

Statesville Record & Landmark (NC): Page 6

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Couple has two houses in the path of hurricanes. They've spent their time helping others.

October 9, 2024 | Blowing Rocket, The (Blowing Rock, NC) Author: Nick Fogleman nick.fogleman@wataugademocrat.com| Section: Blowingrocket | 432 Words OpenURL Link

BLOWING ROCK — Jerry Traudt and his wife, Lynda Lasseter, always knew their house in Daytona Beach, Florida, was in the path of hurricanes. What they never expected was their house in Blowing Rock to be in the path of a storm like Hurricane Helene.

"I've never seen anything like this up here," Traudt said.

Their house in Blowing Rock had minimal damage, but they did stay at a neighboring condo while their power was out for three days.

"Our home got spared, but there are people who lost everything," Traudt said. "We're very, very thankful."

Instead of heading back to Florida to prepare their house for potential damage from Hurricane Milton, the couple has stayed in Blowing Rock and spent their time volunteering at the American Legion building, which has become an intake hub for donations that travel to other counties.

"We are always looking to help people; it's just the way we are," Traudt said. "We enjoy doing it. We wear ourselves out, but we don't mind."

"There's no feeling like being a helper. When we see a need, we fill it," Lasseter said.

Traudt is a member of the service group Lions Clubs International and has spent time volunteering for Habitat for Humanity. Lasseter has trained with the Red Cross and has always found ways to help the community.

"If I see a branch blocking a stop sign, I'll go out and clip it. If I see a tire in the road, I always call to make sure someone goes and gets it," Lasseter said. "The tiniest bit of taking control of the situation is so much more rewarding than shopping."

Their house in Daytona hasn't had damage in recent storms, but last year flood water came within two inches of their house.

"Everybody is really worried. If the canal next to our house comes up like it did again, we believe our house will get wet," Traudt said.

"We got someone to come over to prepare the house, remove some files, take things inside and board up the windows," Lasseter said.

The couple hopes Milton's path remains south of Daytona but have a very positive attitude toward the situation.

"We're convinced our house will flood, but you can't take it with you," Lasseter said of any potential damage.

"Whatever happens, happens," Traudt said. "Thank the lord we don't have carpets."

With Milton headed towards Florida, the couple is still focused on helping others who were impacted by the storm in North Carolina.

"We have been so busy here. It's been a mad dash for hours," Lasseter said.

"The more we can do to help them, the more we're happy to do it," Traudt said.

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Nick Fogleman nick.fogleman@wataugademocrat.com, 'Couple has two houses in the path of hurricanes. They've spent their time helping others.', *Blowing Rocket, The* (online), 9 Oct 2024 https://infoweb.newsbank.com/apps/news/document-view? p=AMNEWS&docref=news/19C2063035D75EF8>



EDITORIAL: Harris's competing comments raise the question of sincerity

October 9, 2024 | Carteret County News-Times, The (Morehead City, NC) Author: Staff Writer | Section: Opinions | 1021 Words
OpenURL Link

Residents and business owners in western North Carolina who are digging out from the unprecedented flooding caused by Hurricane Helene were left wondering this week if Vice President Kamala Harris's expression of sympathy and concern, following a visit to the region were sincere or just political rhetoric.

On October 5, Harris paid a brief visit to Asheville to view the flooding damage caused by Hurricane Helene. During her visit she attended a meeting of state and local officials and according to an NPR report, "thanked those who are in the room and those who are out there right now working around the clock." She promised that federal funding, which stands currently at \$153 million, would continue. Then for media optics, she packed toiletries into aid kits at a distribution center and talked with a few of the citizens before leaving for another political event.

That same day, on another campaign stop, the Vice President turned her attention to the plight of Lebanon's citizens caught in a crossfire between Israel and Hezbollah fighters peppering the Jewish nation with almost round the clock missile attacks.

Her words of sympathy as she announced further funding of humanitarian aid for Lebanon brought into question her serious concern for the tens of thousands of victims in Florida, Georgia, South Carolina, Tennessee and particularly in North Carolina, who have been left homeless and in despair as they try to survive without water, food or electricity.

Standing in front of an audience of liberal minded globalists the Vice President went out of her way in expressing sympathy for a far-way country involved in a conflict that in many cases is self-inflicted.

