



Governor's Advisory Committee on Western North Carolina Recovery

June 22, 2026

10:00 am – 12:00 pm

Today's Agenda

Call to Order, Introductory Remarks | *Senator Kevin Corbin, Co-Chair*

FEMA North Carolina Recovery Office | *Jordan Rink, Director, North Carolina Recovery Office*

Disaster Communications & Communications Resiliency Planning | *Sara Nichols, Energy & Economic Development Manager, Land of Sky Regional Council; Major Kevin Owens, North Carolina State Highway Patrol*

Remarks / *Governor Josh Stein*

Governor Stein's Federal Helene Request | *Forrest Gilliam, Legislative Director, GROW NC*

Tourism Recovery Efforts / *Marlise Taylor, Tourism Research Director, Visit NC; Kelly Jones, Director, Mitchell County Tourism Development Authority*

Recovery Updates / *Matt Calabria & Emily Gangi, GROW NC*

Next Steps / *Matt Calabria, GROW NC*

Adjourn





FEMA North Carolina Recovery Office

Jordan Rink, Director



North Carolina Helene Recovery By The Numbers



FEMA



\$5 Billion



\$2.2B
for recovery projects



\$2.6B
Funded in Direct Federal
Assistance for debris

\$3.1 B



Mission Assignments



Direct Housing

243 found long-term solution
71 purchased FEMA unit



\$566.8M

Assistance to households



\$219M

Flood Insurance
payments

FEMA Public Assistance Reimbursements

- More than \$2 billion in Public Assistance provided to date
- Nearly \$350 million of that obligated in the past few weeks
- Approaching 3,000 recovery projects



Joint Field Office (JFO) Transition to NC Recovery Office (NCRO)

- All functions operative
- Roughly 350 deployed personnel
- Collaboration with Region 4 in Atlanta
- Looking forward



Voluntary Agency Liaisons and Community Liaisons

Voluntary Agency Liaisons

- Helped with food, housing, transportation
- Referrals to long-term recovery groups
- Participated in almost 600 meetings

Community Liaisons

- Link between FEMA and the community
- Strategically located
- Assisted over 4,000 survivors





Disaster Communications & Communications Resiliency Planning

Regional Communications Resilience Plan
Sara Nichols, Land of Sky Regional Council

VIPER System
Major Kevin Owens, NC State Highway Patrol



WNC Regional Communications Resiliency Plan

Land of Sky Region: Buncombe, Henderson, Madison, and Transylvania
Counties

Draft June 2026

Recovery → Resilience

WNC REGIONAL COMMUNICATIONS RESILIENCY PLAN

Land of Sky Region: Buncombe, Henderson, Madison, and Transylvania Counties
January 2026



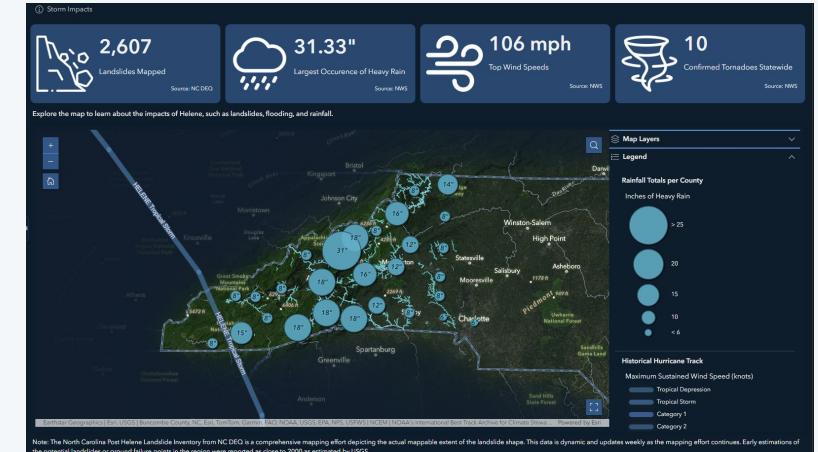
Prepared in partnership with Land of Sky Regional Council
Prepared by: The Ruckus Group LLC
& Information Technology Disaster Resource Center

The core message for recovery leaders

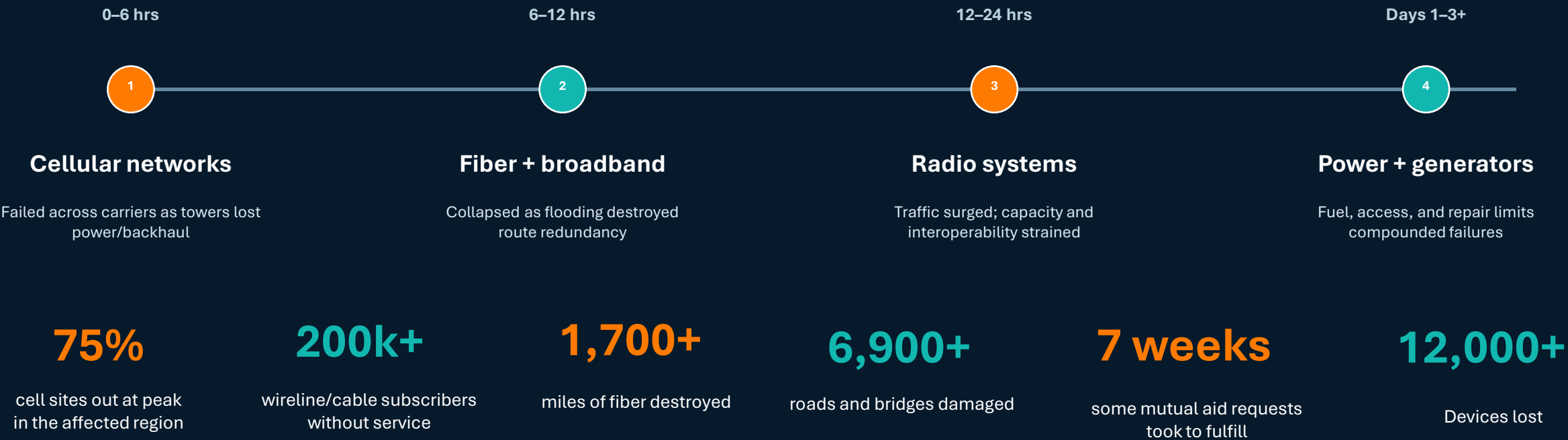
Helene did not create the communications gap. It exposed and accelerated it.

Communications resilience is now recovery infrastructure.

- Residents could not call for help, receive alerts, refill prescriptions, or reach trusted information.
- Emergency managers and providers were forced into manual, low-information response.
- The most damaging failures appeared at the seams between systems, sectors, and jurisdictions.
- The plan gives the state a locally validated roadmap for investment, coordination, and accountability.



