

Congress ignored disaster relief requests. Now, calls begin to return for Helene recovery

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Members of Congress saw Hurricane Helene coming.

Last week, they had planned to be in Washington through Friday, and then recess for the month of October to focus on the election. But as Helene strengthened while approaching Florida, they announced an early dismissal to get home ahead of the storm.

Now, lawmakers from the states devastated by Helene are asking for help from congressional leadership, including the possibility of coming back in October to fund the relief efforts.

And costs could be high.

"I've heard numbers in the \$150 billion range, particularly in North Carolina," said Sen. Ted Budd, a Republican from Davie County, who spoke to McClatchy Tuesday night. "If you consider the volume and the velocity of water in the mountains, it's devastating."

Both Budd and Sen. Thom Tillis signed a letter Tuesday to Majority Leader Chuck Schumer, Minority Leader Mitch McConnell, Appropriations Chair Patty Murray and Vice Chair Susan Collins asking for help.

"Although the true level of devastation is still unfolding, it is clear that Congress must act to meet the unmet needs in our states and address the scope and scale of destruction experienced by our constituents," the senators wrote. "This may even require Congress to come back in October to ensure we have enough time to enact legislation before the end of this calendar year."

Government shutdown

Congress recessed Wednesday and instead of passing 12 appropriation bills to fund the government, members approved a continuing resolution to keep the government operating at its current levels until Dec. 20. Congress isn't scheduled to return until after the election to take up the budget again.

The CR included an increase in funding for the Secret Service after two attempts on the life of former President Donald Trump.

But multiple lawmakers raised concerns about the lack of emergency relief aid in the the bill. And they were forced to vote on the bill or risk a government shutdown after Sept. 30.

Both Budd and another Republican from North Carolina, Rep. Dan Bishop, voted against the CR.

How close the country came to a government shutdown while Helene ripped through Western North Carolina is something Rep. Chuck Edwards, a Republican from Flat Rock, has thought about a lot as he's tried to help his constituents in the days since.

"I think it's important to realize how critical it is that our federal government continues to operate, and we should take a moment to take note that we were within hours, yet again, of the federal government shutting down," Edwards told McClatchy Monday. "I can't imagine what Western North Carolina would be like right now were we in a government shutdown."

Edwards said that should be enough of a wake-up call for Congress that it needs to get work done ahead of time.

Begging for emergency relief

The reality wasn't lost on lawmakers on the Senate and House floors as they had to make that decision.

Both Rep. Rosa DeLauro, a Democrat from Connecticut, and Sen. Brian Schatz, a Democrat from Hawaii, expressed their concerns that they were once again voting on a bill at the last minute; and neither liked that it lacked funding for relief efforts. But to vote against the bill had catastrophic consequences.

For Schatz, it was personal. The Democrat from Hawaii is still fighting for additional relief for his constituents whose lives were ripped apart in the fire that tore through Maui in August 2023.

"All across the country, in more than 20 states and territories, millions of Americans are reeling from disasters," Schatz said, on Sept. 12, on the Senate floor. "Wildfires, hurricanes, droughts, floods. And having lost their homes, their communities, and their livelihoods, they're counting on the federal government for help."

Schatz told his colleagues that that was one of their basic jobs in Congress.

Tillis joined Schatz and eight other senators who wrote to leadership Sept. 13 asking for additional disaster relief funding through a supplemental appropriations package.

But when the bill was signed, it excluded billions in requested dollars for emergency relief.

On Tuesday, Speaker Mike Johnson told reporters that the CR replenished funds for the Federal Emergency Management Agency, and that that money could address the immediate response needed for Helene, The Hill reported.

His remarks come just two days after Biden said he may call back Congress to fund Helene relief, and less than 24 hours after Budd and Tillis sent their letter to Senate leadership along with the every senator from South Carolina, Georgia, Florida, Tennessee and Virginia.

All of those states experienced devastation from the storm, and Budd said that added an extra complication to relief efforts. He said typically neighboring states would come to each other's aid, but right now each needs to focus on its own people.

Missing and hurting people

Budd said it will take years to rebuild, but for now, North Carolina is still in a search and recovery phase.

"The search and rescue is still going on," Budd said. "People are still being extracted. There are people that need oxygen, they need diabetic medicine, insulin, they need critical care, they're elderly."

Budd said the first goal is to get them to safety; simultaneous with that is getting communications up and running and power restored.

"You know, this part of North Carolina is resilient mountain people. Given them a chainsaw, five gallons of gas, they're going to be able to take care of themselves and their neighbors and if you give them some clean water, they'll be OK - and a little food."

Damaged infrastructure

Budd, Tillis and Edwards, along with Reps. David Rouzer and Greg Murphy and Commissioner of Agriculture Steve

Troxler, took an aerial tour of the storm damage in North Carolina Tuesday.

President Joe Biden planned to take the same tour Wednesday afternoon.

"There is so much damage to critical infrastructure," Budd said. "Bridges are gone, roads are gone."

He said there's an added complication that normally these types of disasters strike flat areas, where sand can be easily moved out of the way, but right now they're dealing with rough terrain and downed trees.

Budd said state lawmakers had been fiscally responsible and maintained a rainy day fund of \$5 billion, but the cost to rebuild will surpass that by leaps and bounds.

He said money is needed to repair Interstate 40, Interstate 26, bridges, roads and other infrastructure.

"That's what we need support in, and we want to make sure that it's as clean as possible," Budd said. "That no one's taking advantage of anybody, and that the money gets to repair what we say it's doing. That it's not doing some sort of social justice program, but it's really just helping rebuild Western North Carolina, and of course the other states: eastern Tennessee, North Georgia, southwest Virginia."

Damaged crops

Then there's the state's farmland.

"In regard to agriculture, so much of the fertile ground that we have in North Carolina is in riverbeds, creek beds, or floodplains," Budd said. "It doesn't get flooded that often, but when it does, it's usually not this bad, and it's just devastating."

Budd said everything from tomato crops to orchards were affected.

"There's so much produce that comes out of Henderson County," Budd said.

On Tuesday morning, Rep. Deborah Ross, a Democrat from Wake County, helped lead a group of 33 members from both chambers and parties in sending a letter to Schumer, McConnell, Johnson and House Minority Leader Hakeem Jeffries saying it is "imperative that Congress make appropriations as soon as possible upon the completion of damage assessments to fully fund unmet agricultural disaster relief needs in our states and across the nation."

The lawmakers added: "Farmers and growers nationwide, not only those damaged by Helene, have now faced multiple growing seasons without sufficient federal support. Our constituents are counting on us to act swiftly."

Tillis, Edwards, Murphy, Bishop and Reps. Don Davis, Kathy Manning, Alma Adams, Wiley Nickel and Jeff Jackson also signed onto the letter.

Coming back to Congress

Budd told McClatchy he wasn't sure whether Congress would need to return in October to help with relief efforts, but he was ready to respond to whatever North Carolina needs.

"I'm pushing for funding," Budd said. "How that happens and the timing of it, I don't know."

Budd said that in the past, funding was able to be provided through unanimous consent.

But he wants to see any legislation before he cast his vote.

"You want to hold the government accountable, while having excellent use of taxpayer dollars," Budd said. "So I

think we need to see the bill and see where the money would be appropriated."

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In Western NC, a lack of flood insurance deepens the damage

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For western North Carolina, Hurricane Helene brought a flooding disaster

Next comes an insurance disaster.

Residents in North Carolina's mountains have felt secure from the flooding that increasingly swamps the state's low-lying coastal plain. But when Hurricane Helene - along with a rainstorm that preceded it - dropped more than 40 trillion gallons of water on the region, that security was washed away.

Now, homeowners in the state's mountain counties are learning that their homeowner's insurance doesn't cover flooding, landslides or anything else caused by moving water. Many will wish they had paid for policies through the National Flood Insurance Program (NFIP).

State Sen. Natasha Marcus, the Democratic nominee for state insurance commissioner, said there are less than 6,000 NFIP policies in the western North Carolina disaster area. In Buncombe County, home of hard-hit Asheville, she said, less than 1% of the county's 137,000 housing units have flood insurance.

Marcus said the hurricane's destruction "really drives home what is happening with the changes in our climate. It's just a startling reminder that it is real and how exposed we are. Of course, now it's too late to get flood insurance. So I'm very worried about how we are going to rebuild western North Carolina."

It's understandable that homeowners in high elevations didn't regard massive flooding as a likely threat. The last event to approach Helene's magnitude in western North Carolina was more than 100 years ago - the great flood of 1916.

But climate change is making flooding more frequent as storms developing over warming seas carry more moisture inland. The North Carolina State Climate Office blog said the rainfall during Helene and a preceding storm dwarfed historic standards: "In Asheville, the three-day total of almost 14 inches goes well beyond the 1-in-1,000 year total for a 72-hour period. ... Likewise, the 24.41 inches over three days at Mount Mitchell is off the charts compared to the 1-in-1,000 year amount of 16.5 inches."

Lack of flood insurance is a problem even where floods are common. State Insurance Commissioner Mike Causey told me that when Hurricane Florence engulfed parts of eastern North Carolina in 2018, only 2 percent of the damaged homes were covered by flood insurance.

"It is a huge problem," Causey said. "We had flood education classes around the state in 2019. That education effort increased the number of flood policies by 25 percent, but we are still just scratching the surface."

Hurricane Helene has added intensity to the contest between Causey, a Republican, and Marcus in the insurance commissioner's race.

Causey supports adopting a statewide version of a coastal program that serves as a market of last resort for vulnerable properties. He also wants to increase participation in the state fortified roof program

Marcus says North Carolina's insurance commissioner should be a stronger advocate for adopting building code and infrastructure changes and making people more aware when they are buying in flood-prone areas by updating flood

maps.

"Unfortunately, efforts to modernize these maps have been stalled by political gridlock, leaving communities unprepared for the realities of our changing climate," she said.

Days before Hurricane Helene made landfall, three beachfront houses fell into the ocean in Rodanthe. It's a far different place than Asheville, but it's the same phenomenon. The climate is changing. So are the risks.

Yet at a time when climate hazards are rising, more people are moving into areas vulnerable to floods, winds and wildfires. That development drives up the cost - both in human life and in property - of natural disasters.

It's time for sane development and construction laws that acknowledge the threat of climate change. It's past time to reduce the risks by barring development in flood-prone areas, improving building codes to better withstand storms and encouraging the purchase of flood insurance across the state.

