association and Foundation, Legal Aid of North Carolina, the American Bar Association Young Lawyers Division and the Federal Emergency Management Agency have teamed up to launch a pro bono legal program with local lawyers.

The Disaster Legal Services hotline (866-219-5262) is available for low-income survivors to connect with volunteer attorneys to assist with any storm-related questions and disaster benefits, including:

FEMA appeals

Disaster Unemployment Assistance

Insurance claims

Home repair contracts and contractor disputes

Contractor fraud and consumer protection matters

Replacing destroyed legal documents

Mortgage-foreclosure

Landlord or tenant issues

The toll-free hotline is available 8:30 a.m.-1:30 p.m. Monday through Friday and 5:30-8:30 p.m. Mondays and Thursdays. To be connected to a volunteer lawyer, explain which county you are located in and ask for Disaster Legal Services assistance.

According to Legal Aid of North Carolina, 26 continues have been approved for the federal assistance: Alexander, Alleghany, Ashe, Avery, Buncombe, Burke, Caldwell, Catawba, Clay, Cleveland, Gaston, Haywood, Henderson, Jackson, Lincoln, Macon, Madison, McDowell, Mitchell, Polk, Rutherford, Transylvania, Watauga, Wilkes and Yancey counties and the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians.

You can find more information about the Disaster Legal Services hotline and Legal Aid's resource library with tips for replacing lost documents, property taxes, unemployment assistance and more online at legalaidnc.org/disaster.

Chyna Blackmon: @chynablackmon

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• Citation (aglc Style)

Chyna Blackmon, Staff Writer, 'Free legal assistance available for Helene storm victims in NC. How to get help', *Charlotte Observer, The* (online), 6 Oct 2024 13A https://infoweb.newsbank.com/apps/news/document-view?
p=AMNEWS&docref=news/19C0D08B2F97E620>



Ham radios come - to the rescue when - cell towers, internet fail

October 6, 2024 | Charlotte Observer, The (NC)

Author: Renee Umsted; Staff Writer | Section: News | 544 Words

Page: 15A OpenURL Link

When Helene swept across the Southeast on Sept. 27, including Western North Carolina, cell phones and internet-based communication became unusable.

People still needed a way to talk - to check on friends and family or receive updates on the storm's aftermath - especially as roads and bridges were washed away, isolating communities.

But there's a way to communicate without cell signals or internet, and about 750,000 people across the country know how to use it: amateur radio.

Also known as ham radio, this old-school method of technology allows people separated by large distances to stay in touch.

"People might think that cell phones have made amateur radio obsolete," said Chuck Till, the vice president of the Raleigh Amateur Radio Society. "As you can see, that's far from the truth."

RARS, which has more than 450 members, is a nonprofit organization and one of many radio clubs across the country. While the club offers many services, helping the public during times of emergency is among its goals.

"It's a tireless activity, and these hams are so dedicated to it," said Fin Gold, the president of RARS. "And people don't realize that they're out there, and they're there to help."

How hams help during disasters

Across North Carolina, amateur radio operators have helped with search and rescue efforts and condition reports, Gold said.

Many of the repeaters, which are automated relay stations that have broad coverage, were offline because of Helene. But one repeater on Mount Mitchell, the highest peak in North Carolina, was still operational, and the hams on the mountain were able to help check on people and pass along radio messages, Gold said.

There's a program called AUXCOMM, developed by the Department of Homeland Security, in which certain hams work with government agencies including North Carolina Emergency Management, Till said. Other hams may assist with health and welfare messaging.

"The more people that join us, the more we can help," Gold said.

How to find a ham

Search for amateur radio operators in a given area on the Federal Communications Commission's website.

Search online for a local radio club.

Some operators may have a special license plate with their radio call sign.

How to get involved with ham radio

There are many reasons why people are drawn to radio, Till said. They may want to socialize, compete in contests, perform a public service or experiment with building the technology.

Anyone in Raleigh who is interested in becoming an amateur radio operator can contact RARS.

Hams are licensed by the Federal Communications Commission and must pass an exam to become licensed, said Till, who earned his first license in 1970. RARS and other radio clubs offer classes to prepare for exams, and people may also purchase study materials online.

Equipment costs vary depending on what a person wants to do with the radio.

"You can get into it for as little as \$50," Till said. "I know people who have spent tens of thousands of dollars on their station, but you don't have to do that."

Other ways to communicate without cell signal

Satellites such as Starlink systems can be used for communication. In Western North Carolina, counties reported that the systems allowed emergency responders to receive calls and members of the public to check on family, The News & Observer reported.

Satellite phones may also be used when there's no cell service.

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• Citation (aglc Style)

Renee Umsted, Staff Writer, 'Ham radios come to the rescue when cell towers, internet fail', *Charlotte Observer, The* (online), 6 Oct 2024 15A https://infoweb.newsbank.com/apps/news/document-view?p=AMNEWS&docref=news/19C0D08B1F1C8DC8



Editorial/Opinion

October 6, 2024 | Charlotte Observer, The (NC) Section: Editorial/Opinion | 627 Words

Page: 18A OpenURL Link

Storms

The recent apocalyptic destruction across North Carolina has been billed as a once-in-a-lifetime event.