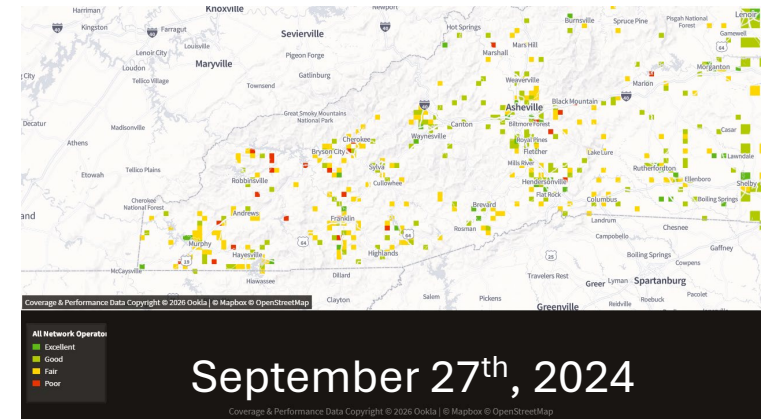
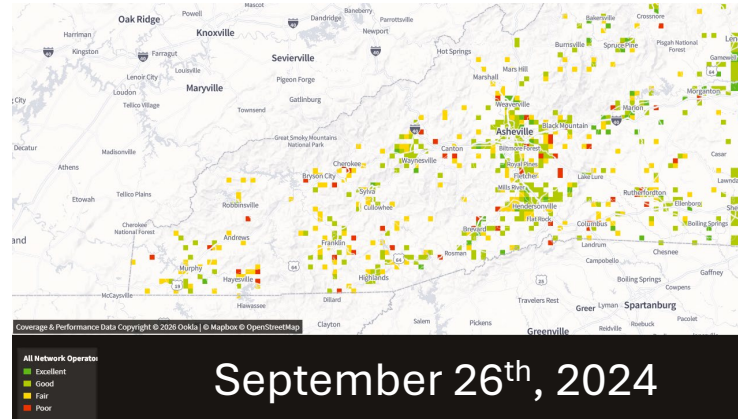
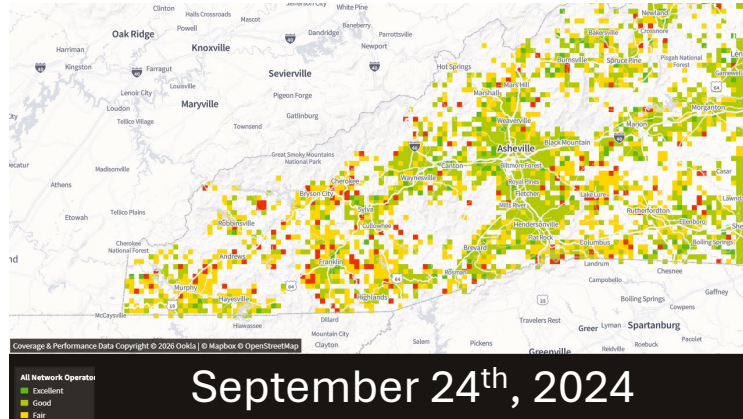
What Helene exposed: every redundancy path failed



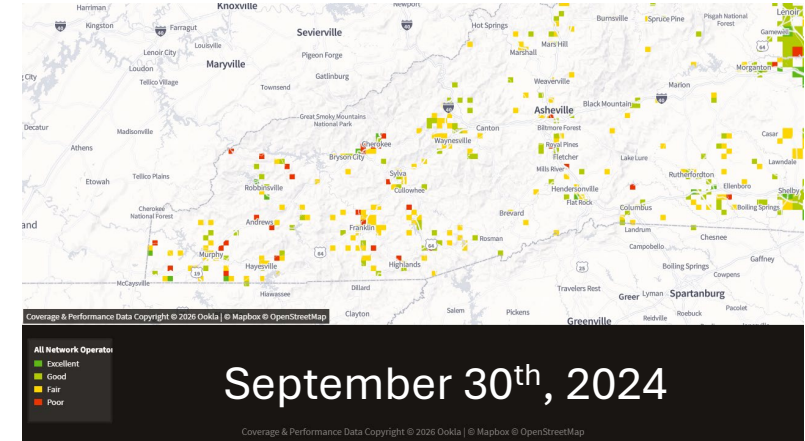
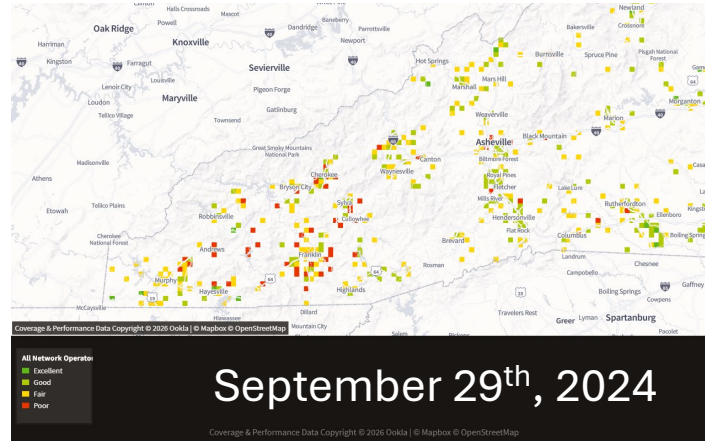
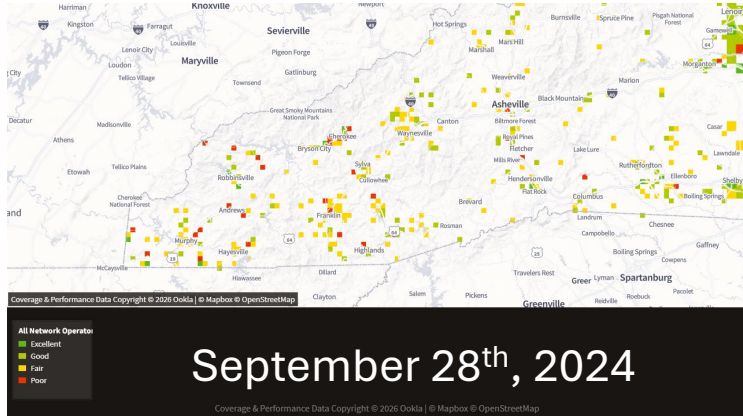
The sequence mattered: cellular failed, broadband collapsed, radio systems overloaded, and power/fuel constraints compounded all other failures.



Stakeholders described a cascading loss of capacity, not an isolated outage.



Research note: As time from storm increased from storm in first 7 days, connectivity shifted.



The WestNGN Partnership Response

Problem	Partnership Support	Outcome
Damaged Broadband Infrastructure	ISPs, ITDRC, NCDIT	5+ providers coordinated with, helped with staff/materials for projects, advocated with state for resources
Damaged Cell Sites	Cell companies, ITDRC	3+ cell companies brought portables to region, ITDRC COWS deployment, coordinated cell approach
Widespread lack of WIFI with other community needs (food, water, medical, etc.)	ITDRC, government, NGOs, citizens, leaders, churches, NDIA, schools	175 ITDRC sites ticketed, 300 sites served
Communications and data collection for where WIFI and other resources are	IEI, Friday Institute	Built a public WIFI map with 140 resources
Lost devices to storm or lost job with device	CDE, E2D, Kramden, WinstonNet, Through the Trees	Over 1,000 devices distributed, ~1,500 participants
Communications not functional without power	Footprint Project, Critical Services Microgrid, NCSEA	Over 49 sites deployed

Built from direct stakeholder experience

113 stakeholders across four counties and three sectors shaped the plan.



Emergency Management

EM, fire, EMS, law enforcement, 911, IT operations

Industry

Telecom, broadband, ISPs, utilities, restoration partners

Community

Healthcare, nonprofits, faith groups, resident advocates

Severity Profile Comparison by Stakeholder Group



Severity scoring averaged 4.2 / 5.0 across dimensions, signaling severe to critical impacts.

- Findings grounded primarily in stakeholder testimony.
- Quantitative data used to validate and contextualize what participants reported.
- Findings translated into 8 goals and 41 actionable solutions.

Five themes explain the system-level failure

1 Cellular over-dependence

Routine operations relied heavily on cell service with inadequate backups.

2 Interface fragility

Failures concentrated at system seams: local/state, public/private, cellular/landline.

3 Geographic and population inequality

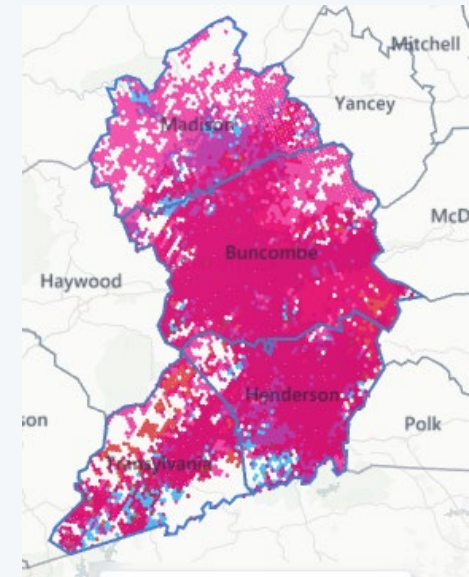
Rural mountain terrain extended outages and limited infrastructure options. Language and population disparities.

