



Debris can still be found lining the waterways in western NC — pictured here is the entrance to the River Arts District in Asheville.

One Year After HELENE

Resilience in Western North Carolina

By: Jeanne Harmor, Director of Communications, NCFE

By the time this article is published, it will be almost nine months since Hurricane Helene descended on southern Appalachia and wreaked havoc on the land and its inhabitants. As time continues to pass, it's important that we don't forget this awful and unprecedented natural disaster. With the timing of this *TreeLine* issue, we felt it was an important opportunity to provide an update on the progress that has been made and the long road ahead for those in western NC.

The NCFE hosted its Western Regional Meeting in Canton in March. This annual meeting provided an opportunity to meet with members and share resources available for those affected by Helene. Through conversations with members, a brief tour of a salvage logging operation on the Biltmore Estate, and a drive through the River Arts District, one thing became very clear: western NC is resilient.

We interviewed several folks in the forestry community to gather their perspectives and illustrate the impacts of this natural disaster on our industry, communities, and more.

The Impact of a Storm

According to a damage appraisal prepared by the NC Forest Service in September 2024, an estimated 822,000 acres of North Carolina timberland received some level of damage during the storm, resulting in an estimated loss of \$214 million. The storm caused significant structural damage and widespread flooding and compromised public infrastructure, preventing access to roads, drinking water, and communication. A storm of this magnitude immediately impacted livelihoods and businesses across the region. We spoke with NCFE members who live and work in western NC to learn about the impacts to the forest industry and communities.



A handmade memorial and sign of strength adorns the entrance to the River Arts District in Asheville.



Stream restoration remains a key priority while western NC rebuilds. Pictured here is the Swannanoa River, where trees, cars, and various debris have been removed after the storm. The picture on the right shows the restoration efforts at the upper end of Black Mountain.



“When [the storm] hit, there was no communication, which is something we’ve never seen before,” said **Rene Taylor, procurement forester, Columbia Forest Products**. “The first thing [we] did was get in touch with our family members and staff. Everything was a mess. I live one county over in Tennessee, and it was three days before I could get back to NC. Once we all got our bearings, we went to work.”

Taylor shared that Columbia Forest Products sustained damage to its mill in Old Fort, and the company lost at least two weeks of production. The company still had a handful of contractors who were able to generate revenue, though they faced many challenges throughout the storm cleanup. Many roads were blocked, affecting log transportation and forcing the team to find alternate routes, meaning more gas needed to be used to get the job done. Taylor found himself in constant strategy mode, immediately pivoting whenever an issue presented itself, but he did what he could to adjust to an otherwise impossible situation.

Richard Sanders of Wildwood Consulting, LLC recalls the immediate impact of the storm.

“[It] threw us for a loop!” said Sanders. “[We] spent at least two weeks clearing public and private roads, helping our neighbors, and delivering fuel and water to people in our communities. We then shifted to addressing concerns for landowners. We received lots of calls from people who sustained timber damage on their properties, so we pivoted towards storm damage evaluation work, salvage harvests, and forest management plan updates.”

Sanders provides services to private

landowners and his company consists of forestry consultants, forestry-trained operations personnel, and a dozen crew members who write and execute forest management plans.

“We are still getting tons of calls — some aren’t sure who to call, so they call us,” said Sanders. “Today, our work is focused on log salvage projects and management plans. We’ve had to adjust many of these plans for our landowners due to storm damage and changes in the market. We’re doing what we can to ensure the successful growth of new stands on these properties and are taking proactive measures to protect their land from wildfires.”

Communities Join Forces

Through all our conversations about storm impact and progress, we couldn’t help but notice a recurring theme: community. Many have told us that communities have come together like they’ve never seen before.

“[It] was impressive since day one,” said **Tyson Edwards, procurement forester, Parton Lumber**. “Everyone came together to work [this] all out. There were months where loggers stopped logging to help their neighbors by putting in bridges for people and using their equipment to remove debris — they really helped people get back on their feet.”

“Everyone has a chainsaw, it turns out!” added Sanders. “It’s amazing how fast the roads were rebuilt and how fast resources arrived and were distributed. You see sawmills trying to help people salvage what they can, and loggers want to help landowners salvage what they can. Everyone was working together across property lines to collaborate and come together to do what needed to be done.”