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Starlink reconnects Western NC reeling from Helene

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Author: Brian Gordon and Emily Vespa, correspondent; Staff Writer | Section: News | 730 Words

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

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

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

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

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

Starlink service gets political

Outside the region, the deployment of Starlink to North Carolina became politicized after falseclaims spread that former President Donald Trump had arranged the deployment of Starlink systems to storm-affected areas after the current administration failed or refused to do the same.

Trump said Monday during a speech in Valdosta, Georgia, that he had spoken to Musk about delivering Starlink systems to storm-affected areas. Early the next morning, Musk, who has endorsed Trump's reelection bid, announced his coordination with the Republican candidate. On the platform X, which Musk also owns, the SpaceX founder wrote "Earlier today, @realDonaldTrump alerted me to additional people who need Starlink Internet in North Carolina. We are sending them terminals right away."

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

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

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

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

What happened to grant funding?

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

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

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

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

Couldn't provide internet at the required speed set by the FCC.

Would have imposed "high start-up costs on rural consumers," requiring subscribers to buy a \$600 dish to access internet.

Proposed using some funds to provide internet to places like parking lots and road medians, which are not underserved rural households like the program intended.

Julia Coin of the Charlotte Observer contributed.

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UNC Health offers free virtual visits for Helene storm victims in Western NC

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As recovery efforts continue for thousands of North Carolinians impacted by Hurricane Helene, UNC Health is now stepping up to provide free virtual care for those in need.

The Triangle-based healthcare system announced that any Western North Carolina residents 18 years or older can be treated virtually through UNC Health Virtual Care Now with a smartphone, laptop or other speaker and cameraenabled device at no cost.

"Our patients and teammates in Western North Carolina are dealing with widespread power outages, extreme flooding, mudslides, road closures and more," Dr. Wesley Burks, CEO of UNC Health said in a media release. "We will support our patients, teammates and communities in this time of greatest need. We want to offer free virtual services for those who have stable Internet access - and will continue to provide in-person care at our clinics and hospitals."

How to make a free virtual appointment

Sore throat

Virtual services through UNC Health Virtual Care Now are available everyday from 6 a.m. to 10 p.m. If you have a medical emergency, you should call 911, but UNC's virtual care providers assist patients with a wide range of conditions, including:

Seasonal allergies
Asthma
Colds, coughs and the flu
Diarrhea
Female urinary problems
Fever
Insect bites
Mild headache/migraine
Mild stomach ache
Pink eye
Rash
Sinus infection

Appointments are not needed but you must register and have a My UNC Chart account to book a provider. Here's what to do if you need to make an appointment:

Visit unchealth.org/care-services/virtual-care#virtual-care-now

Select "Get in Line"

Enter your information to join the queue and then complete the eCheck-in process.

You can find more information about UNC's virtual care services online at unchealth.org/care-services/virtual-care.

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'Incredible': Carolina Hurricanes raise \$300,000 for Western NC storm relief

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Raleigh Brendan Lemieux of the Carolina Hurricanes was gratified Wednesday to see Canes fans fill the Lenovo Center both to see a preseason hockey game, but more so to help others in need.

The Canes had announced that \$10 tickets would be sold to the preseason exhibition against the Nashville Predators. After Helene struck western counties in North Carolina last weekend, causing so much destruction and loss of life, Wednesday's game took on another meaning.

The Hurricanes said all ticket sales and donations would go to hurricane relief funds. Late in the game, it was announced almost \$280,000 had been raised and team president Doug Warf said after the game - a 6-4 loss to the Preds - that he expected the total to be closer to \$300,000.

Warf said Thursday the total had topped \$300,000. Some auction items are being offered on the Canes' web site (nhl.com/hurricanes/) the next few weeks to continue to raise funds., he said.

Lemieux, who had a goal in Wednesday's game, called the overflow crowd of 18,700 and the financial support from the game "incredible."

"My mom's from Vilas, just outside of Boone," the forward said. "Our family is from there. My grandpa and my grandmother are buried there. We feel for all the people in Vilas and the surrounding areas.

"Western North Carolina has been hit so hard, and frankly I don't think there has been enough attention around it. It's sad because I was on the phone with a friend today and he said there's still people missing, still hundreds of unaccounted people presumed dead.

"It's mind-blowing to me that in our country something like this can happen. Obviously, I understand how remote and hard it is to access and for people to help. But it's scary and it's something we can all come together, whatever side of the aisle you're on, and get behind and support these people in dire need of help."

Lemieux, the son of former NHL forward Claude Lemieux, said neighbors of his parents had their house swept away by the flooding. He said he hopes to be able to find some time to go up and lend help.

Some former Hurricanes players, including defenseman Aaron Ward and goalie Cam Ward, joined the relief effort, gathering to help raise donations, food and other necessities. The group, Carolina NHL Hockey Alum, said Wednesday they would truck supplies to Hendersonville.

"I've been praying for these people," Lemieux said. "My family is very lucky to be safe. But the videos we got from our own porch, it's scary.

"I've never seen anything like it. I've never been around a hurricane of that magnitude or flooding like that. It's very scary."

Canes coach Rod Brind'Amour also tried to put things in perspective after the game. Carolina, with a youthful lineup, played a Preds team packed with veterans and it showed in the play on the ice and the final score. But Brind'Amour, like Lemieux, praised the turnout and the financial support it provided.

"That's obviously the most important thing coming out of tonight," Brind'Amour said. "It's everyone coming together and anything can help,." Brind'Amour said. "What's going on down there ... This is having fun. They're dealing with real stuff. Anything we can do to help is great."

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

October 4, 2024 | News & Observer, The (Raleigh, NC) Author: Rebecca Noel; Staff Writer | Section: News | 1088 Words Page: 6A OpenURL Link

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 JillianGorrell 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.

"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 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 from Concord, Statesville and Hickory to western North Carolina on Sunday alone. On Monday, 50,000 pounds of supplies left Concord aboard 75 flights.

Getting crucial supplies to those in storm-battered Western North Carolina remains one of the top Helene-recovery priorities. It's a massive effort 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 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 waiting planes.

The whole place was humming with purpose. Volunteers loaded supplies 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 the back of the room, monitoring weather conditions and dispatching pilots to areas they knew they could reach.

"That's the beautiful thing about Airdrop," Carroll said. "It's kind of like what Mr. Rogers used to say: 'Look for the helpers.' You'll find them everywhere."

On Tuesday, the Concord-Padgett Airport operation had reached its capacity for volunteers by 10 a.m. even as people continued to come in to offer help.

Challenges to the mission

Ben Spells is a local 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 requirelarger 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 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 inhard-hit areas that can help, and, with communication severely limited in the region, it's no simple task.

"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 delivery.

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.

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Still no cell service in much of battered western NC. Why is it so tough to fix?

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Time and again over the past several days, Canton mayor Zeb Smathers has heard desperate pleas.

"I've had tears fill my eyes (because) of random people reaching out to me, looking for their loved ones, because they cannot communicate," said Smathers, whose town of 4,400 was among many in western North Carolina ravaged by Tropical Storm Helene.

"I pray that the inability to reach people didn't cost any lives," he said.

In the hours and days after the storm, widespread cellphone and internet blackouts made a devastating situation worse. Thousands of people couldn't contact loved ones in western North Carolina. The blackouts also hurt efforts to help during a historic crisis, Smathers said.

"If I need to say, 'Hey, you come get water at the police department,' and I can't do that... it makes every other problem worse," said Smathers, who spoke with Charlotte Observer reporters by satellite phone because he didn't have a cell signal.

Nearly half of cell sites - locations with antennas and other electronic communications equipment vital to cell phone communication - were still out Tuesday in western North Carolina counties affected by the storm, the Federal Communications Commission says. In Buncombe County, more than 60% of cell sites weren't working. And in Yancey County, more than 90% were out.

Getting things working again is a huge challenge, one slowed by power outages, flooding, blocked roads and downed power lines, according to Verizon, AT&T and Spectrum. And companies have not predicted when the work would be completed.

"Access into the region, as well as moving within the area, have been an insurmountable challenge the last few days," Verizon said in a Sept. 29 update about their repair work.

AT&T said Tuesday it restored more than 60 percent of the cell sites in areas impacted by the storm.

Smathers said he knows cellphone companies are working hard to repair the damage. But he wonders whether they did enough before the storm to prevent widespread outages.

"There are going to be a lot of questions," he said.

Storm damaged fiber cables

Officials in Buncombe County say they've received more than 11,000 requests from people trying to reach loved ones. And many people outside the hardest hit areas have turned to social media to express their worry and desperation.

"!!Urgent message from a family member re Tropical Storm Helene: Hendersonville NC folks need help with network satellite service," one person said on X Saturday. "This little town is under water from Helene and they have no contact to the outside world."

Many communication blackouts in western North Carolina were caused by power outages and damage to the fiber cables that connect cell sites to other parts of the network, Verizon says. Debris, flooding and high winds damaged the fiber cables, according to the company.

"We're getting reports from AT&T and Verizon," Gov. Roy Cooper said during a press conference on Monday. "Their initial problems were significant in that landslides cut major fiber lines for them."

Repairs - and questions - continue

Verizon and AT&T said their teams are working around the clock to make repairs. At the same time, they've set up equipment to provide alternative connections.

Dozens of Starlink satellite systems have been shipped to North Carolina in recent days to provide high-speed internet access, FEMA said. Starlink, developed by Elon Musk's SpaceX company, uses a network of satellites to provide internet access globally.

Spectrum says it has opened more than 33,800 "access points" in the Carolinas where the public can connect to WiFi. (The locations are detailed in Spectrum's out-of-home WifFi page.)

Verizon and AT&T said they've also brought mobile equipment to western North Carolina to restore cellphone service. Both companies have even launched drones to provide cellphone coverage from the sky.

Before the storm, Verizon says it did take steps to prepare. The company put portable communications equipment - including drones and generator-powered cell sites - in places where it could be deployed rapidly if service was interrupted.

But many still struggle to get a phone signal.

Last weekend, an Ingles supermarket on Asheville's Patton Ave. was closed. But the parking lot was jammed. The reason: It was one of the few sites in that part of town where many could get reliable cellphone service.

And on Tuesday, Mayor Smathers said he saw people in his Haywood County town holding their cellphones in the air as they walked, hoping to find a cell signal.

"It is unacceptable and disgusting that in our time of need, cellular service for the entire region is blocked out," he said.