4 Coordination as multiplier

Strong coordination reduced harm; weak coordination amplified technical failure.

5 Innovation capacity

Field teams improvised; the plan should organize and scale that ingenuity.



These themes point to regional solutions, not one-off equipment purchases.

Communications failure became a health and safety emergency

The plan identifies communications resilience as an equity issue, especially for residents with high social vulnerability. Across the disaster declared counties 577,000 residents had high social vulnerability.



Deaf / hard of hearing

Lost access to video relay, captions, and text alerts



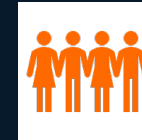
Non-English speakers

Could not consistently reach trusted bilingual information



Medically fragile residents

Lost contact with providers and care teams



Older and rural residents

Became effectively invisible without digital or transportation alternatives

Structural gap: Communities had almost no communications infrastructure they could control independently of commercial networks.

Key Finding: Community Connectivity doesn't begin and end at infrastructure- lost devices, lack of digital skills, and technology diversity all play a role.

HABRI- Hazard-Adjusted Broadband Reliability Index

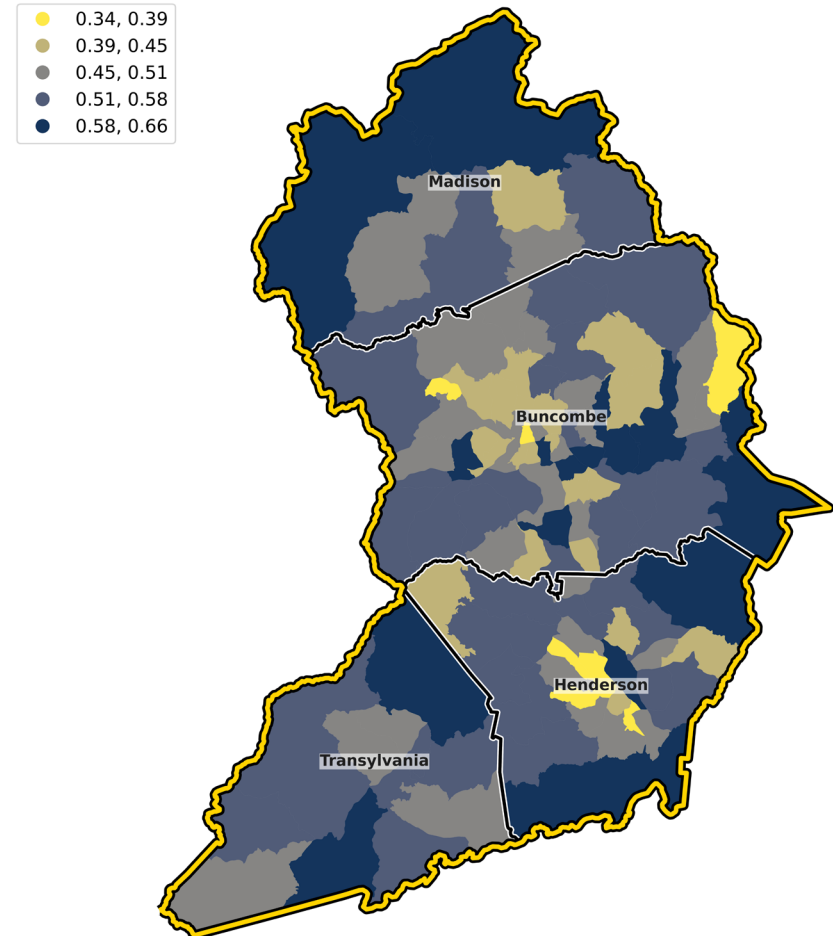
HABRI is a composite risk score that identifies which communities are most likely to lose phone and internet service during a natural disaster. It produces a score between 0 and 1 for each census tract in the state, where higher scores indicate greater risk of prolonged communications failure.

How the Score Is Calculated

HABRI combines three sub-indices, each measuring a distinct dimension of risk:

- Hazard Exposure (40% of score)
- Infrastructure Fragility (35% of score)
- Coping Capacity Deficit (25% of score)

HABRI Composite



The plan translates findings into 41 actionable solutions

1 Redundant systems

2 Cross-agency coordination

3 Technology access + training

4 Pre-disaster alerts

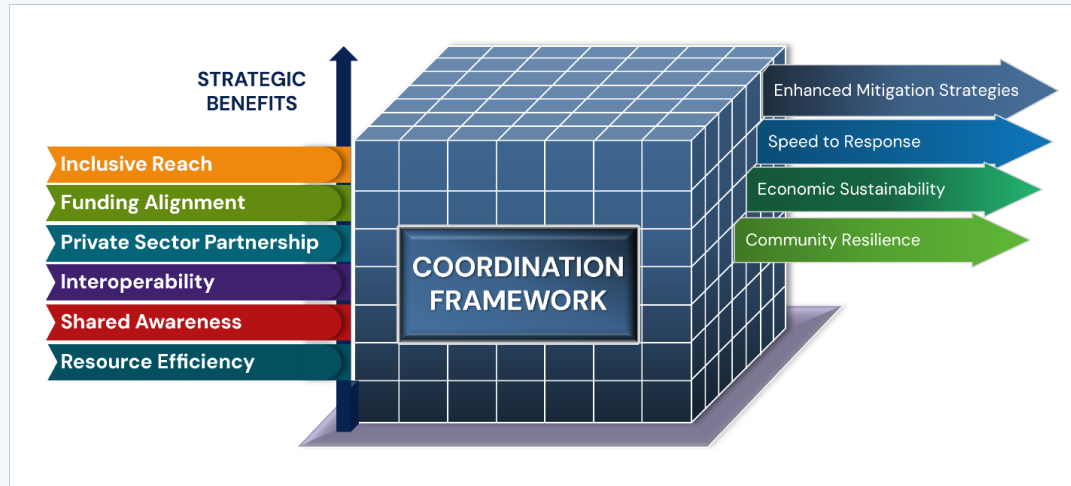
5 Resilience hubs and Community Access

6 Infrastructure hardening

7 Regulatory + policy

8 Monitoring + improvement

Central recommendation: build the framework, not just the equipment



Regional Emergency Communications Coordination Framework

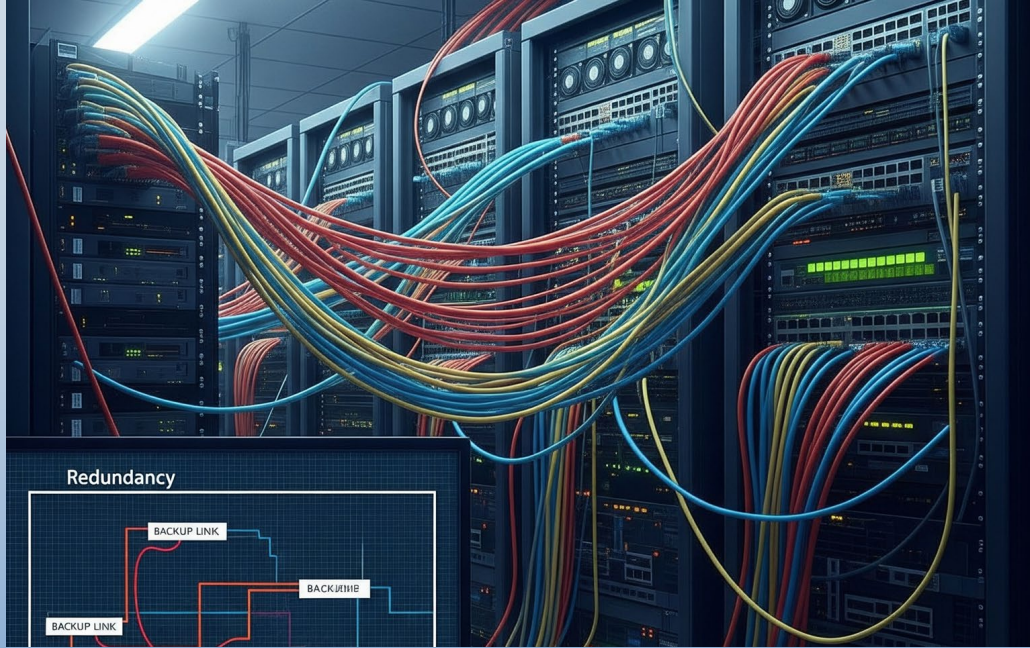
- Preserves county autonomy while creating a shared operating structure.
- Aligns infrastructure, hubs, training, policy, funding, and private-sector partnership.
- Creates a forum for continuous learning and shared accountability.
- Enables unified state and federal funding asks.