Sadly, it won't be. Global warming driven by atmospheric carbon levels continues to rise steadily. Scientists now agree that these storms will become more frequent and more intense, unless we address climate change immediately.

To ensure a secure future for the next generation of Carolina residents, please remember the devastation you see today when you go to the polls in November. Vote with the changing climate in mind.

Sandra O'Neill, Cornelius

Neighbors help out

As tragic as Helene was in North Carolina, it provided the stage to demonstrate the better side of human nature. One example - our next-door neighbors.

We are in our eighties and live in a nice neighborhood with most residents in their mid to late fifties. But not our next-door neighbors, who are a young couple in their mid-thirties.

Our yard contains five large, mature trees that have stood the test of the storms, but not without some loss of limb and leaves. After this storm, our front yard looked like a battle zone. Too much for me, so I planned to contact our yard service to take care of it.

Well, our younger neighbors beat me to it. While taking a nap I woke to hear a leaf blower. Our young neighbors were clearing the debris.

Tragedy sometimes brings out our best.

Albert Guy Dancy, Jr, Charlotte

Building codes

The author has a background in urban design.

I am heartbroken about the damage in western North Carolina.

Over the past 15 years, state lawmakers have rejected limits on construction on steep slopes, which might have reduced the number of homes lost to landslides; blocked a rule requiring homes to be elevated above the height of an expected flood; weakened protections for wetlands, increasing the risk of dangerous storm water runoff; and slowed the adoption of updated building codes, making it harder for the state to qualify for federal climateresilience grants.

When appropriate, an independent investigation should be conducted to see how current building codes may have

contributed to the loss of homes and to determine if these codes need to be changed or modified.

We need to take politics out of building codes when it impacts the safety of our community.

Stephen Berg, Chapel Hill

Trump for inflation

It is remarkable that Trump consistently polls better as to who would be more trusted with the economy. Of course people felt better five years ago. Everything was cheaper.

What people are responding to is inflation and corresponding high interest rates which were driven primarily by the pandemic, not the economic policies of the Biden administration. The entire world saw inflation spike. Our present economy is the envy of the world. Trump's plan is to cut taxes for the wealthy and corporations and to impose tariffs across the board. Most economists agree that this will increase inflation, increase spending deficits and hurt everyday Americans.

Willard Osburn, Cornelius

Clemson game

Why would Clemson University hold its homecoming football the day after Hurricane Helene hit the town of Clemson? Eighty thousand fans descended on the town using up scant resources. The stadium lights blazed while many in the town were without power. Its power lines are buried. Clemson University has just told the people in the area a football game is more important than your survival.

Compare this response to Appalachian State University.

It canceled its football game and offered free food to people in the area. Also the university donated as many additional supplies as possible and many of its students volunteered to deliver food to Helene victims and served free food at various locations.

I wonder which experience is more meaningful? Having a homecoming football game or serving the community?

Augie Beasley, Charlotte

Correction: A headline in Friday's print edition misidentified the author of former Gov. Jim Martin's column on the filibuster. We apologize for the error.

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• Citation (aglc Style)

'Editorial/Opinion', *Charlotte Observer, The* (online), 6 Oct 2024 18A https://infoweb.newsbank.com/apps/news/document-view? p=AMNEWS&docref=news/19C0CD572B412690>



Country star drops midnight surprise on storm-ravaged NC: 'It just didn't feel right to wait'

October 6, 2024 | Charlotte Observer, The (NC) Author: Théoden Janes; Staff Writer | Section: News | 476 Words Page: 21A OpenURL Link

A week ago, North Carolina's Eric Church - the 10-time-Grammy-nominated singer responsible for country-music hits like "Springsteen" and "Drink in My Hand" - had no plans to release new music in 2024.

Then Hurricane Helene swept through his home state, leaving many of the parts he's most familiar with totally devastated.

And in response, at midnight Friday, the 47-year-old native of Granite Falls (a small town northwest of Hickory) released a surprise single he said was dedicated to "the unsung heroes, the people who show up when the world's falling apart."

But Church added an even bigger twist: He signed over all of his publishing royalties for "Darkest Hour," according to a news release, "to the people of North Carolina."

"We've been helping with boots on the ground efforts," the 2000 App State grad said in a statement, "but this is something that will live beyond just the immediate recovery. This is not a quick thing to fix, so hopefully 'Darkest Hour' will be able to contribute to that for a long time to come.

"This song goes to my home, North Carolina, now and forever."

Royalties from "Darkest Hour" will be funneled to and distributed by Church's Chief Cares Fund (which plays on the "Chief" nickname he inherited from his grandfather, a former police chief of Granite Falls).

The charity also will be assisting "in all states and communities affected from Appalachia to the Gulf," the news release said.