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Ames Alexander and Nora O'Neill, Staff Writer, 'Still no cell service in much of battered western NC. Why is it so tough to fix?', News & Observer, The (online), 4 Oct 2024 2A https://infoweb.newsbank.com/apps/news/document-view? p=AMNEWS&docref=news/19C026B722873FA8>



Chef José Andrés and World Central Kitchen distribute thousands of meals in Western NC

October 4, 2024 | News & Observer, The (Raleigh, NC) Author: Drew Jackson; Staff Writer | Section: News | 688 Words

Page: 2A OpenURL Link

Two thousand meals were on their way to Banner Elk Wednesday when a closed road rerouted them to Boone.

"The most amazing thing happened - 2,000 meals were just dropped off from Raleigh," said Emily Brinker, who coowns the Rhode's Motor Lodge in Boone.

The meals were part of World Central Kitchen's massive feeding mission in Western North Carolina in response to the region's devastation from Hurricane Helene. Prepped in the Raleigh kitchen by Rocky Top Catering and driven across the state, the trays of pork barbecue, mac and cheese and baked beans will later be airlifted and possibly driven or walked into the hands of someone in need of a warm meal.

As the region continues reconnecting the broken wires and pipes that have unmoored the western mountains from normalcy, a meal remains the most essential need and can mean the first step forward.

"I think this is all you can do, to try and understand why you're okay," Brinker said. "We're okay so we can help everyone who's not okay."

Rhode's Motor Lodge was expecting World Central Kitchen on Thursday, but the detour meant a helicopter was on its way to her boutique hotel in Boone and the meals would be air-lifted to a hospital site in Banner Elk. This is an expansion of the feeding operation the group had already set up in downtown Asheville.

Comparatively unscathed by the storm, Brinker said once her family was able to get from their house to the hotel she had a better sense of the storm's toll on the region and what it might take to recover.

"It's complete and total destruction," she said. "You can't get many places, most roads are collapsed, most people have zero cell phone service....Everybody who can wants something to do, something to contribute. It's the only thing that makes you feel okay - to help."

World Central Kitchen has become a global leader in humanitarian aid, a stabilizing symbol in the midst of disaster. The group, founded and led by world-famous chef José Andrés, was last in North Carolina in 2018, responding to Hurricane Florence with about 150,000 meals in and around a flooded Wilmington area.

Operations for World Central Kitchen typically look to the restaurant kitchens in impacted areas as sites to prepare and distribute meals.

This week the group has a presence in North Carolina, Georgia and Florida, where Hurricane Helene made landfall before weakening into a still-punishing tropical storm.

Andrés in Asheville

In the early morning hours on Monday, Andrés posted a video from a Waffle House in Abingdon, Va., saying that he was on his way to Asheville.

The video has been seen 1.7 million times that, along with others he's shared since landing in Asheville, speak to the chef's role in shining a light on a crisis as much as lending a helping hand. Since he's been on the ground in the mountains, he's surveyed flooding from a helicopter, delivered meals to fire departments working the disaster and

sent food to cut-off communities.

The World Central Kitchen site in Asheville has been set up at Bear's Smokehouse downtown. On Wednesday, a line of tanker trucks sat parked on the street with 100,000 gallons of potable water to hand out.

Bear's co-owner Cheryl Antoncic said that with the power out Saturday, but the restaurant unharmed, workers made the decision to start cooking what was in the walk-ins for anyone who might need a meal. When World Central Kitchen landed later that weekend, operations escalated.

Antoncic said World Central Kitchen isn't the sort of help you want your community to need.

"It's been very surreal; honestly there aren't really words for it," she said. "There's this sense of gratitude that World Central Kitchen brings, but also, 'Oh my gosh,' I don't want you here because I know what that means. It means mass devastation."

By Tuesday night, more than 60,000 meals had been served by WCK between North Carolina, Tennessee, Georgia and Florida.

Beyond World Central Kitchen, numerous groups and restaurants in the Triangle have collected donations and supplies, prepared meals and shopped for groceries to deliver to the Western mountains. For a complete list of aid groups you can help, follow this link.

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Triangle emergency crews, police help with recovery

October 4, 2024 | News & Observer, The (Raleigh, NC)

Author: Tammy Grubb, Lexi Solomon and Mary Helen Moore; Staff Writer | Section: News | 1981 Words

Page: 1A OpenURL Link

Hundreds of law enforcement officers, firefighters and emergency workers from the Triangle fanned out this week, packing in food and supplies to their emotionally fatigued counterparts in the Western North Carolina mountains.

A group of Henderson County 911 telecommunicators had been on duty three days without a break when Orange County Sheriff Charles Blackwood said he and Chatham County Sheriff Mike Roberson checked in on them Sunday.

The average person may experience the kind of "critical incident exposure" those workers have been under a few times in a lifetime, he said. The typical emergency worker sees it daily, and it can leave them emotionally and physically drained.

"The devastation and anguish in those deputies and those telecommunicators' voices and in their hearts are much like those who've been at war," Blackwood said.

The sheriffs drove in from the south through Kings Mountain and Shelby, where they saw piles of trees along the road, ones from atop the mountain uprooting others as they cascaded to the bottom.

Even the rooftops were covered in mud and silt. Where the water had receded, a muddy line marked where the floodwaters had reached 13 to 14 feet above the aptly named Mud Creek, downhill from the Henderson County Sheriff's Office in Hendersonville.

They urged Sheriff Lowell Griffin, whose own house was flooded, to eat some food and asked what he needed.

"I don't know," Griffin responded.

As they sat, a team of deputies came in covered in mud from their knees down, Blackwood said.

They had just pulled the bodies of a family from their home, where they all had drowned, he said.

"They all looked as if they had been pushing a rock up a hill," he said.

In the county's 911 center, the staff tried to remain hopeful, but exhaustion was in their eyes, Blackwood said.

"I listened to some of the stories about hearing people take their last breaths on the phone call, where they were calling them for help, and all they could tell them was that nobody was coming to help ... that they couldn't get to them," he said.

As they returned home, Roberson, the president of the N.C. Sheriff's Association, activated the Sheriffs Helping Sheriffs network to round up even more deputies and equipment from across the state.

The response was swift, marshaling nearly 400 public safety personnel from Durham, Wake, Orange and Chatham counties.

"In times like these, it's important for communities to come together and support one another," Roberson said. "I want the people of Western North Carolina to know that help is on the way."

Durham County

The Durham County Sheriff's Office sent 10 employees and multiple vehicles Tuesday to help with search and recovery, as well as security. Deputies also drove a week's worth of food to sheriff's offices in the region over the weekend.

Durham County sent a handful of staff to Asheville, plus a heavy-duty truck and driver to make deliveries. Other staff may rotate in over the next few weeks.

Two volunteer fire departments also sent resources:

- * Bahama Volunteer Fire Department sent a three-person crew and a brush truck.
- * Lebanon Volunteer Fire Department sent a fire engine and three firefighters to Bakersville for two weeks on Wednesday.

City of Durham

- * The Durham Fire Department sent 12 people. Eight traveled to Haywood County before the storm hit, helping evacuate people and pets. Four were sent to Asheville on Monday.
- * The Durham Police Department is working with the Avery County Sheriff's Office to collect aid for the region. The most needed items are shelf-stable boxed milk, manual can openers, canned foods and bottled water, the agency said in an email. Drop off donations at the Police Department headquarters, at 602 E. Main St.

Duke hospitals

Duke Health deployed 25 team members to Shelby and is assembling a second team. Duke hospitals are ready to take patients from Western North Carolina as needed.

Wake County

More than 200 personnel from North Carolina's most populated county have been deployed. That includes at least 56 police officers, 179 firefighters and 13 utilities employees.

In the Triangle, that means adjusted shifts and additional costs to maintain normal service, Holly Springs Police Chief Paul Liquorie said.

While FEMA could reimburse those costs, "municipalities now will have to incur the immediate cost, because that will be somewhat of a lengthy and sometimes bureaucratic process to go through the federal government," he said.

Liquorie will lead a caravan of 47 officers from five towns on Friday to Ashevilley, where they'll assist with policing duties and disaster response. Zebulon Police Chief Jacqui Boykin, who sent three officers Sunday to Hendersonville, urged civilians to stay home.

"People want to go, they want to volunteer, they want to donate, and I would say, try to connect with a well-defined program that you're familiar with," she said. "As great as it is that everybody wants to fill their car and drive up there, now you're adding to the issues that they're having with traffic congestion and crashes, and maybe causing more issues."

- * Wake County EMS: Three staff members as part of an Urban Search and Rescue team, four crew members and an ambulance.
- * Wake Fire Services and Emergency Management: A logistics team will spend two weeks in Buncombe County.

- * Wake County Sheriff's Office and Wake County EMS sent therapy dogs to support State Emergency Operations Center personnel and affected residents.
- * Zebulon: Three police officers, three firefighters.
- * Apex: Six utility personnel; four firefighters sent to McDowell County
- * Raleigh: Five water personnel sent to Asheville, 14 firefighters sent to Haywood County, eight firefighters sent to help the Asheville Fire Department.
- * Raleigh: Sent three dump trucks and a pickup truck loaded with supplies, including 50 tons of pipes to repair water systems; a fire engine, a high-water rescue vehicle; and a logistics vehicle from the fire department
- * Wake Forest: At least 12 firefighters sent to Bakersville
- * Cary: Eight firefighters from the swiftwater rescue team sent to Lenoir; nine firefighters sent to the Asheville Fire Department. Two utility managers and a deputy police chief sent to support State Emergency Operations Center in Hickory. Twelve police officers sent to Asheville.
- * Garner: Eight police officers sent to Asheville, four fire and rescue personnel sent to Mitchell County.
- * Rolesville: Five police officers sent to Hendersonville.
- * Fuquay-Varina: Two firefighters sent to the Columbus Fire Department in Polk County.
- * Holly Springs: IT Director Jeff Wilson was sent to the State Emergency Operations Center as part of an IT Strike Team programming radios for those in the field, coordinating dispatchers and setting up Starlink satellite dishes in areas without cell service. Four firefighters were sent to Mitchell County, and 12 police officers will head out Friday morning.
- * N.C. State University: Nine staff members sent to UNC Asheville.
- * UNC System Office: An unspecified number of IT experts were sent to UNC Asheville to restore internet service.