Framework ≠ Working Group

The framework is the system: governance, protocols, mutual aid, training, and improvement processes.

The working group is the body: county, industry, emergency management, and community representatives who implement and sustain it.

Goal 1



Redundant Communication Systems

Stakeholder process identified single points of failure in fiber infrastructure systems, incompatible radio systems between jurisdictions, 700 MHz capacity systems, and non-dedicated platforms with personal device usage. Stakeholders mentioned backups to traditional service (cellular and fiber), to include satellite and radio options.

Goal Objective

Ensure continuous connectivity for critical sites through power, fiber, and communication redundancy

Action Steps

- Conduct a comprehensive audit of communications infrastructure such as fiber, towers, and radios to map redundancy gaps. Develop an Infrastructure redundancy database and resilient site network.
- Develop regional standards for emergency radios with interoperability protocols
- Accelerate Phase 2 P25 implementation across all counties
- Install multiple SIM cards in emergency vehicles for carrier redundancy
- Create resilient communications fleet to be added to mobile beehive
- Add redundant communication systems (such as satellite) to resiliency hubs, and train hosts on diverse equipment
- Install redundant power solutions (solar microgrids, battery storage, or generator systems) for each primary and secondary communication site
- Pursue state and federal funding (FEMA, USDA, RUS, ARC POWER) for communications hardening projects

Goal 2



Cross-Agency Coordination

Stakeholder process identified fragmented communication between partners, disconnection between neighboring districts, no unified resource request system, lack of shared lists/priorities, and unable to integrate mutual aid. Minimal awareness to overall scale and impact resulting in conflicting priorities and unfulfilled resource requests.

Goal Objective

WNC needs a unified regional coordination framework for emergency communications across counties and sectors.

Action Steps

- Form WNC Regional Emergency Communications Working Group
- Develop mutual aid and protocol-sharing agreements between counties
- Create shared incident communication dashboard (NC211, WebEOC, mobile friendly)
- Program neighboring county frequencies into all radio systems
- Deploy national interoperability channels
- Maintain a unified regional contact directory, inclusive of community partners, updated quarterly for all emergency communications leads.

Goal 3



Expand Technology Access and Training

Stakeholder process identified needs for additional and awareness on available technology, limited access in rural areas, and limited capacity to maintain keep up with evolving technology updates.

Goal Objective

Develop workforce capacity and technology upgrades to sustain operational readiness. Create systems that enable citizen preparedness by access to broadband access and devices.

Action Steps

- Inventory all department level technology assets
- Provide quarterly training and drills on communications tools
- Implement “Manual Mondays” and “Fail Safe Fridays” to test backup systems
- Reinvest in shared county LMR infrastructure to replace aging equipment
- Develop PACE planning for all agencies as a shared resource library
- Deploy mobile charging/signal-boost units for field operations
- Create shared equipment caches such as laptops, hot spots, access points, satellite equipment to be deployed for emergency needs

Goal 4



Enhance Public Messaging Systems and Accessibility

Stakeholder process identified needs for additional awareness for everyone, with additional emphasis on hard to reach populations. There was no offline distribution method, inconsistency among counties, and vulnerable populations not receiving timely information.

Goal Objective

Establish multi-modal, multilingual, and redundant public communication systems to ensure accurate and widely distributed information dissemination.

Action Steps

- Develop standardized regional templates for emergency alerts and community updates in English and Spanish
- Create pre-positioned communication templates and information distribution protocols
- Integrate plain-language communication across all public messaging efforts, with language integration
- Pilot community-led communication relays using trusted community partners
- Build partnerships with local media, schools, faith organizations for alert relay
- Create rural communication relay networks using trusted community organizations and libraries.
- Implement redundant message delivery platforms, including text, radio, bulletin boards, and analog backups.

Goal 5



Develop Resilience Hubs and Community Access Points

Stakeholder process identified community lack of power, connectivity, or reliable information. These community networks became lifelines when broadband failed.

Goal Objective

Establish physical and digital resilience hubs that will be enabled for life saving communication capabilities.

Action Steps

- Build resilience hubs with solar, satellite internet, WiFi, charging
- Establish mesh networks for local connectivity
- Create standards for hubs to be approved as digital access resiliency sites- to include devices, public access, and training
- Educate community about diverse mesh network options such as meshtastic and passpoint
- Deploy assistive technology for deaf/hard-of-hearing populations
- Train and deploy language translation tools at resiliency hubs
- Map and publish community communication hub locations
- Integrate amateur radio capabilities at hubs

Goal 6



Harden Infrastructure Access and Resiliency

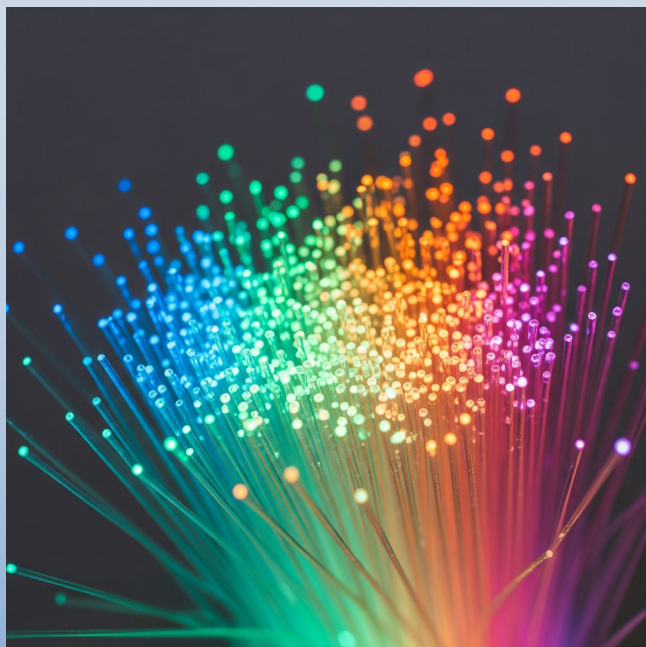
Stakeholders identified that redundancy doesn't just mean more fiber—it means independent routes, power, and people ready to keep them up.

Goal Objective

Critical communication infrastructure remains exposed to environmental hazards, limited redundancy, and restricted accessibility. Middle-mile gaps impede equitable connectivity to anchor institutions.

Action Steps

- Elevate generators above flood levels
- Standardize fuel types (transition propane to diesel where appropriate) increase access to solar powered microgrids
- Create diverse fiber routing with multiple paths
- Enhance data center resilience with alternative cooling systems
- Provide resources to middle mile providers to extend fiber lines to community anchor institutions and other critical facilities
- Own and Pre-position mobile assets (COWs, COLTs, CRDs)
- Rebuild with resiliency in mind- increase buried infrastructure, built against flood pathways or out of the way of climate disasters
- Add towers to increase cellular and emergency management network capacity
- Educate public on respect for fiber to avoid unnecessary breaks to equipment
- Continue deployment of broadband infrastructure to unserved/underserved areas



Advance Regulatory and Policy Alignment

Stakeholders identified that they had equipment and resources ready to implement, but permitting, policies, or lack of coordination delayed critical hours. Access to resources needs to be accessible to providers, government, citizens, and community organizations.

Goal Objective

Establish policy framework that removes barriers to resources accessibility, delays in implementation, and increases relevant parties to respond to urgent community connectivity needs.