"When the night's at its blackest, this is for those who are holding the light, guiding the lost and pulling us through," Church said of "Darkest Hour." "The message of the song specifically in this time is about Hurricane Helene and the people that need help, but in a broader view, it's about any challenging times that we have in our life."

A sampling of the lyrics:

All I really know is I never know

What's coming around the bend

But you should know you're not alone

Hang on and hold my hand

In your darkest hour

Baby I'd come runnin'

In your darkest hour

I'd light your way

Baby don't give up

I'll do everything in my power

To take even a minute off your darkest hour

"It's always important to know that in your darkest hour," he explained, "there are people that will come running, there are people that will help. And I think it's also important to be one of the people that go running when other people need help."

The song marks the first new solo release in more than three years from Church, a part-time resident of Banner Elk.

"I've been in the studio for a while," the singer said in his statement, "trying some different things and exploring creativity. ...

"We were going to wait to release music until next year, but it just didn't feel right to wait with this song. Sometimes you give songs their moment and sometimes they find their own moment."

"Darkest Hour" can be streamed here.

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• Citation (aglc Style)

Théoden Janes, Staff Writer, 'Country star drops midnight surprise on storm-ravaged NC: 'It just didn't feel right to wait'', Charlotte Observer, The (online), 6 Oct 2024 21A https://infoweb.newsbank.com/apps/news/document-view? p=AMNEWS&docref=news/19C0D08C48145048>



They were in the basement frantically preparing for a flood. Then the landslide hit

October 6, 2024 | Charlotte Observer, The (NC) Author: Martha Quillin; Staff Writer | Section: News | 652 Words

Page: 13A OpenURL Link

BARNARDSVILLE Kelli Ball felt the landslide in the bones of her chest before she could see it.

She and her husband, Dakota, were in the basement of their house on Stony Fork Road trying to move stuff out of the way of the rising water. The water was coming from the creek behind the house, normally a little trickle way down the hill, that had climbed the bank Friday morning with all the rain from the remnants of Hurricane Helene.

Their boys, Canaan, 8, and Macon, 4, were upstairs on the couch.

It was around 10 a.m. The family had been awake since 5 a.m., and all morning, the mountains around them had been groaning in the deluge.

"If you've not experienced a flood in the mountains, you just hear these boulders rolling and trees breaking and it just rumbles in the mountains," Kelli said. "It echoes everywhere. We had been hearing that all morning."

The flooding was happening all around Barnardsville, a farming community in Buncombe County north of Asheville along the normally friendly Big Ivy River and laced with creeks that come down from the hills. The Big Ivy itself was coming out of its banks and spreading all over the lowland, snatching double-wide mobile homes and stick-built houses off their foundations and sending them downstream in shards. It emptied out a catfish pond. It blew out a wall of the local diner.

In the Balls' basement, the water was just coming up too fast, and Kelli told Dakota, "We've got to go. We've got to go!" And ran upstairs.

That's when she felt the vibration in her breastbone.

She reached the living room, with its big windows that look across Stony Fork Road at a hay field, then up at a mountain that's part of Pisgah National Forest, just as the mountain turned loose a river of boulders and trees and mud

It was heading hundreds of yards downhill, coming for the Balls' house, with the potential to also take out Dakota's parents' house, on one side of them, or his grandmother's, on the other.

They had picked this site when they built the home in 2019 because it was on high ground.

"We thought it was the safest place," Dakota said.

When Kelli saw - and felt - the liquified mountain coming at her family, she screamed at Dakota, who was still in the basement: "Landslide!"

She grabbed the boys and went out the front door just as a whole tree slammed into the house, jamming under the porch.

"It was like a runaway freight train coming down that mountain," Kelli said.

The boys jumped from the porch and first the family started to run to the right, "but the slide kept coming," so they

decided to go the other way. By then, Dakota's parents had run outside. Separated by the flow of mud and debris several feet deep running between their two houses, "We formed a human chain and just passed our babies across that river," as rocks and branches ran across their bare feet in the flowing mud.

Dakota Ball said the slide opened up two new springs in the front yard, and he and others had used a track hoe to reroute them into one stream running beside the driveway and toward the creek behind the house. The couple had stripped the drywall in the basement, and with the help of people of Barnardsville, had cut enough of the scattered trees to move around in the yard.

A few miles down the road, in Barnardsville proper, volunteers were sorting donations of canned corn and taco shells and bottled water at the old four-bay building that used to house the volunteer fire department. The community, routed by water, already was rebuilding its washed-out roads using equipment on loan from Brock Mountain, a local construction company.

Owners of ATVs were shuttling residents where they needed to go because cars and pavement had been washed away.

"We're lucky," Kelli Ball said. "We're alive."

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• Citation (aglc Style)

Martha Quillin, Staff Writer, 'They were in the basement frantically preparing for a flood. Then the landslide hit', *Charlotte Observer, The* (online), 6 Oct 2024 13A https://infoweb.newsbank.com/apps/news/document-view? p=AMNEWS&docref=news/19C0D08C637587A8>



A deadly mosquito virus is spreading in the US. Could it come to NC? Here's what to know

October 6, 2024 | Charlotte Observer, The (NC) Author: Evan Moore; Staff Writer Section: Business 688 Words Page: 25A OpenURL Link

A person in New York died Monday, Sept. 30, after a contracting a rare virus not seen in the state in more than a decade.