UNC Health

- * Over 1,000 UNC Health employees from hospitals and clinics in Eastern North Carolina signed up to help their peers in Western North Carolina, at UNC Health Appalachian, UNC Health Pardee, UNC Health Blue Ridge and UNC Health Caldwell.
- * Hundreds of medical workers are already there and more will join them. "Their goal is to relieve some of the strain at those hospitals, and let employees who need to deal with their own storm-related issues at home get a break," UNC Health spokesman Alan Wolf said..
- * The group includes physicians, nurses and respiratory therapists. Another group of nurses drove up with an emergency department nurse from UNC Health Rex to help in the Blue Ridge hospital emergency department in Morganton.
- * IT experts were sent Friday to help restore power, phones and Internet at health facilities.
- * UNC Health is collecting supplies for the hospitals and surrounding communities, including water and nonperishable food.

Orange County

Crews from across Orange County left Monday with cots, ready-to-eat meals and water, said Sarah Pickhardt, Division Chief of Emergency Management for Orange County Emergency Services.

Cash and supplies are needed, Pickhardt said, but people should donate through agencies already working in those communities, to avoid draining the limited resources available there.

It took Carrboro's fire crew seven hours to get to Transylvania County - normally a four-hour drive - because of closed roads and other people crowding the highway west, she said.

- "I know the Orange County community is really, really gracious and giving, and there are a lot of supply drives going on, but right now, they're still very much in the response and trying to find people," she said. We really need to keep roads clear for critical commodities and first responders."
- * Orange County sent two emergency managers and 11 EMS personnel to Buncombe County this week. They were joined by four Orange Rural Fire Department firefighters and a brush fire truck that can cover narrow roads, rough terrain and tight spaces.
- * The Orange County Sheriff's Office sent eight deputies to Haywood County, west of Buncombe County.
- * Emergency Services Director Kirby Saunders, his team and the Sheriff's Office deputies are filling in so "completely exhausted" local folks can rest, Pickhardt said. EMS crews are helping out at the shelters, and firefighters are clearing roads with chainsaws and also covering fire department shifts.
- * The key mission for Orange County deputies is to boost public safety, Blackwood said. Local officials have already reported a murder and a "vicious assault" at the gas pumps in town, he said.
- "I expected bad, but I didn't realize it was going to be as bad as it was. It was just heartbreaking, and you're coming back trying to think about and analyze and try to make some sense of it all, but you're just kind of lost," he said.

Chapel Hill

- * Five Chapel Hill police officers went to Buncombe County on Monday to help the Asheville Police Department with traffic control and emergency calls. When they return home later this week, a fresh team could be dispatched.
- * Chapel Hill Police Department's Crisis Unit and an emergency management staff member are supporting first responders and staff at the state Emergency Operations Center. Another emergency management employee was sent to shelters in Asheville and Fletcher.
- * Chapel Hill Fire Department dispatched three firefighters to Haywood County, along with members of the N.C. Task Force 8 Regional Urban Search and Rescue Team, which includes firefighters from Chapel Hill, Durham and Raleigh. The rescue team moved out Sept. 26 to provide swift water rescue and help with structural rescues.

Carrboro

* Four Carrboro firefighters and a fire engine headed out to Transylvania County, a remote area in the state's far west.

Hillsborough

* Five public works and utilities equipment operators, a fleet mechanic with a truck and tools, a safety officer, two dump trucks and a backhoe, a skid steer and two pickup trucks, plus a chainsaw and other tools to help clear roads, are being prepped.

* Town Manager Eric Peterson is meeting virtually twice a week with other N.C. town managers experienced in managing disasters to assist colleagues in affected areas. At least one town communications employee could also go.

Chatham County

- * Five deputies and a captain from the Chatham County Sheriff's Office left Monday for Yancey County. The team took generators, bottled water and ready-to-eat meals with them.
- * Chatham County Emergency Management sent two staff members to help re-establish internet connectivity in emergency operations centers, and the Chatham County Department of Social Services is also helping where needed, a spokesman said.
- * North Chatham Fire Department sent firefighters with an engine truck.

"It's a statewide effort," Emergency Management Director Steve Newton said. "Every county that's not impacted is waiting to send equipment and personnel over. We'll have more personnel going west for the next several weeks."

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Kamala Harris to visit North Carolina areas ravaged by Helene on Saturday

October 4, 2024 | News & Observer, The: Web Edition Articles (Raleigh, NC) Author: Michael Wilner, News & Observer | Section: politics government | 352 Words OpenURL Link

Vice President Kamala Harris will visit North Carolina on Saturday to survey the catastrophic damage left across the state from Hurricane Helene, a White House official told McClatchy, days after making a similar trip to Georgia.

Helene ravaged the Southeast last weekend, ripping through Georgia, the Carolinas and Tennessee with unexpected ferocity and making landfall in Florida, and bringing unprecedented flooding to rural Appalachia. President Joe Biden visited Western North Carolina - among the worst-affected areas - earlier this week, vowing to commit federal resources for as long as it takes to help the region recover.

Before and after satellite images show flooding from Helene in AshevilleBiltmore Village and the River Arts District in Asheville received extensive damage from flooding of the Swannanoa River after Helene caused torrential rainfall in western North Carolina over the weekend. Satellite imagery provided by Planet Labs PBC shows the river overwhelming parts of the city.

Harris will "survey the impacts of Hurricane Helene and receive an on-the-ground briefing about the continued recovery efforts that are occurring in communities across the state," one official said. "The vice president will also provide updates on federal actions that are being taken to support emergency response and recovery efforts in North Carolina and other states throughout the southeast."

The official did not specify where in the state Harris would visit.

IMG_1253.JPEGAn aerial view of some of the devastation left after Helene's floodwaters rushed down the Broad River in the area of Chimney Rock, N.C. Photographed, Friday, October. 4, 2024.

Harris also spoke with North Carolina's Democratic governor, Roy Cooper, to discuss the recovery efforts, the official added. She visited FEMA headquarters earlier in the week for a briefing and to thank federal personnel for their work on the emergency response.

Helene has claimed over 200 lives across the region, and hundreds remain missing. Over 1 million people are still without power nearly a week after the storm has passed.

Harris, the Democratic nominee for president this year, has frequently visited the state over the past several months in her campaign for the White House.

See photos and video from Helene's devastation in the mountains of western NC

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North Carolina Observer: Looking back at Helene's wrath

October 4, 2024 | News & Observer, The: Web Edition Articles (Raleigh, NC) Author: Jessica Banov, News & Observer | Section: north carolina observer nl | 992 Words OpenURL Link

Good morning. It's Sunday, Oct. 6, and we're still reeling from Helene.

This is the North Carolina Observer, a newsletter that highlights the big stories and projects from The News & Observer and The Charlotte Observer.

While our two newsrooms often collaborate, this past week saw us combine to share stories about unfathomable devastation in Western North Carolina. Reporters and photographers who had never met joined together to cover the aftermath of this once-in-a-lifetime storm.

Here's just a sampling of their work, which also can be found here (if you're a News & Observer subscriber) or here (if you're a Charlotte Observer subscriber). All of our Helene coverage can be read without a paywall.

RAL_HOTSPRINGS-NE-100424-RTW.JPGLaw enforcement personnel use heavy equipment and chain saws to search through a large debris field for victims of Hurricane Helene in Spring Creek where it meets the French Broad River on Friday, October 4, 2024 in Hot Springs, N.C.

The toll

The death toll has topped 115 people, and we expect that number to rise. The good news is some counties damaged by the storm have accounted for people they knew were missing. But the flip side is that some counties, including hard-hit Buncombe County, are still searching for missing people, Virginia Bridges reports.

And those who have loved ones still out there continue to cling to hope that they'll get good news. In this heartbreaking story by Virginia, many families learn their worst fears are confirmed.

In NC's tiny 'Dogtown,' Hurricane Helene's fury left these close cousins worlds apart

RAL_092922-HURRICANE-HELENE-TEL-09.JPGSwannanoa residents walk through devastating flood damage from the Swannanoa River on Sunday, Sept. 29, 2024. The remnants of Hurricane Helene caused widespread flooding, downed trees, and power outages in western North Carolina.

The damage

Beyond the human toll, there's no telling how many billions of dollars it will take to repair Western North Carolina. People lost everything - their homes, their cars, their businesses and their prized possessions. And in the meantime, the N.C. Department of Transportation's list of roads that need repairs continues to grow and people remain isolated.

'Gone.' The main route through the NC mountains will take a long time to rebuild'Hopeless and helpless': River Arts District in Asheville was another casualty of HeleneAfter Helene, can NC businesses and tourist sites restore 'the magic of Asheville'? Avery Co. family escaped Helene with just their dogs. Everything else sits in a riverThey were in the basement frantically preparing for a flood. Then the landslide hit.

RAL_HOTSPRINGS-NE-100424-RTW_15.JPGVolunteer Justin Moon shovels mud from the public library on Friday, October 4, 2024 in Hot Springs, N.C after flood waters from Hurricane Helen filled the building one week ago.

The recovery

There are needs big and small, including regaining power and cell service, repairing housing and digging out of so much mud. People need food, clean water, clothes. They need to figure out when and where they'll go to work and school. And then little by little, they'll rebuild.

Throughout this initial phase of cleanup, communities are coming together. And they're getting help from volunteers on land and in the sky.

A 30-truck convoy rides through Helene's worst in Avery County, feeding the forgottenPensacola's battered lone road adds twists to Helene response in remote Western NC townPilots get needed supplies to battered Western NC and beyond, one delivery at a time Pilots fly NC nursing home residents with dementia to safety as medicine runs low'Help is on the way.' A town-by-town look at how the Triangle is aiding Western NCHelene devastated this small Ashe County town. Now its residents are feeding one anotherChef José Andrés and World Central Kitchen distribute thousands of meals in Western NC

helene_tuesday_03.JPGPrema Posner, left, becomes emotional after Emmaleigh Argonauta offered her free flowers at Whole Foods in Asheville, N.C. on Tuesday, October 1, 2024.

Moments of hope

While the news out of Western North Carolina continues to feel overwhelming and altogether awful, there have been a few moments that bring glimmers of joy.

Meet Leslee Serdar. She works at Whole Foods in Asheville and decided to lift people's spirits with flowers. Lionel Richie to the rescue? This National Guard unit's helicopter has a sketch of the singer on the tail. When the crew brings supplies to flood victims, it can't help but bring a little fun to the proceedings. Sereyna Bianchi and Gavin Walker got married after Helene passed through North Carolina, making the most of an unpredictable situation.

LIONEL_RICHIE_11.JPGMitch Halverson, a crew member with Bravo Company 1-171, checks compartments of the Chinook helicopter that the team will fly into the Western North Carolina communities of Buladean and Poplar on Thursday, October 3, 2024. The company has adopted the insignia of Lionel Richie as their symbol and he has become a point of pride for the company.

