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Volunteers help Operation Air Drop as they organize supplies to be flown into western North Carolina, which sustained catastrophic flooding over the weekend, in Concord on Monday.

Pilots get needed supplies to battered Western NC and beyond, one delivery at a time

BY REBECCA NOEL
rnoel@charlotteobserver.com

From above, Gatlinburg, Tennessee, looks almost serene — the hills' jagged edges in fog, creeks and rivers twisting through the green like capillaries. From there, you wouldn't know Gatlinburg's babies don't have formula.

But there's been no running water in the area since remnants of Hurricane Helene tore through the mountain community on Thursday. Many residents still don't have

power. Gatlinburg's airport reopened Tuesday for the first time since Helene struck, and Jillian Gorrell was there to greet the seventh plane to touch down there that morning a small CJ2+ from Concord, North Carolina. It was carrying over 1,000 pounds of diapers, baby formula, clothes and first aid supplies with eight more planes expected to follow.

"We desperately need medical supplies, baby supplies, cleaning supplies, trash bags," said Gorrell, a resident of the area and lecturer in the school of natural resources at the University of Tennessee

in nearby Knoxville.

With roads and bridges in the area devoured and mangled in Helene's wake, it was the first assistance many in the area were able to get, she said

were able to get, she said.

"Roads are gone, landmarks are gone...," Gorrell
said, teary-eyed, with her
voice beginning to break.

"Our area is hurting, but
we're pulling together,

and we really appreciate

everything people are doing for us."

The pilots making the delivery were volunteers with Operation Airdrop, a disaster relief nonprofit, that has mobilized to deliver thousands of pounds of donated goods to western North Carolina, southern Appalachia, and other hard hit areas. Some, including Byron MacRae and Owen Williams, take off from Concord-Padgett Regional Airport, just northeast of Charlotte.

"We got to Asheville about 2:45 p.m. on Sunday, and they had just gotten power back about 10 minutes before we were landing," Williams said of the first trip he took after the storm, delivering 1,500 pounds of goods to the hard-hit Buncombe County city. "The mission has evolved

goods to the hard-hit
Buncombe County city.
"The mission has evolved
with every trip we take as
we learn more about what
people need, what areas
need us the most and how
to spread the word to
people that can help."

'LOOK FOR THE HELPERS'

Operation Airdrop pilots have carried canned food, utensils, cleaning supplies, diapers, bottled water, feminine hygiene products, first aid supplies and more to small airfields in the North Carolina mountains, including Ashe County, Wilkes County and Banner Elk, in addition to parts of Tennessee and South Carolina.

With help from the Experimental Aircraft Association and the Carolina Aviators Network, Operation Airdrop and affiliated volunteers delivered eight tons of supplies

es onto pallets donated from a Walmart down the street. Pilots from around the country filtered in and announced they had a few hours to spare, as Operation Airdrop organizers huddled around a table in from Concord, Statesville the back of the room, monitoring weather conand Hickory to western North Carolina on Sunday ditions and dispatching alone. On Monday, pilots to areas they knew 50,000 pounds of supplithey could reach.

Volunteers loaded suppli-

"That's the beautiful

thing about Airdrop," flights. Getting crucial supplies Carroll said. "It's kind of to those in storm-battered like what Mr. Rogers used to say: 'Look for the help-Western North Carolina remains one of the top ers.' You'll find them Helene-recovery prioreverywhere." ities. It's a massive effort On Tuesday, the Coninvolving federal, state and local governments,

es left Concord aboard 75

involving federal, state and local governments, along with volunteers with groups like Operation
Airdrop.
The organization started in 2017 after Hurricane
Harvey dumped over 27

cord-Padgett Airport operation ation had reached its capacity for volunteers by 10 a.m. even as people continued to come in to offer help.

CHALLENGES TO THE

trillion gallons of rain in southeast Texas. Its founders, Doug Jackson and Robert Johnson from Dallas, flew supplies to the greater Houston area.