"The people of Lebanon are facing an increasingly dire humanitarian situation," she explained. "I am concerned about the security and well-being of civilians suffering in Lebanon and will continue working to help meet the needs of all civilians there. To that end, the United States will provide nearly \$157 million in additional assistance to the people of Lebanon for essential needs such as food, shelter, water, protection, and sanitation to help those who have been displaced by the recent conflict. This additional support brings total U.S. assistance to Lebanon over the last year to over \$385 million."

In politics, optics is important and the contrasting optics created in two separate presentations by the Democrat presidential candidate on the same day clearly raises questions of her sincerity, empathy and priorities, and that of the current administration

In contrasting her broad comments made during her Asheville visit, Harris's expressed concerns about Lebanon only muddled the Biden-Harris administration's interest in hurricane relief. By simply replacing the phrase "people of Lebanon" with the phrase "Hurricane Helene victims" that entire speech could have been presented during the stop in Asheville. Instead Harris kept her remarks broad, providing no real initiatives other than to say that funding would continue.

Since shortly after residents in the hurricane's path began taking stock with social media postings of the destruction, complaints were being levied at the slow and disorganized approach to recovery. Those complaints were and remain a concern in western North Carolina where flooding has made survival a major issue.

Roadways and bridges have been ripped up, water systems are either totally broken or have been breached, making access to potable water a crisis for whole towns, let alone individual houses, and with the absence of electricity or communications, emergency service personnel are having a difficult time reaching victims.

Now, two weeks after Hurricane Helene devastated major swaths of the southeast, leaving behind over 200 recorded deaths and hundreds still unaccounted for, the Biden-Harris administration is complaining about misinformation flooding social media and the concern that this is having on the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) personnel working in recovery efforts.

The administration needs only to look inward for the cause of the dissatisfaction being expressed hourly on social media platforms. Hurricane victims are frustrated with the lack of interest being shown by the national mainstream media, which for apparent political intentions, has failed to draw attention to the tardy and often times confusing leadership in the hurricane recovery efforts.

For several days, residents in western North Carolina had to rely on local support and efforts from non-profit organizations such as the Salvation Army and Samaritan's Purse before any government agencies appeared. And once these agencies did take charge they immediately throttled the volunteer organizations and in some cases told them to cease and desist.

It took nearly a week for the administration to call up military units from Fort Liberty (formerly Bragg) to provide aid in infrastructure repair- aid that is well within the Army's expertise. The Washington D.C. elite has never hesitated to send military aid to a variety of foreign countries at the drop of the proverbial hat, but it took days of head scratching thought in the Biden-Harris administration to send Army units from a military base only hours away from the destruction.

Adding to the complaints of misinformation is the conflicting reports from the head of Department of Homeland Security, Alejandro Mayorkas, who has said at various times that his department may face financial difficulties in funding hurricane recovery. One moment he has expressed fears that his department will not be able to assist if another hurricane hits and then he backs up to say that his department is adequately funded. Which is it, we wonder.

Harris's comments of sympathy and the additional funding for Lebanon is seen by many as being totally tone deaf and disinterested in the plight of the tens of thousands of victims from a natural disaster in her own country. Yet she and her boss, President Biden are, like the late comedian Rodney Dangerfield, complaining that they "don't get no respect."

Based on the mixed messaging, the lack of aggressive leadership and the concerns for a country that is embroiled in a mess of its own making, why should they be respected? The problem now is that as this editorial is being written, another major hurricane is targeting Florida's Gulf coast and the residents and businesses in the target area have great reason to fear – not only the storm but the inability of the federal government to provide assistance.

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It's wildfire season, too: Be careful when burning debris

October 9, 2024 | Carteret County News-Times, The (Morehead City, NC) Author: Staff Writer | Section: News Times | 722 Words OpenURL Link

RALEIGH — With the amount of storm debris brought on by Hurricane Helene and North Carolina on the cusp of fall wildfire season, the N.C. Forest Service is reminding the public across the state to think ahead and be cautious when burning outdoors.

"Recent tropical weather, most notably Hurricane Helene, has left piles of debris in its wake. Once safe to do so, many people will have significant yard cleanup and may choose to dispose of leaves and other yard debris by way of burning," said Agriculture Commissioner Steve Troxler. "Outdoor fires left unattended can get out of hand quickly, becoming wildfires that threaten lives and property."

