

As grim recovery efforts continue from Helene, powerful new hurricane threatens west-central Florida

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The number of dead as a result of Hurricane Helene reached 225 on Friday, while hundreds of people are still unaccounted for amidst the devastation. In North Carolina, Buncombe County, which includes the city of Asheville, 72 people are dead due to Helene, the most in the state. The county medical examiner has halted updating the death toll until more assistance arrives.

The destructive power of the flooding and mudslides is nearly unfathomable, despite the barrage of photos and videos in the news and on social media. Roads have been torn from the sides of mountains, steel girders that once held bridges lie twisted in debris piles like discarded ribbons, and the width and depth of streams and rivers have been altered. The landscape has been irrevocably changed.

As the recovery efforts continue throughout the six states hit by Helene, a new storm, Hurricane Milton, is projected to strike the Florida Gulf Coast Wednesday. The hurricane is only the second in modern times to originate in the Gulf of Mexico and then move eastward against Florida. If it makes landfall in the Tampa-St. Petersburg area, currently at the center of the forecast cone, it would be the first direct hit on that vulnerable metropolitan area in a century.

Florida Governor Ron DeSantis declared a state of emergency for 51 counties, virtually all of the state south of the panhandle. He indicated that a top priority was to remove or secure the vast piles of debris left by Hurricane Helene, which could become dangerous projectiles in the 130 miles-per-hour winds projected to come ashore with Milton.

In the Appalachian disaster area, the death toll could well rise far above the present count of 225, as recovery workers backed by National Guard troops have begun a more systematic search of the ruins of homes and other structures.

In an interview with YouTuber Mark Huneycutt on October 5, Christy Thrift, a river outfitter and water rescue technician in Red Hill, North Carolina, described her attempts to help her neighbors as water rose well above the action stage on the North Toe River.

The river, which normally runs two to three feet deep, was already nine feet deep and flooding roads due to heavy rain in the region prior to Helene. Thrift recounted how she and her husband watched their neighbors' cinder block homes drift off of their foundations, float momentarily and sink beneath the rushing water of the swollen river.

She told Huneycutt that she received the text to move to high ground on October 4, a week after Helene struck, which means the alert went out after everyone had already lost cell service. "These people didn't get the alert," she said. "Cell service went out before the electricity did."

Thrift, who is assisting with recovery efforts, emphasized that the work has shifted from rescue to recovery. She told Huneycutt that although the announced death toll in Spruce Pine is eight, the National Guard has marked at least 100 spots over a six-mile stretch as sites to look for more remains.

"They (the National Guard) are now bringing in body recovery teams. Their goal is specifically to get and retrieve bodies so that they can get them to the medical examiner and check their teeth records. That process is really hard," she said, wiping tears from her face.

In halting sentences, Thrift described the moment when she realized the stark reality of the recovery: "[T]hey (the National Guard) confirmed that the smells I had been smelling were most likely bodies. I was like, 'Well, where are they so I can get to them?' They said, 'You can't get to them. They're crushed in debris, they're up in trees, they're under sediment, they're under sand. Unfortunately, it will be a very long time before you find these people.'"

Red Hill, North Carolina is just downstream from the mines in Spruce Pine which produce up to 70 percent of the ultra high purity quartz (ultra HPQ) that is central to the global manufacture of semiconductors used in a wide array of electronics, such as smartphones, computers and solar panels.

Sibelco, a Belgium-based mining company, reported that

its quartz production facility in Spruce Pine was severely affected by Helene. Operations were suspended on September 26. The Quartz Corporation, another mining company in the area, said it is still too early to determine when production will resume.

The CSX railroad tracks that service the mines, running along the banks of the Nolichucky and North Toe rivers for about 44 miles between Erwin, Tennessee and Spruce Pine, North Carolina are ruined. The damage is catastrophic and includes a 375-foot train crossing over the Nolichucky River that was completely washed away.

The remoteness of much of the line has hindered inspections, according to Trains.com. Officials say it is too early to identify the full extent of damage or the impact on shipping HPQ to chip manufacturers.

Another vital commodity threatened by Helene's impact is IV bags. Baxter International, a major producer of IV fluids for US hospitals, has shut down its North Cove, North Carolina facility after flooding by Helene.

Ballad Health CEO Alan Levine told local news Baxter supplies over 70 percent of the nation's IV fluids, leading to concerns about a potential nationwide shortage. Levine noted that IV bags, essential for hydrating hospital patients, are complex to manufacture.

The company has sent letters to hospitals that it is cutting shipments of IV fluids by 60 percent. The fluids that are being rationed are: saline, used to rehydrate patients and replace electrolytes; dextrose, used when patients are dehydrated or have low blood sugar; and dialysis solutions, used to treat patients with kidney failure.

Baxter told the press that a levee breach caused the flooding, and bridges and roads leading to the plant are washed out. The company currently has no estimate when the facility will be back online.

The impact of the shortage will be widespread. Already, UToledo Health in Ohio has canceled elective surgical procedures through October 11. Twin Cities hospitals in Minnesota announced they are prioritizing essential use of IV fluids while it seeks alternate suppliers. Mass General Brigham in Boston said it is continuing to treat patients but is implementing conservation protocols.

The chaos that is inevitable after a calamity of such proportions as Hurricane Helene is being exacerbated by the political machinations of the US elections. Donald Trump and his far-right henchmen are spreading disinformation and conspiracy theories that are hampering aid efforts to such an extent that the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) has had to post a page on its website debunking the rumors.

Republican Congress member Marjorie Taylor Greene from Georgia implied on X that liberals can control the rain

and that they flooded conservative Republican areas of battleground states during Helene in order to prevent people voting in the 2024 presidential elections next month.

At a rally in Evans, Georgia, on Friday, Trump told the crowd that FEMA is running out of funds because it has spent all of its money on housing illegal immigrants, stirring up fascistic, anti-immigrant sentiments central to his campaign strategy.

The truth is that, since the start of 2023, FEMA and US Customs and Border Protection have provided over \$1 billion to communities supporting migrants, according to *Forbes*. This funding comes from the Shelter and Services Program, which is separate from the Disaster Relief Fund (DRF) used for responding to hurricanes and other natural disasters.

On Wednesday, US Secretary of Homeland Security Alejandro Mayorkas told the press that FEMA, which falls under his supervision, would run out of money before the end of the hurricane season.

FEMA's shortfall is the result of Congress passing a stopgap funding bill days before Helene struck that declined the agency's request for additional funds beyond its existing funding level.

According to Politico's E&ENews, FEMA's disaster relief fund is facing a deficit of nearly \$2 billion by the end of the month. For weeks, the agency has operated in "immediate-needs" mode, diverting billions of dollars meant for rebuilding efforts, going back decades, to prioritize urgent, life-saving operations.

In what amounts to a cynical campaign stunt, the White House published a press release last Thursday announcing \$20 million of aid funds to Hurricane Helene victims which is nothing more than the DRF budget for FEMA.

This sum is a pittance when compared to the tens of billions of dollars Biden is willing to spend on NATO's proxy war on Russia and Israel's ethnic cleansing of the Palestinians in Gaza.



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