After Harvey, they launched Operation Airdrop, with the mission of delivering supplies in times of disaster to small communities cut off by storm damage that the Federal Emergency Management Agency couldn't immediately reach.

"We keep an eye on the weather as soon as hurricane season starts, and when we saw this one coming, we immediately reached out to pilots to see if they could get ready to help," said Shaun Carroll, a Durham resident who's been volunteering with Operation Airdrop since 2018.

Carroll weaved through rows of supplies in an airplane hangar in Concord Monday, as around 100 volunteers sorted donations into neat stacks to be weighed and loaded onto weiting planes.

onto waiting planes.

The whole place was humming with purpose.

MELISSA MELVIN-RODRIGUEZ mrodriquez@charlotteobserver.com

David Asman helps load several hundred pounds of supplies into a piper lance airplane that he will fly into Ashe County, which sustained catastrophic flooding over the weekend, in Concord on Monday.

organizer for another airlift effort in Statesville, which a group of local individuals put together in collaboration with Operation Airdrop. Water remains one of the most high-need items in communities impacted by

Helene, he said.

"We've heard from several people that there's either no water or there's a boil advisory or water treatment plants are just completely destroyed," he said.

However, water can require larger planes to transport it, since it tends to be heavy and planes have a limit on the weight they can move at a time.
"While water is really

"While water is really heavy, we're trying to make sure we can get water to as many people as possible," Carroll said. "Water purification is a really big thing we're trying to get out there: LifeStraws, tablets, filters, that kind of thing, just because there's a big water issue right now."

Collecting donations is the easy part, Spells said. They get them from local individuals as well as corporations.

To distribute them, they reach out to organizations in hard-hit areas that can help, and, with communication severely limited in

the region, it's no simple

"We try to connect with verified people out there, like churches, nonprofits, food banks, fire departments, just folks that can meet the planes when they get there and tell them where to go. It depends on the location,"

Spells said.

"We've honestly had a hard time finding people with a lot of people lacking electricity and cell service, but it's getting easier as more people come back online," he added.

In Gatlinburg, MacRae and Williams unloaded supplies from the CJ2+ into waiting pickup trucks ready to head to two local churches for distribution. Then, they fueled up, strapped back in and watched the green beneath them turn to white as they rose above clouds. Time for another deliv-

operation Airdrop will continue collecting donations of household necessities throughout the week, as long as roads in and out of western North Carolina remain blocked. Supplies can be delivered to the drop-off center in the parking lot of Walmart at 5825 Thunder Road NW in Concord.

Helene cancels South Carolina music festival featuring Eric Church, others

BY JOE MARUSAK
jmarusak@charlotteobserver.com

Organizers of the inaugural outdoor Field and Stream Music Fest in Winnsboro, South Carolina, have postponed the Oct. 4-6 event due to Hurricane Helene, organizers said Saturday.

Eric Church was among the headline acts scheduled to perform along with Lainey Wilson, Lynyrd Skynyrd, ZZ Top and many others.

"It is with heavy hearts that we announce the postponement," organizers said in a statement. "Given the state of emergency and challenging conditions on the ground, this decision has been made out of an abundance of caution."

Hurricane Helene damage "has been severe, with widespread flooding, downed trees and blocked roads," organizers said. "Power is still out on site, deliveries have been delayed, and some areas of the festival grounds remain inaccessible."

The production team for the event and site engineers determined it wouldn't be safe to proceed.

"While we are deeply

disappointed, the safety

of our fans, sponsors, staff, and crew remains our highest priority," according to the announcement. "Our thoughts and prayers go out to all those affected by the storm."

To help recovery efforts, festival equipment, including restroom trailers, generators, and food supplies will go to assist FEMA and emergency services, organizers said.

"We are heartbroken but excited to bring you an unforgettable experience next year," organizers said. "New dates will be announced soon. Tickets and camping will automatically roll over to the rescheduled dates, and refunds will be available."

Refunds will begin within two weeks.

Joe Marusak: 704-358-5067,

@jmarusak





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