Typically, wildfires occur more frequently from October through early December. In 2023, the N.C. Forest Service responded to nearly 2,000 wildfires during those months, with response to more than 1,200 of those fires taking place in November. Backyard debris burning, arson, escaped campfires and machine and vehicle use continue to be common ignition sources for human-caused wildfires.

Wildfire trends and causes in North Carolina are consistent with the rest of the southern U.S. The American South experiences more wildfires each year than any other region in the U.S., with 87% of wildfires igniting on private property and being started by people.

In North Carolina, human activity is responsible for 99% of wildfires.

The wildland-urban interface (WUI) -- the area where structures and other human development blend with undeveloped wildland, forest or vegetation -- is a notable threat for increased wildfire impacts due to rapid population growth and people moving into formerly rural areas, increasing WUI acreage. This trend is significant as three of the top four states with the most homes near wildlands are in the South, including North Carolina. As of 2020, roughly more than half of North Carolina's citizens live in WUI areas.

"Before choosing to burn, folks need to obtain a valid burn permit and keep an eye on the weather. Never burn on dry, windy days and never leave your fire unattended," said Troxler. "Smokey Bear celebrated his 80th birthday back in August, and I think we owe it to him to uphold his message by remembering that we are the best defense against wildfires."

For those who choose to burn, the N.C. Forest Service offers the following tips:

- -Make sure you have a valid permit. You can obtain a burn permit at any N.C. Forest Service office or authorized permitting agent, or online at https://www.ncforestservice.gov/burnpermit.
- Check the weather. Never burn on dry, windy days.

Keep your fire small, not tall.

- -Be sure you are fully prepared before burning. To control the fire, you will need a water hose, bucket, steel rake and a shovel for tossing dirt on the fire. Keep a phone nearby, too.
- -Never use kerosene, gasoline, diesel fuel or other flammable liquids to speed up burning.
- -Douse burning charcoal briquettes or campfires thoroughly with water. Drown all embers, not just the red ones.

When soaked, stir the coals and soak them again. Make sure everything is wet and that the embers are cold to the touch. If you do not have water, mix enough dirt or sand with the embers to extinguish the fire, being careful not to bury the fire. Never dump hot ashes or coals into a wooded area.

-Never leave your fire. Stay with it until it is completely out.

The U.S. Forest Service offers the following guidelines for safely extinguishing campfires and helping to prevent wildfires:

- -Allow the wood to burn completely to ash, if possible.
- -Pour lots of water on the fire, drown all embers, not just the red ones.
- Pour until the hissing sound stops.
- -Stir campfire ashes and embers with a shovel.
- -Scrape the sticks and logs to remove any embers.
- Stir and make sure everything is wet and that embers are cold to the touch.

If you do not have water, use dirt. Pour dirt or sand into the fire, mixing enough dirt or sand with the embers to extinguish the fire.

- -Continue adding or stirring until all remaining material is cool.
- -Do NOT bury the fire as the fire will continue to smolder and could catch roots on fire that will eventually get to the surface and start a wildfire.

To learn more about fire safety and preventing wildfires and loss of property, visit www.ncforestservice.gov and www.smokeybear.com. For more information and tips to help create a defensible space around your home and protect your property from wildfire, visit www.resistwildfirenc.org.

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Helene slammed Asheville's homeless community. Aftermath poses 'insurmountable' challenges

October 9, 2024 | Charlotte Observer, The (NC) Author: Mary Ramsey; Staff Writer | Section: News | 978 Words Page: 5A

Asheville When Helene barreled through Asheville, it was like nothing Renee Maynor had ever seen.

Maynor, who is experiencing homelessness, grew up in Charlotte. Like many in the region, when thinking about big hurricanes, she always thought of 1989's Hurricane Hugo.

But now, she'll think of the disorienting chaos she and her community felt in the week since Helene hit.

"I don't know if I'm coming or going ... I haven't had a shower. I just got a cup of coffee this morning," she told The Charlotte Observer Friday.

The storm caused devastating flooding and landslides, leaving Asheville and residents in the surrounding area without power or running water. It was a brutal hit for the more than 700 people without housing in the city, Maynor and local advocates say.

"This has been an unprecedented event," said Micheal Woods, the executive director of Western Carolina Rescue Ministries.

As the community works to find out who survived the storm and provide immediate assistance, they're also worried about the long-term impacts in a place where housing already was tricky.