The person died after being diagnosed with eastern equine encephalitis (EEE), a virus spread to people by the bite of an infected mosquito, ABC News reported.

Only about 11 human cases of the virus are reported each year in the U.S., according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Though the virus is rare, roughly a third of all people who develop a severe version of the virus die, and those who survive are left with long-term physical and mental problems, ranging from personality disorders to paralysis, the CDC says.

Could the virus make its way to North Carolina? Here's everything you need to know.

Could eastern equine encephalitis come to NC?

Brunswick

There's no evidence to show that EEE will be worse in North Carolina this year, but rain from recent tropical storms and Hurricane Helene could lead to more mosquito activity in the state, N.C. Department of Health and Human Services Entomologist Mike Doyle told The Charlotte Observer.

"The extra rain from Debbie...has increased water significantly on the eastern part of the state, so there's more mosquito larval sites, or mosquitoes growing in the water presently, but we don't have the evidence of infection within the mosquitoes or humans so far," Doyle said.

There haven't been any human cases of EEE reported in North Carolina this year, but there have been cases in the past, CDC data show. The most recent case occurred in 2021.

f the

North Carolina averages about one case of EEE per year, and the disease is more common in the eastern part of state than in other geographic regions, according to the N.C. Department of Health and Human Services.
Historical CDC data show that at least one human case of EEE has been reported in the following counties since 2003:
Catawba
Mecklenburg
Pitt
Perquimans
Pender

Cumberland
Hoke
Robeson
There have been 10 human cases of EEE reported in the U.S. this year, according to CDC data.
Non-human cases and infections, or cases found in mosquitoes, birds and other animals, have been reported in the majority of coastal and piedmont counties in North Carolina since 2003, CDC data show.
Who is most at-risk of contracting eastern equine encephalitis?
The CDC says the following groups are at increased risk of infection:
Residents of and visitors to areas with eastern equine encephalitis virus activity (the Atlantic and Gulf Coast states)
People who work and participate in recreational activities outdoors in endemic areas
People over 50 years of age or under 15 years of age
What are the symptoms of eastern equine encephalitis?
Most people with EEE have no symptoms, but the CDC says symptoms of severe cases include:
Fever
Headache
Vomiting
Diarrhea
Seizures
Behavioral changes
Drowsiness
The symptoms of EEE are similar to other neuro-invasive mosquito viruses, such as West Nile virus and La Crosse encephalitis, which are more common than EEE, Doyle said.
"They all start very similar," said Doyle. "It's not something that the average person or even physician, in many cases, could tell the difference early in the disease. And so we encourage people to seek medical attention from a health provider, and the provider can order a test through the state laboratory that covers all of the known viruses here."
How to prevent eastern equipe encephalitis

Here are some ways you can prevent mosquito bites, according to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency:

mosquito bites, according to the CDC.

There are no vaccines or treatment for EEE, but you can reduce your chances of contracting the virus by preventing

Remove mosquito habitats by eliminating standing water in rain gutters, old tires, buckets, plastic covers, toys, or any other container where mosquitoes can breed.

Use structural barriers by covering gaps in walls, doors, and windows to prevent mosquitoes from entering and making sure window and door screens are in good working order.

Avoid getting bitten by keeping mosquitoes away from exposed skin by wearing long-sleeved shirts, long pants, and socks. You can also tuck your shirt into your pants and pants into socks to cover gaps in your clothing where mosquitoes can get to your skin. Using insect repellent can also be helpful.

Evan Moore: @evaninclt
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• Citation (aglc Style)

Evan Moore, Staff Writer, 'A deadly mosquito virus is spreading in the US. Could it come to NC? Here's what to know', *Charlotte Observer, The* (online), 6 Oct 2024 25A https://infoweb.newsbank.com/apps/news/document-view? p=AMNEWS&docref=news/19C0D08B0B6BC078>



Anti-Trump ad hits home for Franklin Graham

October 6, 2024 | Charlotte Observer, The (NC)

Author: Issac Bailey | Section: Editorial/Opinion | 582 Words

Page: 18A OpenURL Link

Franklin Graham doesn't like the way a political group advocating for Vice President Kamala Harris is using his iconic father's image and words. The Rev. Billy Graham I grew up with wouldn't like the way his son has politicized the faith to which the senior Graham dedicated his life.

No matter what happens at the ballot box this November, the damage men like Franklin Graham have done to the image of Christianity will be long lasting and not easily repaired. The irony is that the political ads that have so upset the junior Graham makes clear why.

One of the ads begins with an old clip of Billy Graham trying to spread the Gospel while standing before the large crowds he was known to routinely attract.

"But you must realize that in the last days, the times will be full of danger," he preached. "Men will become utterly self-centered and greedy for money."