During the recovery efforts, an unexpected tool turned out to be a lifesaver.

“I’ve never used social media before,”

said Taylor. “As it turns out, social media became one of our lifelines for figuring out what roads were open and when, what people were safe, what people were still missing, what resources to find and where, etc. It was a highly effective tool for communication.”

“It was amazing to see everyone coming together,” said **Jess Parton, procurement forester at Gilkey Lumber Company**. “Everybody chipped in to help in any way they could. We received calls from many people that I do business with outside of the affected storm area, wanting to know what they could do to help. We even hooked a generator up to our office and had people come in to use the water. We did what we could to give back to those in our community.”



Challenges Facing the Industry

Given the magnitude of the timberland damage, storm debris is an ongoing challenge. As trees remain on the ground, there is an elevated risk of wildfires and disturbances to the surrounding ecosystems. Forestry professionals are working quickly to clean up as much timber as possible, but there are only so many loggers with the necessary equipment, and the challenges continue regarding supply and demand.

“One of the biggest hits on the logging side is that Helene has created an oversupply of logs to the mills, and we’ve lost some mills in western NC,” said **Scott Page, owner, Page Sawmill and Forest Products**. “Mills that are still running now must have quotas due to the oversupply, and it is very odd to have quotas in the wintertime.”

Right after Helene devastated the area, Page and his crew went to work salvaging as many logs as possible and remained committed to cleanup in several nearby neighborhoods, helping to alleviate the stress of many landowners whose acres were affected. Salvage logging, compared to normal logging, is a very dangerous, slow-moving operation — even with the right equipment, the process is arduous.

“From a production standpoint, salvage logging is a much slower process, and you lose production along the way,” said Page.



“There is a lot of risk and danger involved with salvage logging, and you need to be extra careful on the roads as you’re hauling away timber that has been entangled.”

“The main difference between normal logging and salvage logging is having to deal with the root balls on trees, which is incredibly dangerous,” Taylor added. “Some areas have trees stacked up and all twisted, so it is difficult to untangle and safely cut them.”

“One logger described salvage logging like a field of mouse traps — you don’t know when a tree is going to snap,” said Parton. “Additionally, much of the fallen timber can be found on steep or rough terrain, which is exceptionally risky to salvage, even with mechanized equipment.”

When the terrain is steep, timber is typically not salvageable, and even if it is, it’s extremely dangerous. In these cases, loggers weigh the pros and cons of whether it’s worth the time to clean it up or better to let it decay.

Because of the dangers and low production associated with salvage logging, some loggers have discontinued logging and have focused on helping their communities in other ways. While the logging business is slow, Page and his crew have pivoted their time and resources to stream restoration efforts instead.

“[We] saw FEMA trucks come through to clean up the right of ways, and that’s when we met some folks from Michigan who were doing some stream restoration work on a contract in our area,” said Page. “Our team had the equipment needed to pull debris out of the waterways, and now we are doing this full time. Once this contract is up, we will go back to salvaging timber.”

A Ticking Clock

As we head into the summer months with high temperatures and increased wildfire danger, there are additional factors impacting the ability to salvage downed timber, including a shortage of available logging resources, lack of mills with the capacity to receive the salvaged logs, and an evolving forest products market tied to an economy whose future is unknown.

“There are hundreds of thousands of trees on the ground — there is absolutely no way we can get to them all,” said Edwards. “Even if the logs didn’t have an expiration date, we couldn’t get to them. We have a shortage of loggers across the country, especially in western NC. I estimate that in the first six months since Helene, our logging force may have salvaged 5-10% of the fallen timber.”

As time passes, trees that are attached to their roots will start degrading, but those on the ground will suffer as well. Timber will begin to rot, stain, and eventually decay. Once the logs dry out and start turning blue, they are no longer marketable, and companies lose scale in what they purchased by ordering these logs that were once viable.

So, how much time do we have left until the remaining timber isn’t salvageable? Opinions on this vary, but all agree that time is of the essence.

“My opinion is that we have until the end of summer — we don’t have enough resources to salvage it all,” said Taylor.