"The magnitude of the families and individuals who need housing will be insurmountable," predicted Melissa Duong, the board president of Homeward Bound.

'They thought they were going to die'

Maynor, who has been in Asheville for three years, took refuge during the storm at the emergency shelter at the Harrah's Cherokee Center.

There, she focused much of her energy on trying to care for older adults experiencing homelessness she knew and were also at the shelter.

"They thought they were going to die, and they didn't want to die," she said.

A week later, she was still exhausted.

"The days are running into nights and the nights are running into days because there's always someone needing help," she said. "My muscles hurt from helping tote and carry people's stuff."

She already knows of some friends who didn't survive. She's bracing herself for more bad news.

Woods, whose group has worked in Asheville for 43 years, is especially concerned about people he knows who camped by the Swannanoa River, which swelled during the storm and flooded the area.

"Our hope is that they got out," he said.

'Working around the clock' to help, find survivors

Service providers are keeping "lost and found lists" of people they've served previously and want to track down since the storm, Woods said.

Due to ongoing safety concerns, his group will leave searches to authorities. But he's worried that his "invisible neighbors" are left out of the missing persons numbers.

Western Carolina Rescue has received calls and social media messages from "all over the country" from people seeking assistance with finding loved ones who are unhoused in the Asheville area.

"There's a lot of people that we're thinking about, caring about, praying about that right now we don't know," Woods said.

Teams with Homeward Bound, which focuses on placing homeless people in permanent housing and gaining access to services including mental and physical health care, "have been working around the clock for over a week" to check on clients, Duong said.

As of Friday, they had confirmed three clients died, all of whom lived in mobile homes in Swannanoa. More are "unaccounted for," and case managers are trying to get to them for wellness checks.

"We're boots on the ground as long as the roads are safe," she said.

Potentially 'insurmountable' challenges

Both Western Carolina Rescue Ministries and Homeward Bound also continue to shelter people.

More than 130 men, women and children are staying at Western Carolina. Another 80 people live at Homeward Bound's Compass Point Village, and more stop by the group's AHOPE Day Center.

All lack clean running water.

Woods said his group got help from donors to get portable toilets, and on Friday morning they were testing a system to get people hot showers.

"We've been problem solving on the fly," he said.

Both groups say they need monetary donations and water, as well as gas cans, undergarments for people who can't wash their clothes, phone chargers and food, especially non-perishable food and food that's kid-friendly.

Long-term, the storm creates even more challenges.

Rescue ministries had to cancel its annual fundraising gala.

"That was a part of our budget ... We're going to have to figure out how to make that up," Woods said.

Service providers will also have to grapple with how to help people now dealing with "trauma on top of trauma."

"No one as a kid wakes up and says, 'when I grow up I want to be homeless.' For us, we want this to be a place of stability, a place of safety, a place of love," he said.

He predicted Helene will "create a new kind of paradigm when it comes to the unhoused in Buncombe County."

"The magnitude of just the number of people that we know are going to be displaced because of this ... These are folks who were already probably in substandard housing, housing is very tough anyway in this community. We're going to have the introduction of a whole new group of people into the homeless community," he said.

Duong is worried about people who were already struggling with affording housing in the expensive Asheville market.

"We live in a gorgeous area, but that prohibits us from being able to use a lot of the land," she said.

Tears welled in Maynor's eyes as she walked around downtown Asheville Friday to check on friends and get a meal. But she also remains optimistic.

"I'm tired, but I'll keep going ... I went through the storm, but the storm made me stronger," she said.

Mary Ramsey: @mcolleen1996

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Helene creates piles of debris in Western NC that foretell long cleanup ahead

October 9, 2024 | Charlotte Observer, The (NC)

Author: Richard Stradling; Staff Writer | Section: News | 634 Words

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People in Western North Carolina still lack potable water, power and other basics after Tropical Storm Helene, and the search for the missing continues.

But some of the longer-term challenges of recovering from the storm are starting to come into focus, including how to deal with the mountains of fallen trees, shattered buildings and other debris.

Jonathan Kanipe, town manager of Biltmore Forest in Buncombe County, said Helene felled an "uncountable number" of trees in his heavily wooded community of 1,500. A debris removal company estimates it will collect 100,000 cubic yards of trees and limbs from the 3-square-mile town, Kanipe said.