The power of the ad, though, is what comes next. It cuts to a clip of Trump.

"My whole life I've been greedy, greedy, greedy," Trump says. "I grabbed all the money I could get. I'm so greedy."

The ad shows several clips of Graham while juxtaposing them with Trump.

"They will be proud and abusive...," Graham preached in the ad.

"They will be treacherous, reckless, and arrogant... loving what gives them pleasure instead of loving God... maintain a facade of religion, but their lives deny the truth."

Each time, it cuts to Trump declaring he is "the chosen one" or replaying the infamous "Access Hollywood" tape in which he brags about casually sexually assaulting women.

In another ad, Graham preaches about the importance of forgiveness while Trump says he's never asked for God's forgiveness.

"Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see if they are from God," another begins before showing Trump bragging that he could shoot someone on Fifth Avenue and not lose support.

It's a damning indictment not only of Trump, but of Franklin Graham, a man who has fallen in line behind the type of charlatan his father warned us about.

Instead of being convicted and learning from his mistakes, Franklin Graham has condemned the producers of the ads. In August, he took to "X," formerly known as Twitter, to berate Evangelicals for Harris, a group that said this week Graham has tried to get the ads pulled.

"Maybe they don't know that my father appreciated the conservative values and policies of President Donald Trump in 2016, and if he were alive today, my father's views and opinions would not have changed," Franklin Graham wrote.

If true, Billy Graham wasn't the man I thought he was, not the man my mama made me and my siblings sit down to watch on TV like millions of others throughout the South.

If true, Billy Graham isn't worthy of the reverence many of us have long had for a man we've believed tried to lead people to God even when we disagreed with some of his teachings.

If true, Billy Graham wasn't as authentic as he presented himself for most of his life.

That's what Franklin Graham doesn't seem to understand, or doesn't care to. His embrace of Trump is denigrating his father's name, and this country's largest religion.

While there are plenty of people involved with his non-profit Samaritan's Purse performing great deeds, including in the aftermath of Hurricane Helene, that can't make up for how Franklin Graham has defiled the faith he says he loves by worshiping Trump.

Issac Bailey is a McClatchy opinion writer in North Carolina and South Carolina.

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• Citation (aglc Style)

Issac Bailey, 'Anti-Trump ad hits home for Franklin Graham', *Charlotte Observer, The* (online), 6 Oct 2024 18A https://infoweb.newsbank.com/apps/news/document-view?p=AMNEWS&docref=news/19C0CD57259D6CD0



Remember NC destruction and climate change in November election - Opinion

October 6, 2024 | Charlotte Observer, The: Web Edition Articles (NC) Author: From our readers, The Charlotte Observer | Section: letters_to_the_editor | 615 Words OpenURL Link

The recent apocalyptic destruction across North Carolina has been billed as a once-in-a-lifetime event. Sadly, it won't be. Global warming driven by atmospheric carbon levels continues to rise steadily. Scientists now agree that these storms will become more frequent and more intense, unless we address climate change immediately. To ensure a secure future for the next generation of Carolina residents, please remember the devastation you see today when you go to the polls in November. Vote with the changing climate in mind.

Sandra O'Neill, Cornelius

Neighbors help out

As tragic as Helene was in North Carolina, it provided the stage to demonstrate the better side of human nature. One example - our next-door neighbors. We are in our eighties and live in a nice neighborhood with most residents in their mid to late fifties. But not our next-door neighbors, who are a young couple in their mid-thirties. Our yard contains five large, mature trees that have stood the test of the storms, but not without some loss of limb and leaves. After this storm, our front yard looked like a battle zone. Too much for me, so I planned to contact our yard service to take care of it. Well, our younger neighbors beat me to it. While taking a nap I woke to hear a leaf blower. Our young neighbors were clearing the debris. Tragedy sometimes brings out our best.

Albert Guy Dancy, Jr, Charlotte

New building codes

The author has a background in urban design.

I am heartbroken about the damage in western North Carolina.

Over the past 15 years, state lawmakers have rejected limits on construction on steep slopes, which might have reduced the number of homes lost to landslides; blocked a rule requiring homes to be elevated above the height of an expected flood; weakened protections for wetlands, increasing the risk of dangerous storm water runoff; and slowed the adoption of updated building codes, making it harder for the state to qualify for federal climateresilience grants.

When appropriate, an independent investigation should be conducted to see how current building codes may have contributed to the loss of homes and to determine if these codes need to be changed or modified. We need to take politics out of building codes when it impacts the safety of our community.

Stephen Berg, Chapel Hill

Trump for inflation

It is remarkable that Trump consistently polls better as to who would be more trusted with the economy. Of course people felt better five years ago. Everything was cheaper. What people are responding to is inflation and corresponding high interest rates which were driven primarily by the pandemic, not the economic policies of the Biden administration. The entire world saw inflation spike. Our present economy is the envy of the world. Trump's

plan is to cut taxes for the wealthy and corporations and to impose tariffs across the board. Most economists agree that this will increase inflation, increase spending deficits and hurt everyday Americans.