News you can use

Want to donate to people and animals in NC affected by Helene? Here's how to helpFederal aid is available for North Carolinians affected by Helene. Here's how to apply. Want to donate clothing to Western NC? Here's where & when to drop it offWhen cell towers and internet fail, ham radio operators can still talk. How to get involvedFree legal assistance available for Helene storm victims in NC. How to get help. Here's a searchable database of NC roads closed and damaged by Tropical Storm Helene

RAL_092822-HURRICANE-HELENE-TEL-04.JPGResidents in Clyde begin cleaning up on Saturday, Sept. 28, 2024 after massive flooding damaged dozens of homes and businesses. The remnants of Hurricane Helene caused widespread flooding, downed trees, and power outages in western North Carolina.

The Visuals

I've spent a lot of time this week thinking of this woman in Clyde, who photojournalist Travis Long encountered last Saturday, the day after the rain stopped. We don't have her name, but the scene captures the chaos and shock that many of us are feeling as the long road to recovery begins.

Check out these videos, including aerial drone videos, from the photojournalists at The N&O and The Observer.

We'll continue to cover Helene in North Carolina. Have a story idea we should look into? Let me know. Until next Sunday, stay safe.

Jessica Banov Newsletter Author tag.pngJessica Banov

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No power but only minor damage: Spruce Pine quartz mine owner updates Helene recovery

October 4, 2024 | News & Observer, The: Web Edition Articles (Raleigh, NC) Author: Brian Gordon, News & Observer | Section: north carolina | 554 Words OpenURL Link

The world's main producer of high-purity quartz, a mineral crucial to the global supply of semiconductor chips, announced its shuttered Spruce Pine, North Carolina, mines have endured "minor damage," according to an initial assessment conducted after Tropical Storm Helene upended the town.

"Our dedicated teams are on-site, conducting cleanup and repair activities to restart operations as soon as we can," the mine owner, Sibelco, wrote in an update Friday. The private Belgian company added the power remains out at its Western North Carolina mines but that repairs have "progressed significantly."

With around 500 employees, Sibelco is the largest employer in Mitchell County, a rural mountainous area northeast of Asheville. The company said all its employees and contractors had been accounted for following last week's storm, which dumped more than two feet of rain on Spruce Pine and flooded the local North Toe River. Its facilities have been closed since Sept. 26.

Sibelco's mines sit north of downtown in an area called the Spruce Pine Mining District. Like much of the region, Mitchell County has sustained extensive road and rail line damage, which could hinder employees' ability to get to the mines and Sibelco's ability to move its valuable quartz.

100324-HELENE-KLM-01.jpgAndrew Zook, left, helps to clear instruments and other items from the mud inside Majestic Music in downtown Spruce Pine, N.C. on Thursday, Oct. 3, 2024, days after Hurricane Helene brought heavy flooding to the area.

Free of impurities, Spruce Pine quartz has been crucial to the supply of semiconductor wafers, solar panels and other fast-growing technologies.

"It is rare, unheard-of almost, for a single site to control the global supply of a crucial material," wrote Ed Conway in his 2023 book "Material World." "Yet if you want to get high-purity quartz - the kind you need to make those crucibles without which you can't make silicon wafers - it has to come from Spruce Pine."

Sibelco has grown to keep up with the demand. Between 2019 and 2023, the company increased its production of high-quality quartz by almost 60%. And in April 2023, Sibelco committed to invest \$200 million in its Spruce Pine facilities to double production by next year.

On Friday, the company said its final product stock "has not been impacted" by the storm. "We are working closely with our customers to assess their needs and plan the restart of product shipments as soon as we can," Sibelco said.

Sibelco sells its white quartz sand under the brand name IOTA, which the company states online is "indispensable in the manufacture of a wide range of high-tech products."

100324-HELENE-KLM-03.jpgMarlin King, a volunteer from Pennsylvania, helps to clear mud and debris from Locust Street on Thursday, Oct. 3, 2024, in Spruce Pine, N.C. following damage from Hurricane Helene.

Disruptions at the Spruce Pine mines have previously impacted the supply chain of quartz; In 2008, a fire at a local quartz refinery "temporarily brought production to a halt and impacted the market," the consulting firm Global Risk Intel reported.

Sibelco isn't the only quartz mining company in Spruce Pine. In recent years, a second company named The Quartz Corp opened area mines. On Tuesday, The Quartz Corp confirmed it had also stopped operations following Helene, noting "we have no visibility on when they will restart."

Compared to Sibelco's sites, The Quartz Corp mine is positioned closer to the North Toe River.

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Helene's NC death toll expected to climb, as recovery enters second week

October 4, 2024 | News & Observer, The: Web Edition Articles (Raleigh, NC) Author: Virginia Bridges, News & Observer | Section: north carolina | 1240 Words OpenURL Link

EDITOR'S NOTE: This article included state and county death toll statistics, including from Buncombe County, which has had the highest number of Helene-related deaths. The state Department of Health and Human Services has since taken over death-count reporting for Buncombe County. As of Oct. 17, 2024, DHHS reported 42 confirmed deaths in Buncombe, with a statewide total of 95. Find more recent News & Observer Helene death-toll reporting here.

A week after Helene slammed into western North Carolina, the state death toll reached 115, a tally expected to increase as search and recovery continues.

Some counties damaged by the storm, including Alleghany and Caldwell, finished their searches and safety checks this week, after crossing off dozens of names of people reported missing, according to sheriffs' officials there.

RAL_HOTSPRINGS-NE-100424-RTW.JPGLaw enforcement personnel use heavy equipment and chain saws to search through a large debris field for victims of Hurricane Helene in Spring Creek where it meets the French Broad River on Friday, October 4, 2024 in Hot Springs, N.C.

The hunt for living and the dead continues in Buncombe County. Rescuers there have found 72 bodies, by far the most in the state. And dozens of survivors were still known to be trapped on Friday, according to the Buncombe County Sheriff's Office.

"Our search and recovery has not ceased. We've been trying to do that 24/7," said Bumcombe County Sheriff Quentin Miller. "We cannot stop. We must continue to move forward."

Yancey County, so far, had the second highest number of confirmed deaths Friday: nine, according to state data. The latest death toll also included six people in Henderson County, according to numbers from the state.

Helene stole the music and soul of the town of Spruce PineWith the mud ankle-deep inside her Majestic Music store, and the water stains climbing 8 feet high on the walls, Angie Buchanan said goodbye to 50 years of teaching music in Spruce Pine, NC. "My life is in there," she said. "It's hard. Very hard."

Numbers reported by the state and counties continued to differ one week into disaster response, because the state doesn't count a death until a state medical examiner determines if it is related to Helene, according to Kelley Richardson, a spokesperson for North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services.

The state process takes time and results in a discrepancy between county numbers and state numbers that work out in time.

"We do not dispute the numbers released by our counties, but we work to release one verified number as the state on a twice daily basis," Richardson said.

Hurricane helene deaths by county map embed

Few names but some causes reported

According to both state and county data, Helene's death toll stood at 113 on Friday morning. At least 16 people drowned and 10 victims died due to landslides, according to the state Department of Health and Human Services,

which releases death statistics twice a day.

Children were among those who perished. Among the youngest is a 4-year-old girl in Catawba County who died in a two-vehicle crash on a flooded road, and a 7-year-old Buncombe County boy who drowned.

One victim whose body was found at the end of this week was Julie le Roux, a 33-year-old artist from Georgia, who was separated from her fiancé in McDowell County, when water, mud and much more crashed into a home where they took shelter

The state hasn't reported any deaths in Mitchell and Alexander counties, and officials in those areas could not be reached by The News & Observer on Friday.

RAL_OLDFORT-NE-100224-RTW_8.JPGA member of a search and rescue team from Colorado wades into the Catawba River searching for victims of Hurricane Helene on Wednesday, October 2, 2024 near Old Fort, N.C.

Some good news too

Among so much awfulness, there are slivers of welcome news. Lincoln, Jackson and Allegheny counties reported zero fatalities when contacted by The News & Observer Friday.

Chief Deputy Shane Glenn said Allegheny communities kept the number of deaths down by looking after each other before and after the storm, said Allegheny Sheriff's Office Chief Deputy Shane Glenn. By Friday that county had whittled down its missing person list to zero, Glenn said.

McDowell County as of Friday had recovered the body of one person who died due to Helene and still had 20 people reported missing, Sheriff Office spokesperson Holly Ramsey said.

Aid finally arrives in remote Western NC town whose lone road was battered by Helene"The highway is gone," said Mark Harrison, medical officer for the Pensacola Fire Department. "Most of the homes are gone." Harrison describes the relief effort following Hurricane Helene, and the medical supplies the community needs.

Numbers released by the state and counties conflict with widely shared social media claims overstating the death toll that describe gory scenes of mountains littered with dead people and animals, according to interviews with state and local officials.

North Carolina Emergency Management officials cautioned on Friday about false reports being spread online. The public should rely on trusted sources, like state, national and local government and weather sources.

"Dangerous conditions continue in some areas and false information could put people at risk," the press release states.

RAL_OLDFORT-NE-100224-RTW_6.JPGSearch and rescue personnel from Colorado, Illinois and North Carolina search a stretch of farm land along the Catawba River for victims of Hurricane Helene on Wednesday, October 2, 2024 near Old Fort, N.C.

Man shoots at Buncombe deputies

That said, the situation is tragic, especially in Buncombe County. Landslides and floods there have left local and visiting law enforcement using borrowed boats, ATVs, drones and cadavers dogs to continue their search for the dead and living.

"We got areas that we haven't even been able to get to," said Sheriff Miller, who said his first goal is to save people who are stranded and cut off from resources. Second, is to knock on doors to find the missing, and the third is to find the bodies. Bodies that have been buried in landslides and tangled in mud and debris along the Swannanoa

River, according to the daily state reports.

RAL_PENSACOLA-NE-100324-RTW_16.JPGMembers of the Charlotte Fire Department arrive in Pensacola, N.C. to search for victims of Hurricane Helene on Thursday, October 3, 2024, in the Yancey County.

Bridges are down and roads are impassable, leaving more than 100 people stranded without running water and power, said Braxton Langston-Chapman, who works for Forsyth County Sheriff's Office but is temporarily serving as a spokesperson in Buncombe.

An out-of-town fire department is building temporary bridges so officers can get to communities, Langston-Chapman said. Other organizations are dropping resources down to them via helicopters and drones.