"To visualize that, imagine a football field covered with material to a depth of 56 feet," he said at a press conference Thursday. "It's highly likely the final number will be greater than this."

The floodwaters that scoured Western North Carolina carried shattered pieces of farms, homes, country stores and campgrounds down the hills and valleys. Mangled cars and washing machines, propane tanks and the possessions of thousands of people are now snagged in tangled piles of trees felled by the wind and water.

The huge number of downed trees makes the task of cleaning up after Helene more daunting than after most hurricanes, said Joe Hack, a senior project manager for Mecklenburg County's solid waste department and president of the state chapter of the Solid Waste Association of North America, a trade group.

"It's probably going to take months, maybe years, to get some of the debris up from some of the back areas," Hack said in an interview.

For most communities, clearing that debris is not yet a priority. Buncombe County is still in the "cut-and-clear" phase, moving trees and debris off to the side of blocked streets and roads, said county manager Avril Pinder.

But Pinder said the county has begun talking with municipalities about where that material will go. They have designated storage areas for storm debris, she said, but with the sheer volume created by Tropical Storm Helene, "we have to expand that tremendously."

Pinder said Buncombe County has also begun talking to state regulators about possibly burning some vegetative debris. State law prohibits most outdoor burning, but trees and other plants can be burned under certain conditions, according to the state Division of Air Quality.

As for building materials, furniture and other non-vegetative waste, the county is talking with companies that take construction and demolition debris, Pinder said.

"We know of a couple of places close by that we can haul that to," she said. "We're working with them now on contracts and what that will look like."

Landfill shortage could become worse

The state Division of Solid Waste Management regulates and helps coordinate debris cleanup after a storm, Hack said. The Federal Emergency Management Agency will likely provide money to help pay for it. In Raleigh on

Wednesday, President Joe Biden said he'd approved a request from Gov. Roy Cooper to pay the entire cost of debris removal for at least the next six months.

But it will primarily be up to each county and town to determine how to clean up, in concert with private hauling and disposal companies, Hack said.

"Each community will evaluate the best way to handle it as they go," he said. "There's a lot we don't know yet."

Hack said much of the material will be hauled to emergency debris sites, where some effort is made to separate trees, cars and refrigerators, household trash and hazardous materials, so each can be shipped to the right disposal facility.

Some counties have landfills that can take the material; others usually ship their waste out anyway and will need to find some place to take storm debris.

"Long-term, there is ultimately a landfill shortage or disposal capacity shortage in North Carolina," Hack said. "And this is just going to accelerate filling up some of the facilities."

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Sewage spills add to pollution Helene washed into Catawba River

October 9, 2024 | Charlotte Observer, The (NC)

Author: Gavin Off; Staff Writer Section: News 905 Words

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Heavy rain fromHelene caused more than a quarter million gallons of sewage to spill from Mecklenburg County's wastewater treatment system and into the Catawba River basin.

At least that's the official estimate the city gave the N.C. Department of Environmental Quality.

The real amount of waste was likely much bigger, said Rusty Rozzelle, water quality program manager for Charlotte-Mecklenburg Storm Water Services, a partnership between the city and county that oversees drainage and water quality.

The county's drinking water supply is safe. But the environment took a hit, and it will take some weeks to assess the toll, Rozzelle said.

And it is not just what leaked into the Catawba locally that Charlotte-area residents should be aware of, he said. They'll also have to grapple with any impacts from the debris, sewage and other contamination that washed into the river upstream, as far west as the Appalachian Mountains, that will eventually float to Charlotte.

"This is by far and away the most devastation our waterways have experienced in modern history - both from a water quality and water quantity perspective," Rozzelle said.

When untreated sewage reaches a waterbody, bacteria, viruses, parasites, molds and fungi are released. Wading, swimming or ingesting contaminated water could lead to stomach cramps and diarrhea or even life-threatening ailments such as cholera and hepatitis, according to the Environmental Protection Agency.

Bacterial levels are usually highest immediately after contamination and when the rivers are running the fastest, said Mike O'Driscoll, a hydrologist and professor at East Carolina University.

The extra water dilutes the pollutants, he said, but some contaminants, such as nutrients and heavy metals, could be in the water for months.

Sewage spilled many places into the river

More than 1 million gallons of sewage leaked from collection systems within the North Carolina portion of the Catawba River basin, The Observer data analysis shows.