Action Steps

- Streamline emergency permitting for rapid deployment
- Develop utility coordination protocols for power restoration
- Advocate for federal/state broadband funding to require emergency redundancy
- Include communications resilience in all emergency plans
- Create emergency fuel access agreements
- Work with utilities/providers to bury lines or create fast-repair corridors
- Reduce digital access dependency for resource access such as FEMA assistance
- Create broadband provider resource access such as emergency funding for materials
- Create urgent access policies that get people online faster, such as a disaster affordability program and device distribution

Goal 8



Implement Monitoring and Continuous Improvement Frameworks

Stakeholders identified that while they may have previously felt prepared, things are constantly changing and we need to measure and adjust to avoid the same failures.

Goal Objective

Create ongoing evaluation and adaptive learning to ensure communication resilience investments remain effective as technologies and risks evolve.

Action Steps

- Conduct annual regional communications resiliency surveys
- Run post-incident debriefs with all stakeholder groups
- Establish communication system performance metrics
- Create quarterly progress reporting
- Update plans annually based on lessons learned
- Publish findings regionally for continuous improvement

Implementation roadmap: build the foundation, then scale



The early work is relatively low-cost but high-leverage: governance, shared awareness, and disciplined redundancy planning.

Where the Governor's Advisory Committee can accelerate recovery

1. Recognize communications resilience as recovery infrastructure

Treat communications assets, hubs, alerts, power, broadband infrastructure, cellular connectivity, and backhaul as essential to health, safety, economic recovery, and continuity of government.

Broadband Recovery Program **\$50M IN FUNDING**

to Rebuild Broadband Infrastructure
Destroyed by Hurricane Helene in
Western North Carolina

Applications Due November 24

MONDAY, NOVEMBER 3, 2025

Governor Josh Stein Announces \$50 Million Broadband Recovery Program to Rebuild High-Speed Internet Infrastructure in Western North Carolina

Broadband providers with infrastructure projects in the 39 counties designated under a disaster declaration for Hurricane Helene, including the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians, may apply for the \$50 million in funding for reconstruction or repair broadband infrastructure needed to connect residents, businesses and community institutions to reliable high-speed internet.

2. Fund the foundation first

Support a Framework Coordinator, regional infrastructure audit, and PACE training/planning before fragmented equipment purchases.

3. Align state programs around a regional roadmap

Connect NCEM, NCDIT/Broadband, VIPER, utilities, industry, hazard mitigation, community orgs, and recovery funding to the same priorities.

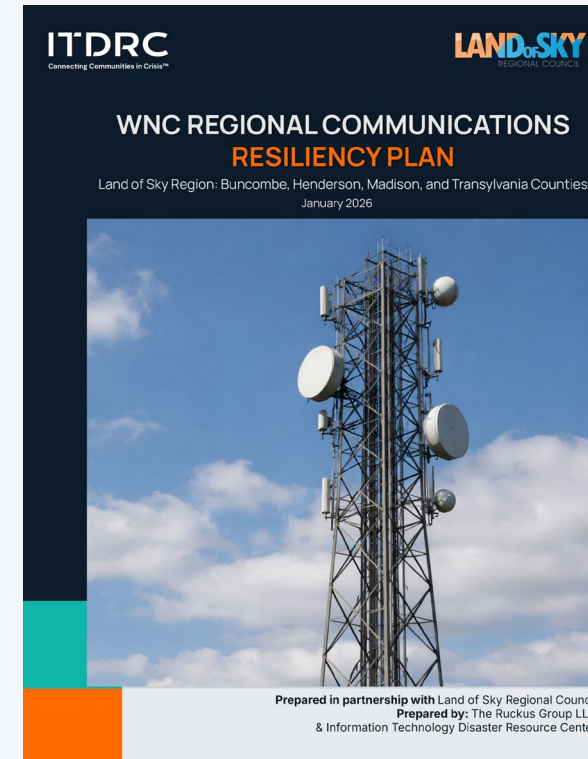
4. Remove avoidable policy friction

Streamline emergency permitting, utility coordination, access, fuel logistics, and temporary communications deployments.

Closing: recovery is the moment to build resilience

A resilient communications system is one where some form of communication remains possible even when primary systems fail.

- Helene exposed region-wide vulnerabilities that no county can solve alone.
- The plan provides a shared analytical basis, a coordination framework, and a phased roadmap.
- State alignment can turn lessons learned into durable public safety, health, and economic resilience.



Questions and Involvement

**Sara Nichols, Land of Sky Regional Council
Energy and Economic Development Program Manager**

sara@landofsky.org

**Rodney Cooper, ITDRC
Director of Technical Programs and Operations**

rcooper@itdrc.org

ResilientWNC@itdrc.org





VIPER Network

Major Kevin Owens

North Carolina State Highway Patrol

Director of Communications, IT and Logistics Operations

VIPER BASICS

- VIPER (Voice Interoperability for Emergency Responders) established 2004
- VIPER is the Largest Communication System of its kind in North America. (2nd Largest in the entire world)
- System currently has approximately 220,000 Users
- Operates on Project 25 (P25) Phase II digital trunked radio with APCO-25 standard, facilitating encrypted and interoperable voice communication.
- Statewide system divided into four geographic zones (Central, Western, Eastern, and Piedmont)
- Links EMS units, hospitals and health centers. Facilitates seamless statewide medical communications.
- Designed for interoperable emergency communications among police, fire, EMS, and medical facilities.
- Backed by hundreds of RF sites and dynamic Zone structuring for resilience.

VIPER Network Overview

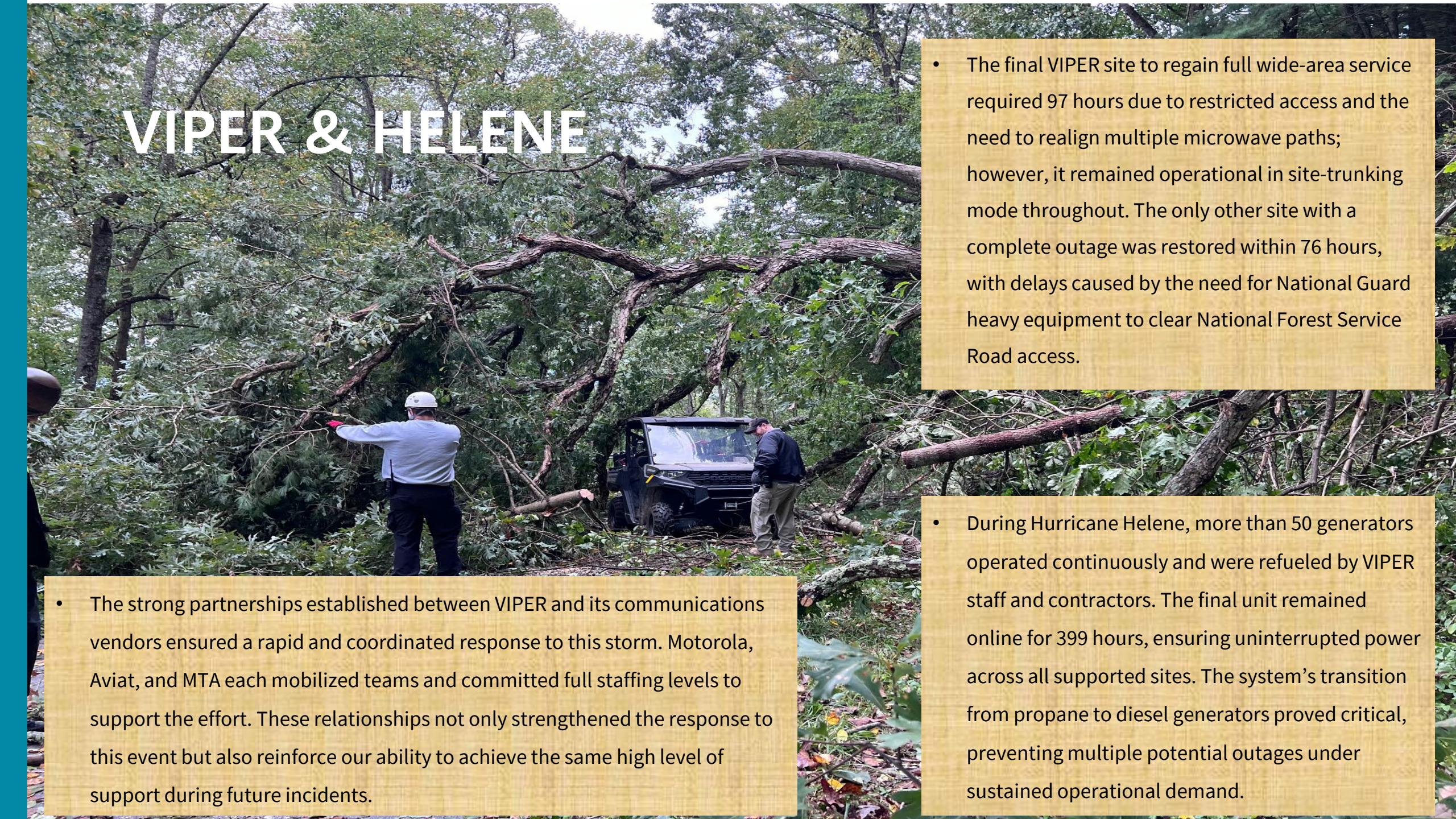
- VIPER has completed construction of the final tower among the 241 sites funded by the legislature. The original system design identified these 241 sites as necessary to achieve 95% in-street coverage across the state. The final site, located on Hawshaw Mountain in Avery County, became operational on 14 August 2025.
- Given the continued exponential growth in system users and the increasing reliance placed on VIPER by state, county, city, and federal partners, expansion of the system's current coverage has become essential.

