

Hurricane Helene death toll rises to 190 as US Southeast digs out from catastrophe driven by climate change

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The death toll from Hurricane Helene across the US Southeast rose to 190 Tuesday, with more than 680 people still missing, solidifying its standing as one of the deadliest storms in US history.

Helene made landfall as a Category 4 hurricane in Florida's Big Bend region on Thursday, after rapidly strengthening in the extremely warm waters of the Gulf of Mexico, heated by the effects of climate change.

The storm made its way inland over Georgia, South Carolina, western North Carolina and eastern Tennessee as a tropical storm. Helene dropped several feet of rain in some mountainous areas in a few hours, bringing a deluge which wiped entire towns in southern Appalachia off the map and has left tens of thousands stranded and homeless without food, water or cellphone service.

Environmental scientists have a clear understanding that capitalist-induced climate change, driven by unrestrained carbon emissions, is making it possible for storms to carry and deliver more water in a short period of time, overwhelming aging and inadequate infrastructure in the United States.

Last Wednesday, as Helene was rapidly escalating into a Category 4 hurricane, the House and Senate left for a six-week pre-election recess after passing a government funding extension that cut billions of dollars in supplemental disaster funding requested by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA).

On Thursday, as Helene slammed into the Florida coast, Israel announced it had received an \$8.7 billion aid package from the United States to continue its unrelenting genocide in Gaza and its onslaught in Lebanon.

On Monday, President Biden said he was considering calling Congress back to Washington for a special session to allocate additional funds towards the recovery effort in the Southeast. However, it appears unlikely that Congress will return to pass additional emergency funding left out of a stop-gap, three-month federal budget bill passed last week.

In a statement on Wednesday, the president announced he was sending 1,000 active duty soldiers to assist the National Guard in the afflicted areas. He also traveled to North Carolina's Emergency Operations Center in Raleigh before taking a helicopter flyover to view the destruction in the state's western region.

In Greene County, Tennessee, there is no timeline for restoration of water to customers in five utility districts served by the Greene County Water Commission. The county's intake structure was destroyed when the Nolichucky River rose by two feet per hour during the storm, according to the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA).

Officials noted that twice the amount of water that flows over Niagara Falls flowed over the 111-year old Nolichucky dam located near Greeneville. The flooding of the Nolichucky River is responsible for two deaths and four missing workers from the Impact Plastics plant in Erwin, Tennessee.

The system's pumping station was obliterated by the violence of the flood.

North Carolina has 145 water systems without power, suffering infrastructure damage or under boil-water alerts. In Asheville, North Carolina, the damage to the water system is "catastrophic" according to Assistant City Manager Ben Woody.

Mayor Esther Manheimer told local press the problem is the devastation to the feeder pipes from the North Fork treatment plant into Asheville, a city of more than 90,000 residents. "We don't want people to assume that's going to happen quickly," she said about the return of water service. "We need to make sure people understand that this is something they should plan for long term. They need to keep water for drinking, for flushing toilets, for things like that—Don't assume this is going to end anytime soon."

The collapse of water service for Asheville and the destruction of the city's River Arts District brought to a halt the \$1 billion craft beer industry which has been developed

in the region since the 1990s because of the protected watersheds that supply the city's water. The Asheville Brewers' Alliance estimates 4,000 jobs rely on beer-making in the city.

The devastation wrought by Helene also has serious implications for the \$3 trillion global tech industry. Spruce Pine, North Carolina, is the world's largest source of ultrapure quartz, also known as high-purity quartz, or HPQ.

HPQ is used to make the crucibles instrumental in the manufacture of semiconductors, as well as components inside semiconductors themselves. Crucibles must withstand extremely high temperatures while maintaining purity. Only HPQ fits this criteria.

There are other sources in Russia, Brazil, and India, but only the mines in Spruce Pine have the level of purity demanded by many producers. The quartz needs to be of exceptional purity because any contaminant can impede the performance, speed, and precision of semiconductors.

"The key thing will not be just the floods, as bad as they are," Chris Hackney, a researcher at Newcastle University in the UK, told *Wired*. "The damage to infrastructure—roads, transport, power, and mining equipment—will stop production for a while."

The shutdown of the Spruce Pine mines occurs at a critical moment in the development of generative artificial intelligence (AI), which is increasing demand for semiconductors to handle the immense processing power needed for its applications. Hackney noted that "any disruption to supply chains will have an impact on prices and production of high-ended electronics and tech."

The damage to the transportation infrastructure in Tennessee and North Carolina is still largely unknown. What is known so far is that there are five state bridges destroyed across Tennessee, 14 others are closed, and 27 closed sections of roadway according to the Tennessee Department of Transportation (TDOT). The agency says there are still hundreds more to inspect.

Among the roads closed is a section of Interstate 40 (I-40) through Cocke County, Tennessee, which was one of the counties hard hit by the storm. I-40 stretches from California to the Atlantic Ocean and is a logistically important transportation route through the Smoky Mountains.

In North Carolina, I-40 suffered catastrophic failure when the flood-swollen waters of the Pigeon River Gorge undercut and washed out the eastbound lanes of the interstate.

According to the North Carolina Department of Transportation (NCDOT), more than 60 of the closed roads in North Carolina are primary routes, including US Highways 64 and 74. NCDOT expects the clearing of roads and assessing the damage will be a months-long recovery effort.

reported on Tuesday that customers can expect "long-term outage" in the Blue Ridge Subdivision that suffered severe infrastructure damage in the flooding. A post on X shows damage to the rail line between Erwin, TN and Spruce Pine, North Carolina.

Norfolk Southern has reported four lines closed due to the storm. Two entries read, "Macon to Brunswick: 70 miles of trees to remove; Asheville: routes east and west of Asheville due to historic flooding."

The impact on shipping and mail service due to infrastructure damage is not yet fully known. The United States Post Office in Asheville has suspended retail and delivery operations until further notice.

The North Carolina State Board of Elections held an emergency meeting on Monday on the impact of the disaster on mail-in ballots and how voters who have lost identification in the disaster can still vote. It is expected they will send information out within the week.

The money which Congress has denied to FEMA stalls thousands of projects by states to rebuild infrastructure damaged by disasters in the past decade or longer ago, according to a report by Politico last year when a similar shortfall occurred after Hurricane Idalia.

This is a recurring funding cycle that has forced FEMA to reprioritize disaster relief nine times since 2001. Christopher Currie, of the US Government Accountability Office, told a local news agency that "It's happening now much quicker and more often than it ever has historically."

According to the Politico report, 65 federal disasters or emergencies were declared between April 1, 2023 and August 23, 2023. This included nine last August alone due to wildfires in states including Louisiana, Washington, Rhode Island and Hawaii.

The report states, "The 65 disasters and emergencies in the past five months is more than occurred in any full year from 1953 to 1995."



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