Northeast of Charlotte, some 309,000 gallons spilled from the Newton Collection System. Ninety-two thousand gallons spilled across the Catawba River in Gaston County. Sewage flowed into the Catawba River basin upstream from Mecklenburgand atthree Charlotte Water Collection System locations after Helene roared across the Carolinas, state records show.

Mecklenburg County's largest untreated discharge was more than 224,000 gallons into Lake Wylie, with no specific utility facility identified in the data. Another 11,000 gallons flowed into Sugar Creek, which runs through the center of the city, and 1,500 gallons into Campbell Creek, on the city's west side, according to DEQ estimates.

Downstream from Mecklenburg County, Helene caused nearly 500,000 gallons of raw sewage to spill into Rock Hill, S.C. area waterways.

The exact cause of all spills is unclear. When it comes to Charlotte Water, the public utility, floating debris can run into and break wastewater pipes that span creeks. Lift stations, pumping systems that move wastewater from lower elevations to higher ones, can overflow. And erosion can undermine underground pipes, said Cam Cooley, a utility spokesperson.

For those not linked to the utility, an influx of water can cause septic tank waste to back up into homes or leach into the soil, said O'Driscoll of East Carolina University.

Rozzelle said it would be two or three weeks before local officials even test water along the Catawba River. There is no need to test it now, he said. Officials know bacteria counts are "really high."

Helene pollution extends beyond local spills

The Charlotte area has weathered much larger sewage spills than the at least 236,000 gallons reported tohave escaped during Helene, a Charlotte Observer analysis of state data found.

Charlotte's largest sewage leak happened in 2018 when heavy rains caused 15 million gallons to leak into Long Creek off Oakdale Road, northwest of uptown, The Observer found. That same year, another 2.6 million gallons flowed into Taggard Creek, east of Charlotte Douglas International Airport.

But what makes Helene's toll on the river so terrible was all the contamination between the eastern slopes of the Blue Ridge Mountains in McDowell County, where the river starts, and here, Rozzelle said.

Much of that pollution will eventually make its way to Charlotte.

"There may have been larger spills in this county, but I think you have to look at everything upstream," he said.

Contaminants cause concern

Nancy Hiemstra's home overlooks Mountain Island Lake, where some of the area's worst flooding happened. She knows something changed after Helene. The lake smells, she said, and she's seen a film on its surface.

Since the storm, Hiemsrta, who is on city water, has filtered and boiled it before drinking, she told The Observer. Her home sits downstream of a number of spills, including the 309,000 gallons that spilled in Newton.

Treating water piped to homes by Charlotte Water is not necessary, Rozzelle said. The city is purifying that drinking water and, he stressed, it is safe to drink.

But the Catawba River is contaminated with sewage and other pollutants, Rozzelle acknowledged. In addition to sewage, manufacturing chemicals, gasoline, oil and heavy metals, some of which are carcinogenic, and even human remains were likely washed into it, he said.

The contamination shouldn't prevent residents from rebuilding. But it should prevent them from going into the water for now, he said.

"I would not be surprised if anything is floating in the water right now," Rozzelle said. "Some seen. Some unseen."

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13 state parks closed in Western NC after Hurricane Helene. Estimated reopening timeline

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After the deadly destruction of Hurricane Helene, over a dozen of North Carolina's state parks will be shut down for several weeks.

As cleanup continues across the southeast, The North Carolina Division of Parks and Recreation announced that all state parks west of I-77 are closed through at least Oct. 31, 2024, along with most programs at all state parks.

The Division of Parks and Recreation is assisting with statewide emergency and rescue efforts in Western North Carolina in the aftermath of Hurricane Helene," the division announced on Oct. 2. "As a result, we are scaling back operations across the state to allow staff to continue to assist with critical deployments."

According to the division, 13 of North Carolina's 39 state parks and recreation areas will be closed until at least the end of the month, including:

Chimney Rock State Park

Crowders Mountain State Park

Elk Knob State Park

Gorges State Park

Grandfather Mountain State Park

Lake James State Park

Lake Norman State Park

Mount Jefferson State Natural Area

Mount Mitchell State Park

New River State Park

Rendezvous Mountain

South Mountains State Park

Stone Mountain State Park

Along with one third of North Carolina's state parks being closed, so are several other roads around the area, including the famous Blue Ridge Parkway.