Willard Osburn, Cornelius

Clemson's wrong response

Why would Clemson University hold its homecoming football the day after Hurricane Helene hit the town of Clemson? Eighty thousand fans descended on the town using up scant resources. The stadium lights blazed while many in the town were without power. Its power lines are buried. Clemson University has just told the people in the area a football game is more important than your survival.

Compare this response to Appalachian State University. It canceled its football game and offered free food to people in the area. Also the university donated as many additional supplies as possible and many of its students volunteered to deliver food to Helene victims and served free food at various locations.

I wonder which experience is more meaningful? Having a homecoming football game or serving the community?

Augie Beasley, Charlotte

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• Citation (aglc Style)

From our readers, The Charlotte Observer, 'Remember NC destruction and climate change in November election Opinion', Charlotte Observer, The: Web Edition Articles (online), 6 Oct 2024 https://infoweb.newsbank.com/apps/news/document-view? p=AMNEWS&docref=news/19C097CB5CF8C368>



Florida braces for Milton, FEMA head slams 'dangerous' Helene misinformation

October 6, 2024 | Courier-Times, The (Roxboro, NC) Author: Sarah TITTERTON| Section: National | 699 Words OpenURL Link

Another potentially devastating storm barreled toward the Florida coast on Sunday, as the head of the US disaster relief agency lashed out at a "dangerous" misinformation war being waged over the aftermath of Hurricane Helene.

The National Hurricane Center (NHC) said the new storm, Milton, had intensified into a Category 1 hurricane Sunday with maximum sustained winds of 80 miles (130 kilometers) an hour.

Milton was churning in the Gulf of Mexico, southwest of Tampa, with nothing but 800 miles of warm ocean between it and the Florida coast -- an area still reeling from Helene's catastrophic winds and storm surge.

It could hit by midweek as a major storm, the NHC said.

President Joe Biden was briefed on Milton and said in a statement that his administration was readying "life-saving resources."

He also ordered an additional 500 active-duty troops sent to North Carolina to help with Helene response and recovery, joining 1,000 other troops, 6,000 national guards and 7,000 federal personnel already on the ground.

Deanne Criswell, head of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), said on ABC that federal authorities were "absolutely ready" for Milton.

Florida Governor Ron DeSantis upped the number of counties under a state of emergency to 51 ahead of the storm, predicting Milton could have "major, major impacts," with storm surges of up to 20 feet (six meters).

Helene roared into the Florida coastline as a Category 4 storm on September 26 and carved a path of destruction inland, dumping torrential rainfall and causing flash flooding in remote towns in states such as North Carolina.

The storm has killed more than 220 people -- making it the deadliest natural disaster to hit the United States since 2005's Hurricane Katrina -- with the toll still rising.

Relief workers are racing to find survivors and to get power and drinking water to remote mountainous communities.

But that effort has been hit by a wave of false claims and conspiracy theories.

Among the litany of disinformation is the lie pushed by Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump that relief funds have been misappropriated by his rival for the White House, Democrat Kamala Harris, and redirected toward migrants.

"It's frankly ridiculous and just plain false ... it's really a shame that we're putting politics ahead of helping people," Criswell told ABC.

It is a "truly dangerous narrative," she said.

The Trump administration nevertheless doubled down, repeating the assertion in a statement Sunday.

FEMA and outside fact-checkers note that a program under the agency's aegis to provide shelter and aid to

migrants is funded directly by Congress, entirely separate from disaster-related funding.

ABC reported that law enforcement is monitoring threats toward FEMA officials and other recovery agencies prompted by the disinformation.

North Carolina Republican Senator Thom Tillis on Sunday urged residents to focus on recovery and ignore the damaging rhetoric.

"The last thing that the victims of Helene need right now is political posturing, finger-pointing, or conspiracy theories that only hurt the response effort," he said in a statement.

- 'Turn that garbage off' -

In addition to Trump's false claim, the Washington Post reported Sunday on other lies swirling around Helene that it said were "adding to the chaos and confusion."

They include a false claim that a dam was about to burst, which the Post said prompted hundreds of people to unnecessarily evacuate, and a "troubling" lie that officials planned to bulldoze bodies under the rubble in one North Carolina town.

One user suggested "a militia go against fema" in a post on X, formerly Twitter, which has received more than half a million views.

Asked about that post, Criswell said it "has a tremendous impact on the comfort level of our own employees to be able to go out there."

FEMA has begun debunking the rumors online, as have North Carolina authorities.

Much of the focus was on X.

Before the platform was purchased by Elon Musk, when it was still known as Twitter, it was a go-to place for disaster coordination and information sharing.

But the billionaire has allowed right-wing disinformation and conspiracy theories to flood the platform.

"When Musk bought Twitter, there were many of us in the disaster space who warned that there would likely be changes that would make the platform less useful during disasters," Sam Montano, a disaster expert, told the Post.

"I think that we're seeing that manifest now."