VIPER & HELENE



- During the first week of Hurricane Helene, the North Carolina State Highway Patrol deployed three helicopters to conduct rapid aerial assessments of VIPER tower infrastructure, identify access obstructions, and confirm the operational status of microwave paths. These flights provided real-time situational awareness to field technicians and Emergency Operations Center staff, allowing maintenance crews to be directed to the most critical sites first.
- Throughout the event, VIPER communications engineers, technicians, and network support staff operated on extended duty cycles—coordinating generator refueling, monitoring site health, reallocating channel resources, and managing traffic loads as system demand surged. Field teams conducted on-site diagnostics, cleared debris from equipment shelters, and restored microwave alignment under constrained access and hazardous conditions.
- The North Carolina National Guard reported that, without the VIPER system, inter-agency coordination would have been significantly limited, restricting them to one mission at a time. With VIPER operational, the Guard was able to synchronize multiple simultaneous missions, including search-and-rescue operations, logistics transport, high-water evacuations, and infrastructure assessments across multiple counties.

VIPER & HELENE



- The strong partnerships established between VIPER and its communications vendors ensured a rapid and coordinated response to this storm. Motorola, Aviat, and MTA each mobilized teams and committed full staffing levels to support the effort. These relationships not only strengthened the response to this event but also reinforce our ability to achieve the same high level of support during future incidents.

- The final VIPER site to regain full wide-area service required 97 hours due to restricted access and the need to realign multiple microwave paths; however, it remained operational in site-trunking mode throughout. The only other site with a complete outage was restored within 76 hours, with delays caused by the need for National Guard heavy equipment to clear National Forest Service Road access.

- During Hurricane Helene, more than 50 generators operated continuously and were refueled by VIPER staff and contractors. The final unit remained online for 399 hours, ensuring uninterrupted power across all supported sites. The system's transition from propane to diesel generators proved critical, preventing multiple potential outages under sustained operational demand.

- During the first week of the storm, VIPER served as the primary means of communication for many agencies across the state.
- Numerous county PSAPs rerouted 911 calls to centers in Eastern North Carolina due to storm impacts.
- VIPER provided the **only** reliable method for local first responders to communicate with those receiving PSAPs.
- Without VIPER, many agencies would have had no functional link to the PSAPs managing their emergency calls.
- NCEM deployed Starlink and satellite phones to impacted areas, which helped reduce system loading on VIPER.
- In many regions, **VIPER, Starlink, satellite phones, and amateur radio** were the only available forms of communication for days to weeks.



VIPER & HELENE

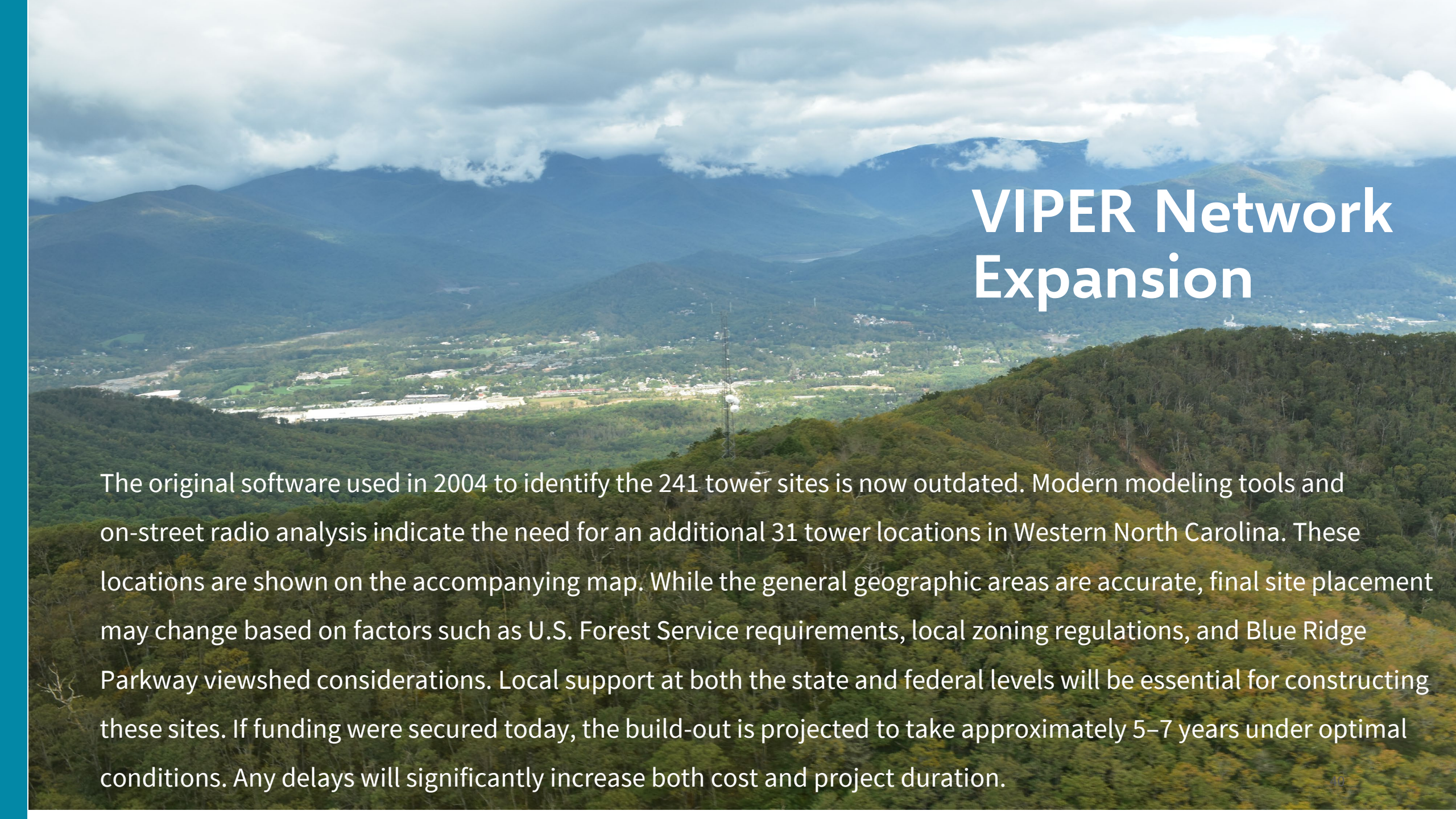
- **VIPER, Starlink, Satellite Phones and HAM Radios** all served the purpose of improving communications and worked to complement rather than compete with each other during this catastrophic event.