"We continue to discourage unnecessary travel in and to Western North Carolina. Limiting travel helps prioritize sending lifesaving resources and repairing vital infrastructure repairs in the communities hit hardest by Helene. Many roads continue to be closed due to unsafe conditions," NCDPR's website says.

If you have any reservations made for any of the state parks west of I-77, including cabins, campsites and picnic shelters, full refunds will be distributed, according to the division.

You can find more information and updates on park closures online at ncparks.gov/closures.

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fact check - Here are the rumors and the reality in Western North Carolina

October 9, 2024 | Charlotte Observer, The (NC)

Author: Chantal Allam and Joe Marusak; Staff Writer | Section: News | 1512 Words

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Emergency officials responding to the Hurricane Helene disaster in Western North Carolina say false rumors on social media are impeding their efforts to help tens of thousands of people in need.

"False information is being widely shared on social media channels, including AI-generated content and images," N.C. Department of Public Safety officials said in a statement. "Nefarious actors and those with ill intent may be taking advantage of this situation by spreading false information."

False rumors even spread claiming the government had created the hurricane.

The public should find and share information from trusted sources and discourage others from spreading information from unverified sources, NCDPS officials said.

On social media Friday, the American Red Cross said misinformation is hurting its Hurricane Helene relief efforts.

"Misinformation can spread quickly after a disaster, causing confusion and distrust within communities struggling to recover," the Red Cross said in a statement. "Unfortunately, we're seeing this during our response to Hurricane Helene."

Here are rumors being spread on social media and the facts offered in response by government agencies:

Rumor: Governments aren't responding to the disaster.

Facts: The N.C. State Emergency Response Team is working 24/7 to save lives and provide Helene relief. The team includes local, state, federal and military units; power and cell phone companies and other businesses; and volunteer organizations.

On Saturday, Mooresville Fire Chief Curt Deaton said his team alone has rescued 11 people and two animals in Ashe County and will remain there until it is safe for residents and their first responders.

"This work is very strenuous," Deaton said. "These men spend most of the time walking and climbing through dangerous debris piles, searching for any survivors or victims ... Some of our team, they've been there for 10 days straight now, working around the clock."

Rumor: Donations, volunteers turned away at checkpoints.

Facts: Western N.C. roads are still dangerous and impassible in many places, and landslides remain a threat. Traffic is being rerouted on some roads so emergency vehicles, disaster relief efforts and local traffic can still access them.

Rumor: Governments are discouraging and confiscating donations.

Facts: The state encourages financial donations to the North Carolina Disaster Relief Fund and to N.C. volunteer organizations responding to the disaster. The state is working with the organizations to collect and distribute physical donations coming in from across the state and country.

Coordinated volunteer disaster relief efforts are needed in Western North Carolina, according to the NC Department of Public Safety.

"We strongly encourage neighbors to continue helping neighbors in impacted areas," department officials said. "Those wishing to volunteer should register at www.nc.gov/volunteer," and not "self-deploy" to the region.

Rumor: The government created the hurricane

Facts: Helene formed from an organized band of showers and thunderstorms in the Gulf of Mexico, the National Hurricane Center in Miami reported.

Rumors that the government created the storm were fueled by U.S. Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene's tweet late Thursday that "Yes they can control the weather. It's ridiculous for anyone to lie and say it can't be done."

Rumor: The FAA is restricting access to the airspace.

Facts: The FAA is not restricting access for recovery operations but is trying to people safe. There has been a 300% increase in air traffic in the region, the FAA says.

"The FAA is coordinating closely with state and local officials to make sure everyone is operating safely in very crowded and congested airspace," according to a statement by the N.C. Department of Public Safety.

When President Joe Biden visited the area on Wednesday, the Secret Service took painstaking care to keep all search-and-rescue and relief flights going, a U.S. official told The Charlotte Observer.

The official said recovery-related flights that are coordinated by the N.C. Emergency Operations Center are assigned special Beacon codes and allowed to proceed. If a pilot lets the EOC know they are planning to deliver aid, the plane would be pre-cleared by the FAA.

The only flights affected would have been by pilots unknown to members of the relief or search-and-rescue community, the official said.

Rumor: "The Red Cross isn't here."