“I feel like we have more time than people think,” said Parton. “If you look at the timber across Tennessee, South Carolina, and North Carolina, it’s important to look at factors like a tree’s roots and where they are. Most of the timber has been uprooted; some might leaf out if enough of its roots are in the ground. It also depends on the summer we



Example of a salvage logging site. These images show an affected area that still needs to be cleaned up.

have. If we can make it past the summer, the cooler temperatures will help with the longevity of the timber we have left.”

Looking Ahead

What do the next six, 12, and 18 months look like in terms of recovery?

“In terms of timber markets, we can still get white pine out because it is not stained yet; poplar will last longer. Markets are flooded with salvaged logs right now — we need to move these through the market and then we can start managing unimpacted stands,” said Sanders. “In six months, we should be done with salvaged pine, in 12 months we should be done with poplar, and then we can hopefully



get back to our planned timber harvests. Right now, [we] are not focused on timber harvests that are not a result of the storm.”

“We still have a long way to go — the next six months will be similar to the first six months,” said Parton. “Quotas and other factors out of [our] control will slow us down, and then the next 12-18 months will be a challenge. From a cruising and pricing standpoint, I’ll be fighting this until the end of my career. From a normalcy standpoint, we will continue to see progress being made, but it will be years before we see a difference. Some places will never be the same.”

“The biggest part of the debris cleanup should be winding down at the 12-18 months mark, but the renovations of homes and buildings will take years,” said Page. “Multiple people who are still without homes will need to relocate and start from scratch.”

Hope and Resilience Lead the Long Road Ahead

Despite the immense tragedy our friends in western NC have faced, we see a region of individuals who have demonstrated remarkable tenacity and a commitment to their communities. The landscape in



western NC will never be the same, but every day communities are taking steps to clean up and rebuild. Progress is already felt and seen by many who pass through.

“There has been tremendous progress on the roads and bridges that were damaged — it has been amazing to see the infrastructure repaired and how quickly Interstate 40 was reopened,” said Parton.

IF YOU DO NOT LIVE IN WESTERN NC AND/OR HAVEN'T VISITED SINCE HELENE, OUR FORESTRY EXPERTS HAVE SHARED THE FOLLOWING REGARDING ITS RECOVERY.

“ [It] will never be the same, but we’ll be fine. The scars in the built environment and the woods will be here forever, but [we] are moving forward.” — *Richard Sanders*

“ North Carolina is never going to be the same [as] pre-Helene, from businesses and homes completely washed away, timber down, and whole mountainsides completely on the ground with timber. Pictures on the news do not do it justice. You can still see storm damage everywhere you go. We’ve come a long way with roadside and stream restoration cleanup. Until you lay eyes on it and see it, you don’t know what it was really like.” — *Tyson Edwards*

“ The pictures don’t do it justice. Prepare yourself — you think you know what you’re about to see, but you can’t put it into comprehension until you see it. There are water lines up above people’s windows and doors — it’s eye-opening. It’s hard to fathom until you see the evidence of it. There are some areas that will never be the same.” — *Jess Parton*

“ The biggest thing is to realize that there is still a lot to do. There is no short-term fix. It will take years to get back to normalcy and the lifestyles we are used to.” — *Scott Page*

“ It’s going to be years until we are back to normal. Many still don’t have homes. Many organizations are focused on getting houses for these folks, getting materials for people who need it. There is a housing need that will be this way for years to come. If you are a general contractor and can rebuild homes, consider volunteering.” — *Rene Taylor*

Left: An example of an area needing debris removal. This shows three separate houses that sustained damage from Helene. The houses are positioned next to Flat Creek, which flows from Montreat into the Swannanoa River at Black Mountain.



Logging crews are working every day to clean up fallen timber. There is only so much time left until the logs are no longer marketable.



“There has been absolute devastation to the area, but there have been resources from everywhere, including supplies, campers, housing, internet, clothing, etc.,” said Page. “It was overwhelming watching the people who came in from all over to help.”

And, just like forests, the people of western NC are naturally resilient. ■

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If you are a landowner and you're interested to learn if you are eligible for disaster assistance programs, visit this Farm Service Agency website.

