

# Florida braces for Hurricane Milton as the Southeast continues to dig out from Helene

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With recovery from Hurricane Helene barely underway, the Southeast is under imminent threat from Hurricane Milton, which is expected to make landfall late Wednesday night on the Gulf Coast near Tampa Bay.

Milton grew from a Category 1 to catastrophic Category 5 hurricane in 24 hours on Monday, the result of extreme rapid intensification as it passed over the record-warm waters of the Gulf of Mexico. After slightly weakening to a Category 4 it strengthened back to Category 5 on Tuesday as it passed Mexico's Yucatan Peninsula. Tampa Bay is expecting a record storm surge of between 10 and 15 feet, twice that brought by Helene a week ago.

Officials in Florida are particularly concerned because Milton is on track to make landfall in a heavily populated area which has not been hit by a hurricane in over 100 years. Tampa Bay is the 17th largest metropolitan area in the US and encompasses the cities of Tampa, Clearwater, and St. Petersburg, with a total population of over 3 million people. More than 1 million people were under evacuation orders as of Tuesday evening, with officials warning it was the last day to safely get out of the storm's way.

Meanwhile, the death toll from Hurricane Helene exceeds 240, while the number of missing is unofficially over 1,600, according to the Helene People Finder Facebook group.

As of Monday, nearly 7,000 federal personnel were deployed to the regions severely affected by Helene. The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) has distributed just over \$210 million in federal aid to survivors. Over 1,500 active-duty military personnel have been deployed on the ground.

In Tennessee, 20 people are known to have died in the storm. Five of six employees from Impact Plastics

in Erwin, Tennessee, who were swept away by the flood waters of the Nolichucky River as they tried to leave work on September 27, have been confirmed dead.

The Tennessee Bureau of Investigation (TBI) and the Tennessee Occupational Safety and Health Administration (TOSHA) are investigating how employees of the company became trapped as the plant's parking lot flooded.

Gerald O'Connor, the owner of the Erwin, Tennessee company, appealed to the public for the second time in an effort to clear himself of wrongdoing, this time by video. He started by suggesting the resources being spent on investigating why he kept his employees at work as the nearby Nolichucky River overflowed its banks would be better spent on recovery efforts.

In his statement, he denied the survivors' claims that they were told to remain on the job even though the parking lot was already covered in water, and were only released after power went out. By the time workers tried to leave, the roads out of the industrial park were impassable.

O'Connor asserted that employees were released 45 minutes before the flooding had reached a dangerous level, adding, "To our knowledge, no one died while on company property."

Outside Erwin, a small community at the end of Little German Road has been completely cut off, as the Nolichucky River washed away the road that connected it to town.

Residents and rescuers have had to scramble along exposed pipes and the remnants of the road still attached to the mountain to get supplies into the area.

According to a Facebook post on Tuesday, the Little German Road is not high on the list for repairs. The community has cleared a 400-yard footpath along the

edge of the river to get to town. Residents also widened an existing trail that can accommodate limited car traffic.

Greeneville County has restored 90 percent of water service to residents after the Nolichucky River devastated the region's water system, though a boil water alert is still in place.

While recovery efforts in hard-hit western North Carolina are progressing, the full extent of the damage will not be known for many weeks or months. The region is 11,000 square miles of mountainous terrain, including over 80 mountain peaks between 5,000 and 6,000 feet in elevation as well as 43 peaks over 6,000 feet high, presenting extraordinary challenges to recovery teams.

In Asheville, the largest city in the region, officials are estimating that some water service could be restored within a week. Residents have been relying on bottled water for drinking and hauling buckets of water from pools, hot tubs and rivers to flush their toilets.

Asheville's water supply is managed by three treatment plants: North Fork in Black Mountain, Mills River, and William DeBruhl (Bee Tree) in Swannanoa, which together maintain an extensive network of thousands of miles of pipes.

The North Fork and Bee Tree both suffered catastrophic damage from Helene. Repair will start on the North Fork plant, which is responsible for 80 percent of the area's water.

More than 59,000 Duke Energy customers in Buncombe County, where Asheville is located, are still without power as of Tuesday. In Georgia, power has been restored to 95 percent of residents. In South Carolina, hardest hit by power outages, 100,000 people are still without electricity.

Lack of reliable cell phone and internet service continues in western North Carolina. Speaking to the *New York Times*, the FCC said telecommunications companies are unable to get generators to areas where damaged roads have cut off access to their equipment.

FEMA announced Monday that it will continue focusing on the recovery from Helene while preparing for Milton's landfall midweek. Former FEMA head Craig Fugate noted that some resources and teams may need to be redirected from the Helene response to Florida.

Tricia Wachtendorf, director of the University of

Delaware's Disaster Research Center, emphasized that while government agencies plan for consecutive disasters, it remains difficult, especially when the same area is hit back-to-back, placing significant strain on local and state agencies.

Last Wednesday, Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas stated that FEMA does not have enough money to make it through this year's hurricane season.

Speaking to MSNBC yesterday, Mayorkas said that Congress must be reconvened to pass additional funding to respond to two massive back-to-back hurricanes. Congress passed a stopgap funding bill which declined FEMA's request for additional money just days before Helene struck.

Despite calls for reconvening Congress, House Speaker Mike Johnson said on Sunday that he would not commit to such action before the election on November 5.



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