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Sarah TITTERTON, 'Florida braces for Milton, FEMA head slams 'dangerous' Helene misinformation', *Courier-Times, The* (online), 6 Oct 2024 https://infoweb.newsbank.com/apps/news/document-view?p=AMNEWS&docref=news/19C0D114C0386968>



Drowned by hurricane, remote N.Carolina towns now struggle for water

October 6, 2024 | Courier-Times, The (Roxboro, NC) Author: Ulysse BELLIER | Section: National | 674 Words OpenURL Link

Nicole Crane, exhausted, tearful and unwashed after a week of searching for a neighbor swept away by the raging waters of Hurricane Helene, dreams of taking a shower.

But she and the other 100,000 residents of the US town of Asheville, North Carolina are without fresh drinking water, forced to rely on bottled water -- or in some cases on river or spring water.

Dog teams finally found her neighbor's body the day before, "so not having fresh water has been low priority," she told AFP on Saturday, as a tanker nearby distributed the precious commodity.

As the region struggles to recover from the storm that killed at least 226 people across the US southeast, dumping a deluge onto the North Carolina mountains, one fundamental issue is of immediate concern: getting access to water.

Flood damage severely disrupted Asheville's water system.

Crane, clad in a red tank top, the lines in her face a reflection of despair, described her desperate search for her neighbor -- a man she last saw "on his roof, going down the river."

Now, knowing his final fate, she struggles to hold it together.

"I smell bad right now, and I'm exhausted and hungry," she told AFP, breaking into tears.

She had heard that showers are available some 30 miles (50 kilometers) away, but that's just too far. "I'm going to come back," she said, "and get some water so I can wash my face."

- River water -

A stone's throw away, Jessica Pickering and her husband Michael open the valves of a 6,200-gallon (23,500-liter) tanker, financed by the NGO World Central Kitchen, to fill the bottles and jerrycans of the grateful residents who pass by.

Shelley Hughes, 64, and her son Owen, 27, load heavy buckets of water into the trunk of their car.

"The big adventure of the day," laughs Shelley, "is finding water for the toilet" -- both for her family and for less mobile neighbors.

Thousands of residents are using a more primitive approach: scooping water from a nearby river to pour it into their toilet bowls.

Packs of bottled water, distributed by volunteers in church and school parking lots throughout the region, are used for drinking, cooking and washing up.

The water crisis, in a region crippled by the deadliest hurricane to hit the United States since Katrina in 2005, could be a daily feature of people's lives for some time.

The city of Asheville is coordinating work to restore normal water supplies.

But a top city official refused to give a date for a return to normal.

And "I'm not going to give a timetable on when I would give a timetable," the official, Ben Woody, said in a briefing published on Facebook.

The city had protectively installed backup water pipes in 2004, but Helene swept them all away during its devastating passage on September 27, a cataclysm rendered even more intense by climate change, scientists say.

- Spring water -

Far from the city, in one of the scores of steep valleys in the surrounding mountains, octogenarian Clyde Hollifield and his wife Adrienne live in a small white house under a canopy of trees, miles from any store.

A spring on the far side of a nearby stream normally provides them with fresh drinking water, delivered to them by a small pipe. But torrential floodwaters swept that away, too.

"It was like a tsunami," said Hollifield, who wears a long white beard.

Using scraps of wood, he has cobbled together a makeshift bridge to support a new water pipe.

Their neighbor Juniper Odell arrives. She and her husband rely on water they also pipe from a spring, but that too was damaged by Helene. The Odells, do-it-yourselfers by necessity -- like so many in these reclusive areas -- repaired it themselves.

Further downstream, a few miles from the village of Chimney Rock -- or what was Chimney Rock, before the floods virtually wiped it off the map -- the parking lot of an air-conditioning company serves as a warehouse for stacks of bottled water packs.

On Saturday morning, 79-year-old Randall Melton drove from his nearby home to collect a few gallons. What for?

"To make coffee," he said simply.

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• Citation (aglc Style)

Ulysse BELLIER, 'Drowned by hurricane, remote N.Carolina towns now struggle for water', *Courier-Times, The* (online), 6 Oct 2024 https://infoweb.newsbank.com/apps/news/document-view?p=AMNEWS&docref=news/19C0D114E9C33920



Eastern Baptist Association gives instructions concerning relief efforts for Hurricane Helene

October 6, 2024 | Daily Reflector, The (Greenville, NC) Author: Emily Smith Correspondent| Section: Local | 392 Words OpenURL Link

The Charity Mission Center cafeteria was packed with representatives on Thursday, October 3rd from various Eastern Baptist Association (EBA) churches to take action on disaster relief. The meeting, led by the husband and wife team, Richard and Tammy Weeks, provided information and instruction concerning the relief efforts towards the devastation caused by Hurricane Helene.

"The damage of this hurricane is worse than Florence," said Richard Weeks, Director of Missions for the EBA. "If it wasn't for the churches in the Western part of the state, we wouldn't be as far as we are in the Hurricane Florence rebuild projects. It is time for us to return the favor."