VIPER System Statistics

- VIPER System Usage vs Busy Statistics 9-23-2024 through 10-09-2024
 - Zone 2 (Newton/West) Area - Total Calls processed on VIPER – 2,929,944
 - Total Buses returned 172,926 Total busy percentage 5.9%.
- All Zones combined – Total Calls processed on VIPER – 6,548,561
 - Total Buses returned 173,733 Total busy percentage 2.65%.



VIPER & HELENE

The background image is a landscape photograph showing a valley with a telecommunications tower in the foreground, surrounded by dense green forest. In the distance, there are rolling mountain ranges under a sky with scattered white and grey clouds. The title 'VIPER Network Expansion' is overlaid on the right side of the image in a large, white, sans-serif font.

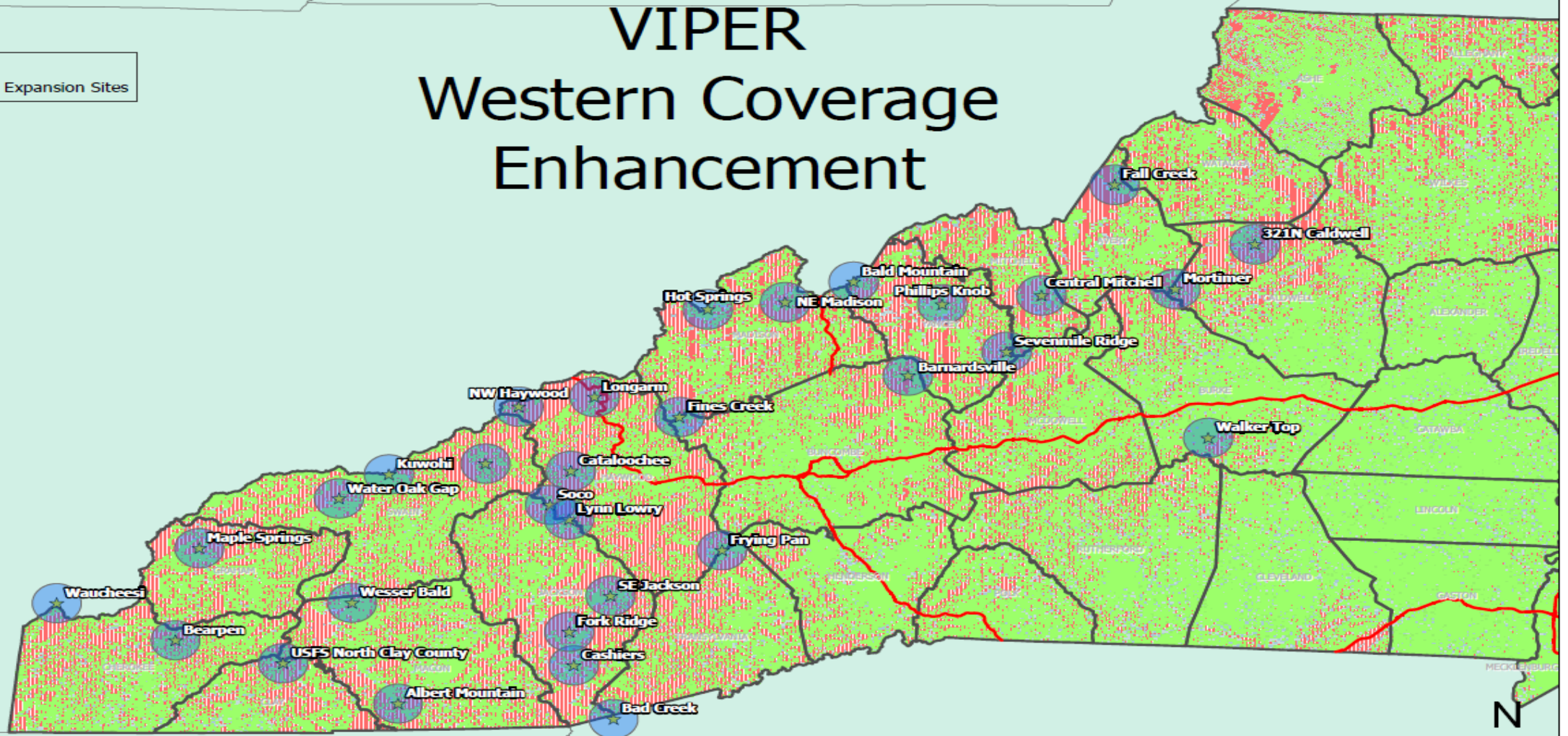
VIPER Network Expansion

The original software used in 2004 to identify the 241 tower sites is now outdated. Modern modeling tools and on-street radio analysis indicate the need for an additional 31 tower locations in Western North Carolina. These locations are shown on the accompanying map. While the general geographic areas are accurate, final site placement may change based on factors such as U.S. Forest Service requirements, local zoning regulations, and Blue Ridge Parkway viewshed considerations. Local support at both the state and federal levels will be essential for constructing these sites. If funding were secured today, the build-out is projected to take approximately 5–7 years under optimal conditions. Any delays will significantly increase both cost and project duration.