Facts: At least 1,300 Red Cross disaster responders are helping people in the Carolinas, Florida, Georgia, Tennessee and Virginia with safe shelter, food, hygiene items, medications and emotional support.

Before Helene made landfall, the Red Cross positioned hundreds of disaster responders and thousands of relief supplies across the Southeast.

Rumor: The Red Cross is confiscating or discarding donated items.

Facts: The Red Cross is not "confiscating, removing or discarding donated items," Red Cross officials said in a statement Friday. The Red Cross focuses on providing shelter, food and relief after disasters.

"While we don't accept physical donations, as managing them takes time and resources away from our mission, we work with community partners who are better equipped with these resources to handle and distribute these items," Red Cross officials said.

Call 211 to find out where donated goods are available.

Rumor: The Red Cross is taking over shelters.

Facts: The Red Cross does not take over shelters. Rather, it provides management support at the request of local

partners.

Rumor: The Red Cross is taking over volunteer groups.

Facts: While the Red Cross is working alongside other volunteer groups, the Red Cross is not taking over their efforts or services.

Rumor: FEMA does not have enough money to provide disaster assistance for Helene.

Facts: FEMA has enough money right now for immediate response and recovery needs.

In North Carolina alone, FEMA has provided more than \$26 million in housing and other types of assistance to over 25,000 households, it said in an Oct. 5 release.

More than 700 FEMA staff and over 1,200 urban search and rescue personnel are on the ground. Over 1,000 National Guard troopshave also been deployed to the state.

Rumor: FEMA is no longer accepting applications for housing assistance.

Facts: FEMA is still accepting assistance applications throughout areas affected by Helene, it said.

Over 1,400 people who cannot return home are currently staying in safe and clean lodging through FEMA's Transitional Shelter Assistance program.

FEMA said residents in declared counties who have applied for disaster assistance may be eligible to stay temporarily in a hotel or motel paid for by FEMA while they work on their long-term housing plan. People do not need to request this assistance. FEMA will notify them of their eligibility through an automated phone call, text message, and/or email, depending upon the method of communication they selected at the time of application for disaster assistance.

Twenty-two shelters are housing just over 1,000 people, FEMA said. Mobile feeding operations continue to help survivors in hard-hit areas, including three mass feeding sites in Buncombe, McDowell and Watauga counties.

For current application timelines, visit disasterassistance.gov or FEMA's state-specific Helene disaster site for North Carolina.

Rumor: Funding for FEMA disaster response was diverted to support international efforts or border-related issues.

Facts: This is false, FEMA said. No money is being diverted from disaster response needs. FEMA's disaster response efforts and individual assistance is funded through the Disaster Relief Fund, which is a dedicated fund for disaster efforts.

Commodity distribution, mass feeding and hydration operations are underway in areas of western North Carolina, FEMA said. Commodity shipments are also en route.

"The agency is on track to meet requested delivery timelines for meals and water," it said in a statement released Oct 5. "Voluntary organizations are supporting feeding operations with bulk food and water deliveries coming via truck and aircraft."

In North Carolina alone, the Salvation Army has nine mobile feeding units and has served over 7,100meals, 6,600 drinks, and 3,700 snacks, it said.

Resources:

Residents can visit: ncdps.gov/helene to get information and additional assistance.

Residents should not travel to western North Carolina to keep the roadways clear for search and rescue teams and utility crews.

Residents can get in touch with loved ones by calling 2-1-1 or visiting unitedwaync.org to add them to search and rescue efforts.

Rumor: FEMA is in the the process of confiscating Helene survivor property. If I apply for disaster assistance and my land is deemed unlivable, my property will be seized.

Facts: FEMA cannot seize your property or land. Applying for disaster assistance does not grant FEMA or the federal government authority or ownership of your property or land, FEMA said.

When you apply for disaster assistance, FEMA said an inspector may be sent to verify the damage on your home. "This is one of many factors reviewed to determine what kind of disaster assistance you may be eligible for," it said. If the results of the inspection deem your home uninhabitable, that information is "only used to determine the amount of FEMA assistance you may receive to make your home safe, sanitary and functional," it said.

If you were affected by Helene, apply for disaster assistance. The fastest way is through DisasterAssistance.gov. You can also apply through the FEMA mobile app or by calling the FEMA Helpline at 800-621-3362. If you use a video relay service, captioned telephone service, or other communication services, provide FEMA the specific number assigned for that service.

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