In the search effort, deputies are knocking on doors at night, trying to account for the missing as quickly as possible. But a recent incident highlights the dangers of exploring savaged areas at night. On Wednesday, a 64-year-old man fired four bullets at deputies walking up to his home. After a negotiation, the man was arrested on attempted first-degree murder and other assault charges.

"I would just ask people to help us, you know, be patient with us," Miller said, and keep in mind that it could be law enforcement just trying to check on them.

RAL_100224-HURRICANE-HELENE-TEL-07.JPGA scene from Biltmore Village in Asheville on Wednesday October 2, 2204. The area received extensive damage from flooding of the Swannanoa River after the remnants of Hurricane Helene caused torrential rainfall in western North Carolina.

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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Pet adoptions 'urgently needed' at Wake SPCA for displaced NC animals after Helene

October 4, 2024 | News & Observer, The: Web Edition Articles (Raleigh, NC) Author: Chyna Blackmon, News & Observer | Section: local | 458 Words OpenURL Link

Following the devastating aftermath of Hurricane Helene, a Triangle animal group is pleading to the public to help pets that were displaced during the storm.

As local, state and federal officials continue rescue and recovery efforts in Western North Carolina, the SPCA of Wake County says pet adoptions are "urgently needed" to free up space and resources for other affected shelters who are asking for help in taking in as many evacuated pets as possible.

spca of wake countyThe SPCA of Wake County has a variety of animals available for adoption, including dogs, cats, rabbits, and more.

"We have seen how devastating natural disasters can be for both people and animals," Darci VanderSlik, a SPCA Wake spokesperson said in a statement. "By adopting a pet from a shelter like ours, you are not only bringing joy and love into your own life, but you are also helping to save a life and provide a second chance for an animal in need."

spca wake countySPCA of Wake County is urging the public to help clear their shelters as a way to support pets impacted by Hurricane Helene.

The Triangle nonprofit has a variety of animals dogs, cats, rabbits, and other animals in need of homes that were already up for adoption at other shelters before the storm hit.

"The affected shelters need to clear animals out to safe areas like Raleigh in order to create room for incoming lost pets so that they can reunite them with their owners," Samantha Ranlet, Communications Manager for SPCA of Wake County, told The News & Observer.

"Otherwise they would face this inundation of lost pets with facilities that are already at max capacity, which would either mean turning lost pets away with nowhere to go, or having to euthanize adoptable animals to create space."

spca wake countyThe SPCA of Wake County has a variety of animals available for adoption, including dogs, cats, rabbits, and more.

Triangle businesses and organizations collecting donations for Helene storm victims in NC

How to adopt from SPCA of Wake County

If you're interested in making a furry friend in need a part of your family, here's how the adoption process works at SPCA of Wake County:

Submit an adoption survey to meet with an Adoption SpecialistSchedule an appointment to ask questions and learn more about a potential petFinalize paperwork and pet adoption

You can find more information about the adoption process and fees, which include spaying/neutering, vaccinations, microchipping, and more, online at spcawake.org or visit the shelter open everyday from 11 a.m.-6 p.m.

spca of wake county The SPCA of Wake County is located at 200 Petfinder Lane in Raleigh, NC.

When does hurricane season end? What to know, how to stay prepared in NC after Helene

Biltmore Estate closed until further notice. A look at the damage there after Helene

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Chyna Blackmon, News & Observer, 'Pet adoptions 'urgently needed' at Wake SPCA for displaced NC animals after Helene', *News & Observer, The: Web Edition Articles* (online), 4 Oct 2024 https://infoweb.newsbank.com/apps/news/document-view? p=AMNEWS&docref=news/19C6955A89DCB820>



NC lawmakers to pass first round of Helene relief this week. Requests already coming in

October 4, 2024 | News & Observer, The: Web Edition Articles (Raleigh, NC)
Author: Dawn Baumgartner Vaughan and Kyle Ingram, News & Observer Section: politics government | 1337 Words
OpenURL Link

North Carolina's state lawmakers return to Raleigh for a one-day session on Oct. 9, and leaders say they will vote on an initial relief package for communities affected by Tropical Storm Helene.

Top Republicans, who control the legislature, put out a joint statement on Friday. Senate leader Phil Berger and House Speaker Tim Moore said they are "preparing to come back next week to vote on an initial disaster relief package."

"Over the past week, we've heard directly from residents in Western North Carolina and have seen the devastation firsthand. Our hearts are broken for the communities that have been ravaged by Hurricane Helene. Despite the destruction, it has been incredible to see how North Carolinians have stepped up to help. We cannot let up on those efforts or forget about the small communities that have been effectively closed off because of this storm," Berger and Moore wrote.

"The General Assembly is preparing to come back next week to vote on an initial disaster relief package to facilitate the state's response to Hurricane Helene. We are still working to determine what needs to be included in that legislation. Our thoughts and prayers remain with the victims of this storm and those who have lost loved ones, as well as the aid workers, volunteers, and rescue teams supporting the region," they said.

The General Assembly also has a weeklong session in November, and could also hold a special session. Lawmakers may wait until more information is known about what the exact needs are for communities in crisis for the next round of relief.

Money from the federal government is already on the way, with the White House reporting more than \$17 million in housing and other assistance for more than 10,000 households in North Carolina. Individuals and families can apply for FEMA assistance, and access other resources, at fema.gov or call the FEMA helpline at 800-621-3362.

In the meantime, at the state level, the Department of Public Instruction has announced what it definitely needs, and the Board of Elections has concerns, too. Here's where things stand with what lawmakers and agencies are considering.

Surviving after Helene: 'Just living is a challenge'The News & Observer's Travis Long was one of the first journalists on the ground when Helene's floodwaters roared through Western North Carolina. A veteran of more than 20 major storms, he shares his experiences and images after a week of covering the devastation the storm left behind.

General Assembly 'stands ready'

Berger said earlier this week, "It will take time to know the full catastrophic nature of this storm, but the General Assembly stands ready to take the necessary steps to help our neighbors in Western North Carolina."

Legislative leadership, particularly in the Senate, prioritizes its "rainy day" fund in annual budget discussions. No amount of spending has been announced.

Senate Democratic Leader Dan Blue, of Wake County, said Senate Democrats "look forward to working with Senate Leader Phil Berger and our Republican colleagues to ensure these reserve funds are allocated in a way that will restore stability in our communities as soon as possible."

RAL_PENSACOLA-NE-100324-RTW_9.JPGA family in the Pensacola community of Yancey County, N.C. carry milk and food to their home after picking them up at the community fire department on Thursday, October 3, 2024. The area has been heavily damaged from Hurricane Helene, with the roads in inaccessible due to flooding.

Possible special session to deal with Helene relief

House Democratic Leader Robert Reives, of Chatham County, has floated the idea of having a special legislative session to deal with Helene.

"House Democrats are thinking of and praying for the residents affected by Hurricane Helene, especially in Western North Carolina but also in Eastern North Carolina where a tornado tore through Rocky Mount. We are committed to doing whatever it takes to help rebuild the region over the long term," he said in a statement. Reives said it will take time to plan for "long-term recovery."

"House Democrats have begun working on a package of relief measures and look forward to working with our Republican colleagues and the Governor's team to help get it done. We stand ready to do this work in one of our regularly scheduled sessions or during a special session - whatever is necessary," Reives said.

Department of Public Instruction request

N.C. Superintendent of Public Instruction Catherine Truitt said what people "are seeing and hearing in WNC is heart breaking," and that after talking to school and school district leaders in Western North Carolina, her agency already has a list of requests for lawmakers.

That request, which Truitt shared on social media and at a meeting this week, includes about \$166 million.

The funding request includes \$150 million for building repairs and renovations, school nutrition, equipment, supplies and technology losses. The DPI request notes the amount is "a preliminary figure based on amounts appropriated during Hurricane Florence and estimates based on current needs."

DPI is also requesting up to \$16 million for school nutrition staff who were employed for scheduled instructional days that were missed due to Helene. And the agency is requesting school calendar flexibility for impacted school districts.

RAL_PENSACOLA-NE-100324-RTW.JPGHelicopter pilot Brett James, with Willow Creek Aviation of Louisburg, N.C. departs the Pensacola Fire Department after dropping off medical supplies, food and water, shuttling them from Hickory, N.C. to the Yancey County, N.C. village of Pensacola on Thursday, October 3, 2024. The area has been heavily damaged from Hurricane Helene, with the roads in inaccessible due to flooding.

Elections request

The State Board of Elections is considering a variety of legislative requests to address Helene's potential impact on voting. Extra funding for counties hit hard by the storm could be a key part of the request, as well as changes to deadlines for receiving absentee ballots.

"We're still early in our conversations with the legislature," Karen Brinson Bell, executive director of the board told reporters on Tuesday. "...We want to be able to give them a very educated request and not just (be) haphazard in what we're asking for."

Though the board is still working with county election officials to determine the extent of the damage, Brinson Bell said funding may be needed to help counties pay to reissue ballots lost in the storm or hire on-site assistance for other election tasks. Getting absentee ballots in by the deadline, 7:30 p.m. on Election Day, could be another concern, given that postal service is still disrupted in many western counties and many ballots were likely delivered right before the storm hit.

With about a month left until the election, Brinson Bell said the board may need to consider asking the legislature to extend the deadline for receiving absentee ballots - an issue that has been a point of contention in the past. In previous elections, the state accepted absentee ballots within three days of the election, so long as they were postmarked by Election Day. However, last year, Republican lawmakers passed a bill eliminating this deadline over the objections of their Democratic colleagues and voting rights activists.

Short of asking for a deadline extension, Brinson Bell said there were other steps the legislature could take to help voters affected by Helene get their absentee ballots in on time. One of those changes could be allowing voters to drop off their absentee ballots in-person on Election Day - not just during early voting.

"That's the kind of thing we're weighing right now," she said.

Before and after satellite images show flooding from Helene in AshevilleBiltmore Village and the River Arts District in Asheville received extensive damage from flooding of the Swannanoa River after Helene caused torrential rainfall in western North Carolina over the weekend. Satellite imagery provided by Planet Labs PBC shows the river overwhelming parts of the city.

UNC System request 'at some point'

The UNC System is still assessing what it might need.

"The UNC System will certainly request relief funds at some point, but it's too soon to evaluate costs when the region is focused on life, safety and health. We also support the state and congressional delegation who are advocating for federal support in North Carolina," UNC System spokesperson Andy Wallace told The N&O.

Higher education reporter Korie Dean contributed.