Weeks encouraged those attending the meeting to remember how devastating and hopeless it felt to experience the effects of Hurricane Florence in Duplin County. There are areas in Duplin County that still suffer the aftermath. For many residents, life has not been the same since. It isn't easy to imagine a steeper situation. For victims in the Western part of our state, this is a sad reality.

When disaster strikes, it is a natural human response to rise to a call to action. However, according to Weeks, there is a productive way to help, no matter your stage of life or level of ability.

The EBA will work closely with Baptists on Mission (BOM) to directly relieve the affected areas. Baptist on Mission adopts the following mission statement:

Baptists On Mission exists to Glorify God by involving churches and Christians in meeting human needs in Jesus' name.

This mission statement is the sole purpose of their efforts to provide a variety of humanitarian efforts towards this initiative.

Weeks continues to explain in this meeting that he will be leading multiple teams one week at a time starting October 14th. The groups will be leaving on Sunday and getting home on Friday. There is a strong need for feeding volunteers. Those serving in this area will be providing consistent hot meals to affected community members and volunteers serving to repair the damage. Other service areas will include getting the mud out, tree removal, and tarping roofs. You can sign up to serve for a week by contacting the Charity Mission Center Office.

Please visit baptistsonmission.org/Mission-Projects/By-Mission-Type/Disaster-Relief/Hurricane-Helene for more information about how you can partner financially or volunteer with this organization, you can give directly to the efforts online and sign up to volunteer.

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Emily Smith Correspondent, 'Eastern Baptist Association gives instructions concerning relief efforts for Hurricane Helene', *Daily Reflector, The* (online), 6 Oct 2024 https://infoweb.newsbank.com/apps/news/document-view? p=AMNEWS&docref=news/19C0D0D323E05B50>



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Emily Smith Correspondent, 'Eastern Baptist Association gives instructions concerning relief efforts for Hurricane Helene', *Duplin Times, The* (online), 6 Oct 2024 https://infoweb.newsbank.com/apps/news/document-view? p=AMNEWS&docref=news/19C0BB2BE485DE68>



Ukrainian refugee family missing after Helene

October 6, 2024 | Fayetteville Observer, The (NC) Author: Christopher Cann; USA TODAY | Section: News | 496 Words Page: A5 OpenURL Link

When Russian forces invaded the Ukrainian port city of Kherson in February 2022, Anastasiia Novitnia Segen and her family sought a way out.

The family of four, including Segen's husband, Dmytro, their 13-year-old son, Yevhenii, and her 80-year-old mother, Tatiana Novitnia, were soon accepted into a U.S. humanitarian program and moved to the western North Carolina community of Micaville three months later.

They chose the remote neighborhood nestled in the southern Appalachian Mountains because it was where Segen's sister and brother-in-law had settled decades earlier.

In an open field on her sister's property, Segen and her family moved into a navy blue mobile home just a short walk from the South Toe River. It was paradise compared to Kherson, the first major Ukrainian city seized by Russian forces.

But, after more than a year of peace and tranquility in the North Carolina highlands, the Segens' lives have been beset by a different sort of disaster.

Helene, one of the deadliest hurricanes to hit the U.S. in the modern era, soaked the Southeast with record rainfall, triggering monstrous floods that swept through entire neighborhoods and cities.

Segen and her family remain unaccounted for, leaving their relatives in a desperate search to find them.

Lysa Gindinova, Segen's niece who lives in Brooklyn, New York, has hovered over her phone in recent days, refreshing local Facebook groups for names of discovered residents and calling rescue teams in the area, as well as local, state and federal authorities.

"It's been 24/7," Gindinova told USA TODAY. "I'm just on my phone all the time. I cannot function normally. That is all I think about."

The Segens are among hundreds of residents still missing.

"We are currently facing significant roadway and infrastructure damage, which is creating significant challenges for both our first responders and our citizens," Yancey County Chairman Jeff Whitson said at a news conference Tuesday. Whitson said search and rescue operations were ongoing, with teams from as far as New York and Texas assisting.

The South Toe River, near the Segen family's home, crested the morning of Sept.27, rising nearly 6 feet in seven hours before the gauge was damaged and measurements ceased, according to the National Water Prediction Service. The final update, listed at 7:30a.m. that day, said the river was over 6 feet above flood stage and within 2 feet of its record height.

The last time Gindinova spoke to her aunt was about 6p.m. Sept.26, as Helene's ferocious rains and winds began battering western North Carolina.

"She said the water in the river is rising," Gindinova said, recalling the conversation. "She made a joke that she

hopes their Titanic - referring to their house - is going to hold."

On Tuesday, Gindinova reached a family friend who had sent a drone over the field where the Segens' home sat on blocks. In footage he shared with Gindinova, the home was nowhere to be seen.

"There's nothing left," Gindinova said.

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• Citation (aglc Style)

Christopher Cann, USA TODAY, 'Ukrainian refugee family missing after Helene', *Fayetteville Observer*, *The* (online), 6 Oct 2024 A5 https://infoweb.newsbank.com/apps/news/document-view?p=AMNEWS&docref=news/19C0983751B88F60