

Major damage to railroads from Hurricane Helene, as roads open in North Carolina and Tennessee

Jane Wise
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Nearly three weeks since record rainfall from Hurricane Helene caused historic flooding and devastation in Western North Carolina and Eastern Tennessee, the area's infrastructure is still dealing with serious damage. At least 250 people in six states are dead in its aftermath, making it the second deadliest storm to hit the mainland US in the last 50 years, behind only Hurricane Katrina, which hit New Orleans in 2005. It is still unclear how many people remain missing.

Accuweather has updated its estimate of damage and economic loss to \$225-\$250 billion. The federal government has so far released only \$100 million to North Carolina, \$32 million to Tennessee, and \$2 million to South Carolina to just begin rebuilding roads and bridges.

In Western North Carolina devastation from flooding and landslides was most severe, the North Carolina Department of Transportation's (NCDOT) website, drivenc.gov, listed 744 roads fully or partially closed.

Tim Anderson, who leads NCDOT's Division 13 in the hardest hit area of the state, said the agency has identified 5,400 places that will eventually need repairs in his area alone.

A small example of the immense cost of recovery is the preliminary work being done on the eastbound stretch of Interstate 40 that was washed away by flood waters in the Pigeon River Gorge. Contractors were awarded \$10 million to drive "soil nails" into the side of the gorge to prevent further erosion of what remains of the westbound lanes, while plans for rebuilding the roadway proceed.

There is no timeline for when I-40 will be repaired, though some news sites speculate the road could reopen

in 2028. Interstate 40 was the busiest road between Tennessee and North Carolina with roughly 26,000 drivers traveling along it every day.

Two Class 1 railroads are also assessing severe damage from Helene to their lines in Tennessee and North Carolina. Significant sections of tracks for both CSX and Norfolk Southern railroads are washed out, the tracks described by local news as "snarled—ripped from the ground ... suspended, hanging from the mountainside."

North Carolina State University Professor Brad Ashbaugh explained, "When the railroads are washed out, you can't get those shipments in. With many of the roads washed out as well, it's a logistical nightmare to get goods into those areas, or if they're producing things that the rest of the country needs to get things out."

Ashbaugh is concerned that delays and increased costs from rerouting around the affected areas could cause shortages. "With supply chains getting leaner, any delays can cause shortages."

More than 40 miles of CSX's Clinchfield line between Erwin, Tennessee, and Spruce Pine, North Carolina, are wiped out, including two bridges. The railroad runs along the banks of the Nolichucky and North Toe rivers for about 40 miles between Erwin and Spruce Pine. A 375-foot bridge spanning the Nolichucky River at Poplar has been washed away, leaving only concrete piers standing in the muddy waters.

Coal trains operate on the former Clinchfield line to serve utility customers in the Carolinas, including Duke Energy's Cliffside steam plant in Brice, North Carolina. The line also handles empty coal trains and

occasional ethanol unit trains headed to the Charlotte area. In addition, infrequent grain trains bring the daily average to about five to seven trains using the Clinchfield.

Trains are now being rerouted along the I-64 corridor between Kentucky and Virginia. From there, they travel south into North Carolina, before circling back to reach the western region of the state, adding several hundred miles to their journey.

CSX has stated that it is currently unable to provide an estimated reopening for these sections.

Further south, Norfolk Southern's former Southern Railway line between Morristown, Tennessee, and Salisbury, North Carolina, suffered damage, particularly in the areas between Marshall and Old Fort, North Carolina.

On its website, Norfolk Southern said that the region's remote location and mountainous terrain, combined with the aftermath of the storm and flooding, has presented challenges in assessing damage along parts of the line near Asheville and over Black Mountain, where significant sections of track have been completely wiped out.

A section of track used for transporting coal, forest and consumer products like lumber, plywood and packaging sustained significant damage, with tens of thousands of feet of rail and multiple bridges destroyed.

While parts of the rail line near Old Fort, North Carolina, and east of Asheville have reopened, Norfolk Southern does not expect to reopen the stretch between Newport, Tennessee, and Asheville until late January 2025. There is no timeline for restoration at this point from Asheville to Old Fort.

The North Carolina Railroad company (NCR), a private corporation whose stock is entirely owned by the state of North Carolina, announced a disaster relief grant program to support communities in the state impacted by Hurricane Helene. The program will provide \$10 million in financial aid focused on repairing smaller Class II and Class III railroads.

Class II and Class III, or "short line," railroads are carriers that mainly operate in regional areas, linking industries and communities to larger Class I railroads. They play a crucial role in the supply chain by providing the "first mile" and "last mile" connections. The tracks that connected the cities and towns destroyed by Helene were carried away by the mud and

waters as well.

North Carolina A&T Chancellor James Martin, a civil engineer and geotechnical earthquake and risk engineering expert, warned that the devastation of the infrastructure in the Southern Appalachian and Blue Ridge Mountains will have global consequences.

"If you have folks that are coming to western North Carolina for trade and suddenly they have to route around the area and depend on other suppliers ... those effects are typically long-term and deep," Martin told Triad Business Journal.

He observed that the damage to the infrastructure in the region was not due to the quality or design but "based on a previous century's weather patterns," which have now changed and become unpredictable because of climate change.

While the state has shoveled hundreds of billions of dollars into funding for war and corporate subsidies, millions impacted by disasters like hurricanes Helene and Milton face severe deprivation, losing homes and possessions, and suffering the insufficient response from state and federal governments.



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