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UNC basketball scrimmage, originally planned for Cherokee, will now fund Helene relief

October 4, 2024 | News & Observer, The: Web Edition Articles (Raleigh, NC) Author: Shelby Swanson, News & Observer | Section: university of north carolina | 416 Words OpenURL Link

The North Carolina men's basketball team's Blue-White scrimmage, originally scheduled on Oct. 13 at Harrah's Cherokee Hotel & Casino Resort in Cherokee, North Carolina, has been relocated due to logistical concerns following Hurricane Helene.

The event will take place on Oct. 12 at the Smith Center, following UNC's football game against Georgia Tech. The scrimmage will begin 45 minutes after the conclusion of the football game, which is scheduled for noon.

The event was originally going to be held off-campus to provide players more opportunities to promote and profit from their name, image and likeness. Now, following the damage caused by Helene, the scrimmage will function as a fundraiser to help those impacted by the storm.

"Our number one concern is the safety and well-being of the thousands of people who are affected by the storm and we didn't want to add to their challenges by trying to play a basketball game in Cherokee at this time," UNC coach Hubert Davis said in a statement. "We had some discussions about keeping the date to help restore some normalcy but there is nothing normal about the tragic circumstances people in the area are facing every day. We plan to bring our team to Harrah's and Cherokee another time when the conditions are right."

Tickets for the scrimmage are \$10, with proceeds going to hurricane relief. Those who previously purchased tickets for the Cherokee event can attend for free. UNC students can attend with a One Card at no extra cost.

Davis likened the event in Cherokee to barnstorming games he participated in as a former player at UNC.

"We would go play games all around the state and the reason why we would do it is not everyone had an opportunity to come to the Smith Center," he said. "So why not do it in the preseason? It gives us an opportunity to travel around the state and for North Carolina fans to be able to see us who can't make it all the way down here."

Davis said the Tar Heels will look for similar preseason opportunities in the future.

Following the Oct. 12 scrimmage, the Tar Heels play a preseason game against the Memphis Tigers on Oct. 15 at FedEx Forum, benefiting St. Jude Children's Research Hospital. The game will be broadcast on ESPNU, with all proceeds directed to St. Jude.

The Tar Heels will also host Johnson C. Smith at the Smith Center in an exhibition on Oct. 27, and their regular season begins on Nov. 4 at home against Elon.

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Shelby Swanson, News & Observer, 'UNC basketball scrimmage, originally planned for Cherokee, will now fund Helene relief', *News & Observer, The: Web Edition Articles* (online), 4 Oct 2024 https://infoweb.newsbank.com/apps/news/document-view? p=AMNEWS&docref=news/19C6955A9E616B88>



Photos: Surrounded by water, small NC community had to wait until rescue could safely travel

October 4, 2024 | News & Observer, The: Web Edition Articles (Raleigh, NC) Author: Robert Willett, News & Observer | Section: north carolina | 690 Words OpenURL Link

Pensacola, North Carolina, a remote community in Pisgah National Forest, found itself surrounded by water during Helene.

With Cattail Creek running down the mountainside and the Cane River rising and overflowing, the town of about 500 people found itself salvaging what remained behind.

Rescue and recovery in the town, about 22 miles from Asheville, began when it was safe. There's only one direct connection - Pensacola Road - so residents had to wait until trucks could make their way through.

Here are photos from the town on Thursday, Oct. 3, 2024.

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

RAL_PENSACOLA-NE-100324-RTW_20.JPGA Pensacola Fire Department truck, photographed on Thursday, October 3, 2024, truck fell victim to flood waters from Hurricane Helen that flooded the nearby Cane River. Firefighters stationed the truck at this end of the community, dividing their resources, to better serve the community in case the main fire station became inaccessible.

RAL_PENSACOLA-NE-100324-RTW_9.JPGA family in the Pensacola community of Yancey County, N.C. carry milk and food to their home after picking them up at the community fire department on Thursday, October 3, 2024. The area has been heavily damaged from Hurricane Helene, with the roads in inaccessible due to flooding.

RAL_PENSACOLA-NE-100324-RTW.JPGHelicopter pilot Brett James, with Willow Creek Aviation of Louisburg, N.C. departs the Pensacola Fire Department after dropping off medical supplies, food and water, shuttling them from Hickory, N.C. to the Yancey County, N.C. village of Pensacola on Thursday, October 3, 2024. The area has been heavily damaged from Hurricane Helene, with the roads in inaccessible due to flooding.

RAL_PENSACOLA-NE-100324-RTW_1.JPGMark Harrison, Chief Medical Officer for the Pensacola Fire Department, center, unloads supplies from Helicopter pilot Brett James, with Willow Creek Aviation of Louisburg, N.C., on Thursday, October 3, 2024 in Pensacola, N.C.

RAL_PENSACOLA-NE-100324-RTW_2.JPGMark Harrison, Chief Medical Officer for the Pensacola Fire Department, center, unloads supplies from Helicopter pilot Brett James, with Willow Creek Aviation of Louisburg, N.C., on Thursday, October 3, 2024 in Pensacola, N.C.

RAL_PENSACOLA-NE-100324-RTW_4.JPGNational Guard Troops from Southern Pines, N.C. deliver water to the hard hit village of Pensacola, N.C. in Yancey County on Thursday, October 3, 2024.

RAL_PENSACOLA-NE-100324-RTW_3 (1).JPGHenri McGowan, who lives in the village of Pensacola, in Yancey County, N.C. holds his daughter Violet McGowan as he calls loved ones using the Starlink Internet service at the community fire department on Thursday, October 3, 2024 in Pensacola, N.C.

RAL_PENSACOLA-NE-100324-RTW_6.JPGSeven-year-old Amersyn Rutledge of Greenville TN, sorts donated supplies at the Pensacola Fire Department on Thursday, October 3, 2024 in Pensacola, N.C. Amersyn came with her father to volunteer on Thursday as the hard hit community, cut off by damaged roads from Hurricane Helene copes with limited resources and medical supplies.

RAL_PENSACOLA-NE-100324-RTW_7.JPGInside the Pensacola Fire Department on Thursday, October 3, 2024, volunteers sort donations to the community that was hard hit by Hurricane Helene The storm destroyed roads, cutting off access to the Yancey County, N.C. community. Most supplies have been flown in by helicopter or driven in on four wheel drive vehicles.

RAL_PENSACOLA-NE-100324-RTW_11.JPGFallen Utility lines in the Yancey County village of Pensacola, N.C. on Thursday, October 3, 2024. Hurricane Helene destroyed roads and knocked out power to the community.

RAL_PENSACOLA-NE-100324-RTW_8.JPGA sign in the window of the Pensacola Fire Department offers residents a place to spend the day, have some food and use Starlink to call family and friends on Thursday, October 3, 2024 in Pensacola, N.C. The area has been heavily damaged from Hurricane Helene, with the roads inaccessible due to flood damage.

RAL_PENSACOLA-NE-100324-RTW_15.JPGJoyce Maness shovels mud, laced with sewage, from her front porch in the Pensacola community of Yancey County, N.C. on Thursday, October 3, 2024 in Pensacola, N.C. Food waters from Hurricane Helene pushed the mud and sewage into her home.

RAL_PENSACOLA-NE-100324-RTW_16.JPGMembers of the Charlotte Fire Department arrive in Pensacola, N.C. to search for victims of Hurricane Helene on Thursday, October 3, 2024, in the Yancey County.

RAL_PENSACOLA-NE-100324-RTW_19.JPGThe Laurel Branch Baptist Church, on Thursday, October 3, 2024, in the Yancey County community of Pensacola, N.C. suffered heavy damage after Cane Creek and Cattail Creek flooded the community during Hurricane Helene.

RAL_PENSACOLA-NE-100324-RTW_21.JPGClothes dry in the sunshine against a backdrop of storm debris from Hurricane Helene in the Yancey County village of Pensacola, N.C. on Thursday, October 3, 2024

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Photos: Volunteers take on the task of recovery in flooded NC mountain town

October 4, 2024 | News & Observer, The: Web Edition Articles (Raleigh, NC) Author: Robert Willett, News & Observer | Section: north carolina | 521 Words OpenURL Link

The Appalachian Trail runs down the main street in Hot Springs, North Carolina. During Helene, the French Broad River raged down the same route, blazing a path of devastation. Volunteers and friends have banded together to help the small resort town start down the path of recovery.

News & Observer photojournalist Robert Willett captured these images a week after the flood hit.

RAL_HOTSPRINGS-NE-100424-RTW_14 (1).JPGBusiness owners with an army of volunteers work to clean mud from flooded business on Bridge Street on Friday, October 4, 2024, after flooding from Hurricane Helene destroyed many of them.

RAL_HOTSPRINGS-NE-100424-RTW_4.JPGSeven-year-old Zander Reed of Hot Springs, N.C. sorts through a massive amount of donations for Hurricane Helene victims in the gym of Hot Springs Elementary on Friday, October 4, 2024 in Hot Springs, N.C. Donation coordinators said they have plenty of diapers, but are in need of PPE equipment, and muck boots.

RAL_HOTSPRINGS-NE-100424-RTW_7.JPGVolunteers Kristin Giles and Raymond Dauteuil clean the inventory from the historic Gentry Hardware on Friday, October 4, 2024 in Hot Springs, N.C. Flood waters from Hurricane Helene flooded adjacent Spring Creek in the center of town, wiping out most of the businesses.

RAL_HOTSPRINGS-NE-100424-RTW_6.JPGA volunteer working to clean the interior of the flooded historic Gentry Hardware, washes the muck off their boots and shovels on Friday, October 4, 2024 in Hot Springs, N.C.

RAL_HOTSPRINGS-NE-100424-RTW_5.JPGA marker for the Appalachian Trail which passes through downtown Hot Springs, N.C. is covered with sand from flood waters from Hurricane Helen on Friday, October 4, 2024.

RAL_HOTSPRINGS-NE-100424-RTW_8.JPGJenifer Miller of Hot Springs, N.C. uses water, gravity and ingenuity to solve a growing dust problem, as mud from historic flooding turns to dust on Friday, October 4, 2024 in downtown Hot Springs, N.C.

RAL_HOTSPRINGS-NE-100424-RTW_4.JPGSeven-year-old Zander Reed of Hot Springs, N.C. sorts through a massive amount of donations for Hurricane Helene victims in the gym of Hot Springs Elementary on Friday, October 4, 2024 in Hot Springs, N.C. Donation coordinators said they have plenty of diapers, but are in need of PPE equipment, and muck boots.

RAL_HOTSPRINGS-NE-100424-RTW_3.JPGOne of the hot tubs at the at Hot Springs Resort And Spa is filled to mud on Friday, October 4, 2024 after Spring Creek and the French Board River flooded the resort in the wake of Hurricane Helene. Several of the hots tubs were washed away in the flood.

RAL_HOTSPRINGS-NE-100424-RTW_9.JPGThe guest check in sign at the Hot Springs Resort And Spa on Friday, October 4, 2024 after Spring Creek and the French Board River flooded the resort in the wake of Hurricane Helene.

RAL_HOTSPRINGS-NE-100424-RTW_2.JPGA quilt and an American Flag are hung out to dry on Friday, October 4, 2024 on the front porch of Hot Springs Rafting Company after the historic structure was flooded by Spring Creek during Hurricane Helene.

RAL HOTSPRINGS-NE-100424-RTW 11.JPGUtility contractors works to restore power to the town of Hot Springs, N.C.

on Friday, October 4, 2024, one week after Hurricane Helene moved through western North Carolina.

RAL_HOTSPRINGS-NE-100424-RTW_13.JPGNorth Carolina SBI and Federal ATF Agents, search through storm debris in Spring Creek where it meets the French Broad River for victims of Hurricane Helene on Friday, October 4, 2024 in Hot Springs, N.C.

Photos: Surrounded by water, small NC community had to wait until rescue could safely travel

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In the resort town of Hot Springs, service workers take on leadership roles after Helene

October 4, 2024 | News & Observer, The: Web Edition Articles (Raleigh, NC) Author: Brian Gordon, News & Observer | Section: north carolina | 792 Words OpenURL Link

What is a resort town without a resort?

What is a stop on the Appalachian Trail without anywhere to stay?

These questions face the residents of Hot Springs, North Carolina, in the months ahead. Significant sections of the spa that gives the community its name were carried into the French Broad River last Friday during Tropical Storm Helene. A row of outdoor hot tubs, No. 1 to No. 8, are gone. Severed pipes and several roofs stick into the sandy grounds.

Along with Marshall and Mars Hill, Hot Springs is one of three towns in Madison County, a remote area of tree-covered mountains and slaloming roads directly north of Asheville and less than 5 miles from Tennessee. Where Marshall is the county seat and Mars Hill a college town, Hot Springs revolves around tourism.

RAL_HOTSPRINGS-NE-100424-RTW_7.JPGVolunteers Kristin Giles and Raymond Dauteuil clean the inventory from the historic Gentry Hardware on Friday, October 4, 2024 in Hot Springs, N.C. Flood waters from Hurricane Helene flooded adjacent Spring Creek in the center of town, wiping out most of the businesses.

With the French Broad running north, the greater community of around 1,100 residents is a popular spot for white water rafting. It also boasts the only downtown in the state that the Appalachian Trail cuts directly through. And like much of Western North Carolina, the local leaves turn majestic colors in the autumn.

"We call these people leaf lookers," said Karen McCall, who runs a Hot Springs rafting and tubing company with her husband. "All this town is is tourism. There's nothing else here."

RAL_HOTSPRINGS-NE-100424-RTW_1.JPGKaren McCall of Hot Springs Rafting Company cleans equipment that was damaged from Hurricane Helene flooding outside the historic home that houses the business on Friday, October 4, 2024 in Hot Springs, N.C.

As in other areas devastated by Helene, Hot Springs experienced not one local waterway flooding but two. In addition to the French Broad, an overwhelmed Spring Creek swept through the town center and its small concentration of shops, breweries and restaurants along Bridge Street. Keith Calloway watched from his second-floor apartment as the waterline consumed his specialty grocery store below. The creek receded Friday evening but his store was a soaking jumble. To get inside, he and a group tore down the entire front.

RAL_HOTSPRINGS-NE-100424-RTW_11.JPGUtility contractors works to restore power to the town of Hot Springs, N.C. on Friday, October 4, 2024, one week after Hurricane Helene moved through western North Carolina.

"The first two days we were cut off," Calloway said. "But then (the North Carolina Department of Transportation) got this road put back together."

A few doors down Friday morning, Rochelle Moon and two other women were shoveling mud out of the darkened local library. The shelves were bare, with a stack of salvaged books on a center table. Moon, a member of the nonprofit Friends of Libraries, said she hasn't spoken to county officials about the library's future. She simply arrived to Hot Springs on Wednesday, found the building in disarray, and began the process of clearing.

RAL HOTSPRINGS-NE-100424-RTW 15.JPGVolunteer Justin Moon shovels mud from the public library on Friday,

October 4, 2024 in Hot Springs, N.C after flood waters from Hurricane Helen filled the building one week ago.

Volunteerism was evident throughout the community, as residents took on new responsibilities.

Last week, Sonya Phillips was a bar manager at a brewery off Bridge Street. On Friday, she was leading a massive recovery effort out of the Hot Springs public schools campus. Mounds of donated food, diapers, water, gallon buckets, trash bags and wipes filled the gymnasium throughout the day. Outside, someone asked Phillips about the logistics of a helicopter landing to drop off more supplies.

"There's a whole airspace thing," she advised before referring the person to an aviation contact she knew.

"Right now, it's about trying to coordinate outreach with other communities, like Marshall, Barnardsville and Burnsville," she said.

RAL_HOTSPRINGS-NE-100424-RTW_2.JPGA quilt and an American Flag are hung out to dry on Friday, October 4, 2024 on the front porch of Hot Springs Rafting Company after the historic structure was flooded by Spring Creek during Hurricane Helene.

As volunteers kickstarted Hot Springs' long recovery, law enforcement continued to search for Helene victims. Behind the Hot Springs spa, where Spring Creek meets the French Broad, agents for the North Carolina Bureau of Investigations removed a mass of tangled tree trunks. Additional personnel from the federal Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms and Explosives were parked on the resort's front lawn.

There have been four confirmed deaths in Madison County attributed to Helene. As of Friday morning, around 13% of the county's 16,000 homes and businesses remained without power as authorities continue to look for those still missing.

RAL_HOTSPRINGS-NE-100424-RTW_5.JPGA marker for the Appalachian Trail which passes through downtown Hot Springs, N.C. is covered with sand from flood waters from Hurricane Helen on Friday, October 4, 2024.

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Want to donate clothing to Western NC? Here's where & when to drop it off

October 4, 2024 | News & Observer, The: Web Edition Articles (Raleigh, NC) Author: Renee Umsted and Chyna Blackmon, News & Observer | Section: local | 605 Words OpenURL Link

Cooler temperatures are coming to North Carolina, just as many in the western part of the state are working to rebuild what Helene destroyed.

Organizations, businesses and individuals quickly stepped up, providing monetary help, time, expertise and other supplies.

Many are requesting warm clothing and blankets as temperatures drop, especially in the evenings.

Several readers asked us where they could drop off clothing donations specifically. Here are some places in the Raleigh and Charlotte areas that are collecting clothing donations to send to Western North Carolina.

Where to donate or drop off clothing around Charlotte

« A group of local volunteers are spearheading a clothing drive for storm victims called Clothed With Care. Through December, you can drop off new or gently-used clothing, shoes and essential items. Location: 3410 St Vardell Lane, Charlotte.

The nonprofit A.S.P.I.R.E. Inc. is accepting coats, clothing and hygiene items. Location: 5820 E. W.T. Harris Blvd.Satin Hearts Together is collecting gently used clothing in all sizes for men, women and kids. Coats, scarves, shoes and hats are all acceptable, as long as they are clean and in good condition. Clothes will be available to families and individuals affected by Helene during a free shopping event at the store. Location: 2700 Coltsgate Road, Charlotte

Where to donate or drop off clothing around Raleigh

- « ABODE at Arringdon is collecting donations including washed clothing, blankets, toiletries, hygiene products, water, non-perishable food and pet food through Friday, Oct. 11. Location: 5817 Arringdon Park Drive, Morrisville. Phone: 919-924-0458
- « Jessica Dillon with Caul Group Residential publicly posted on Facebook that she is collecting items to drop off in areas affected by Helene. Dropoffs accepted until noon on Wednesday, Oct. 9. She is also taking monetary donations and will purchase supplies. Location: 201 Shannon Oaks Circle, Suite 200, Cary. Venmo: @Jessica-Dillon-29
- « Raleigh Tide Cleaners is accepting gently used clothing to be donated to the Red Cross. Those that donate will receive \$10 credit for their Tide Cleaners account to be used for a future dry cleaning and laundry order. Location: 111 Seaboard Ave ste 114, Raleigh.

Leith Ford is collecting donations through Tuesday, Oct. 15. While used clothes are not accepted, individuals may drop off unopened socks and heavy duty work gloves, among other items. Location: 5300 Rolesville Road, Wendell.Clean bedding items and winter clothing - such as pants, jackets, hats, socks and new, unopened underwear - are being accepted at gyms including Archetype West Raleigh/Cary (6601 Hillsborough St., Raleigh), Archetype Raleigh (2011 N. Raleigh Blvd. Unit 103, Raleigh) and Knuckle Up Boxing (714 N. West St., Raleigh). The North Carolina National Guard Association is collecting new warm clothing items (with tags) at its office. Donations including hats, gloves, sweatshirts, sweaters and pants for men, women and children may be dropped off between 8 a.m. and 4 p.m. Monday-Friday. Location: 7410 Chapel Hill Road, RaleighGalatea Boutique is accepting warm

clothing, camping supplies, blankets and sleeping bags. Location: 222 N. Bloodworth St., Raleigh.Drop off bottled water, non-perishable food, new and gently used clothing, diapers and other supplies at Sherlocks Glass. Location: 206 Broadway St., Durham (12 p.m.-8 p.m. Monday-Saturday, 12 p.m.-6 p.m. Sunday) and 3801 Hillsborough St., Raleigh (12 p.m.-8 p.m. Monday-Sunday).

« Savvi Tuxedos and Bridal Gowns will take donations of clothing, blankets, supplies, pet food and nonperishable items, as well as donations, throughout October. Location: 6220 Glenwood Ave. Raleigh. Phone: 919-783-8911

Did we miss a local clothing drive for storm victims in need around the Charlotte or Raleigh areas? Let us know.

Ask NC service journalism team EMBED

Pet adoptions 'urgently needed' at Wake SPCA for displaced NC animals after Helene

Want to donate to people and animals in NC affected by Helene? Here's how to help Copyright 2024 The News and Observer

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