VIPER

Western Coverage Enhancement

Legend
— Proposed Expansion Sites

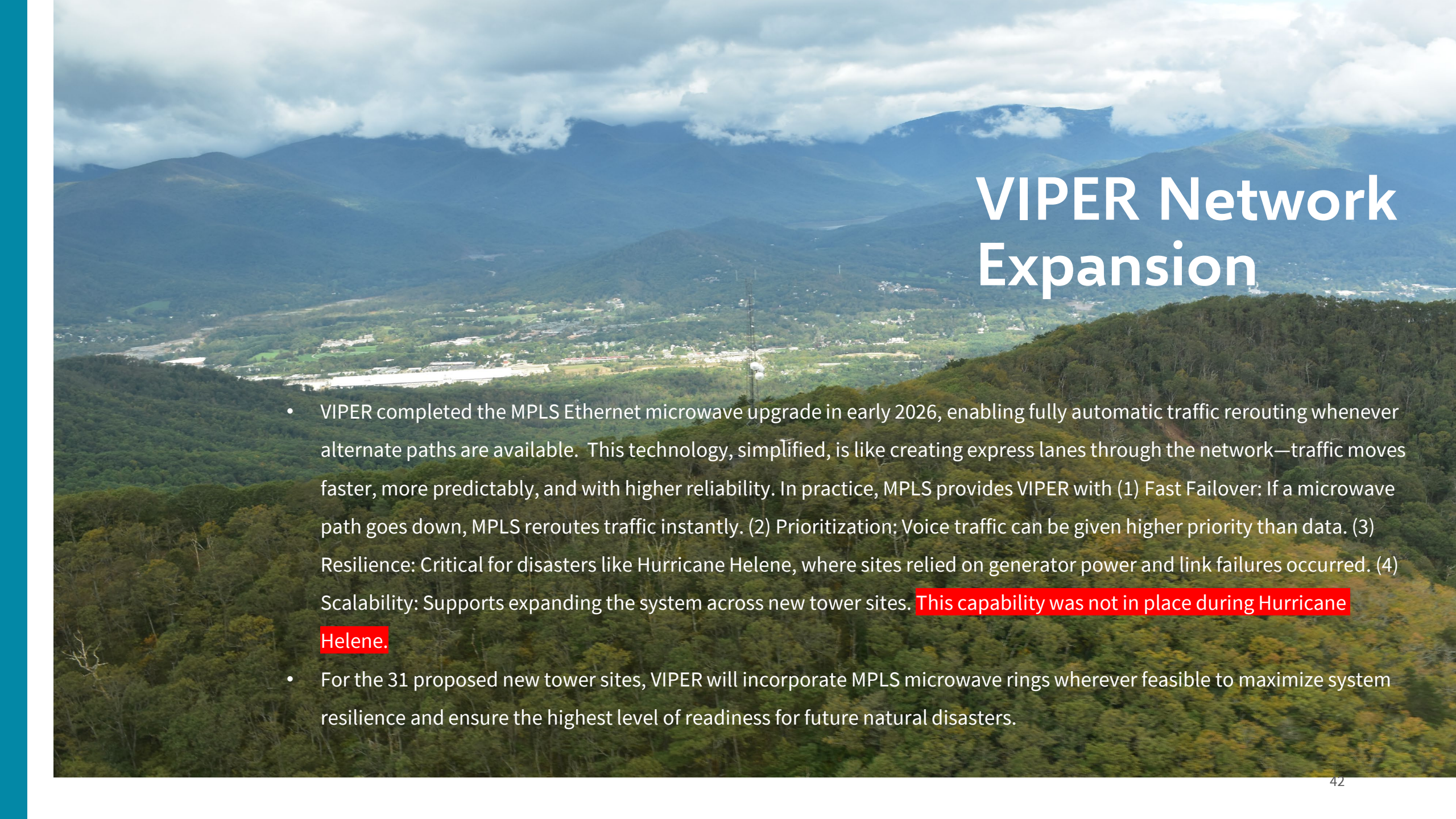


Coverage & Site data
2Q2025

0 10 20 40 60 80 Miles



9/21/2025 DTS



VIPER Network Expansion

- VIPER completed the MPLS Ethernet microwave upgrade in early 2026, enabling fully automatic traffic rerouting whenever alternate paths are available. This technology, simplified, is like creating express lanes through the network—traffic moves faster, more predictably, and with higher reliability. In practice, MPLS provides VIPER with (1) Fast Failover: If a microwave path goes down, MPLS reroutes traffic instantly. (2) Prioritization: Voice traffic can be given higher priority than data. (3) Resilience: Critical for disasters like Hurricane Helene, where sites relied on generator power and link failures occurred. (4) Scalability: Supports expanding the system across new tower sites. **This capability was not in place during Hurricane Helene.**
- For the 31 proposed new tower sites, VIPER will incorporate MPLS microwave rings wherever feasible to maximize system resilience and ensure the highest level of readiness for future natural disasters.



VIPER Network Expansion

- Expansion towers will be built as ANSI/TIA-222 Class III structures, the highest standard for mission-critical communications.
- Engineered for 100-year wind loads, elevated ice loading, and enhanced structural safety margins.
- Designed with reinforced foundations and higher load-bearing capacity to support multiple public-safety and broadband systems.
- Structurally capable of hosting broadband antennas, microwave links, and RF equipment without compromising tower stability.
- **Enables broadband providers to extend high-speed internet into underserved areas with minimal infrastructure cost.**
- Provides commercial carriers space to improve cellular coverage and network resilience across the region.
- Class III hardening ensures operational reliability during severe weather and disaster conditions.

An aerial photograph of a radio tower situated on a hill covered in dense forest. The tower is a tall, lattice-structured metal tower with several satellite dishes and antennas attached. At the base of the tower is a small, red-roofed building. The surrounding forest is lush and green, with some trees showing early autumn colors. A dirt road or path is visible on the left side of the hill.

THANK YOU

Major Kevin Owens

704-778-6709

kevin.owens@ncshp.gov

www.ncshp.gov



Remarks

Governor Josh Stein





Governor's Federal Helene Request

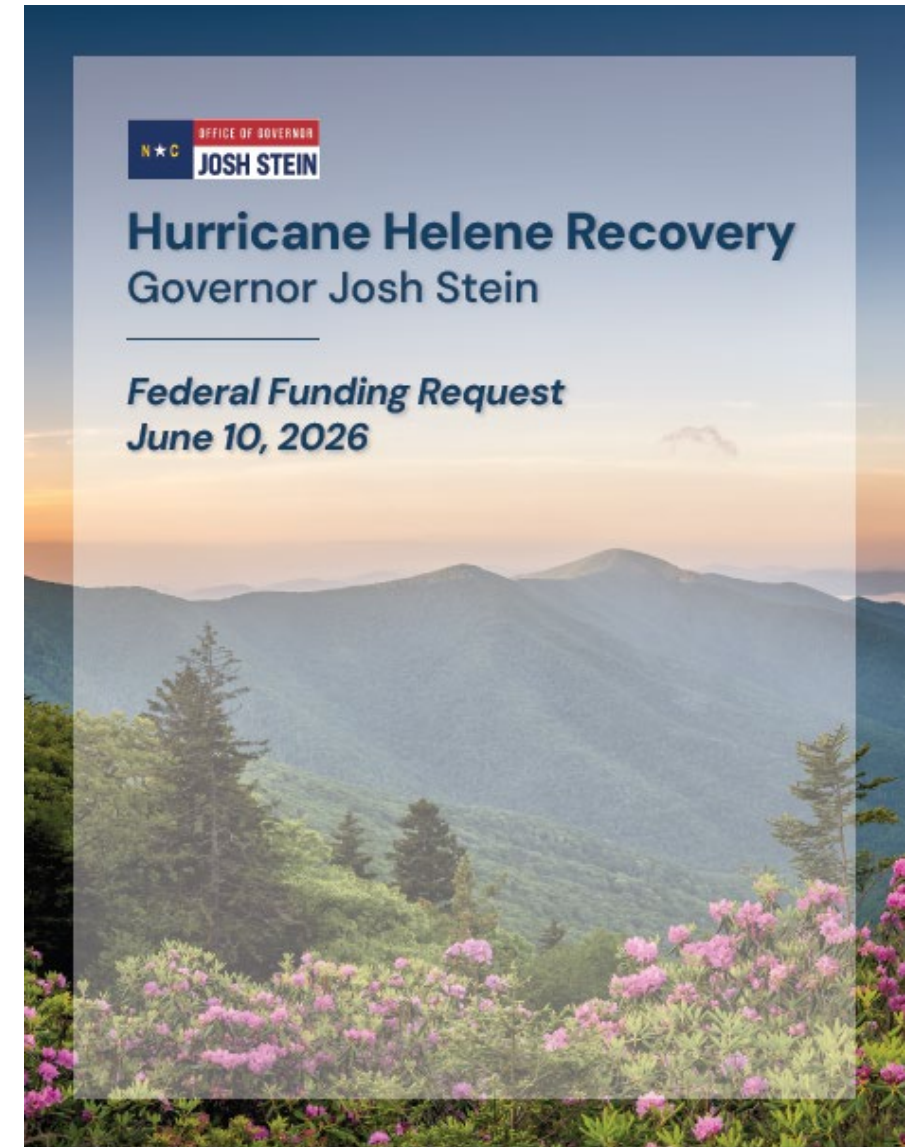
Forrest Gilliam, GROW NC



Governor Stein's Helene Federal Funding Request

Using updated data and evidence, we refined the state's request to Congress for additional funding to reflect current needs, totaling approximately \$10.15 billion. This appropriation request will get survivors back into safe homes, support local businesses, stabilize local governments, fix roads, and rebuild critical water infrastructure.

The revised request, an approximate \$3 billion reduction, accounts for federal and state funds that have since been awarded and takes into consideration revised damage estimates.



Governor Stein's Helene Federal Funding Request

\$3.07 BILLION

Repair or Rebuild Damaged Homes; Replace Lost Housing Stock

- Repair and rebuild damaged homes and replace lost housing stock so people who lived in western North Carolina before Helene have the option to stay here.
- 2,100 – estimated single-family homes that will qualify for home repair/replacement program but will lack funding.
- 56,000 – estimated number of damaged or destroyed homes that remain in need of repair/reconstruction across the region.

\$1.03 BILLION

Water, Wastewater, and Stormwater Infrastructure

- Restore and enhance essential services to support homes and businesses across the region. Address stormwater runoff to reduce future flooding risk.
- \$758 million - unfunded Helene water and wastewater applications (70 projects).
- \$250 million - estimated unfunded stormwater needs.
- \$3.7 billion - total estimated damage to water, wastewater, and stormwater systems.

\$3.05 BILLION

Local Infrastructure

- Rebuild critical local infrastructure and facilities beyond what FEMA will fund: municipal roads, dams and levees, stream restoration, and government facilities.
- \$2.97 billion – estimated funding gap for local infrastructure projects after FEMA Public Assistance.
- \$21 million – unfunded applications for Emergency Watershed Protection Program (EWP) for streambank restoration.
- \$100 million – estimated long-term need for EWP stream restoration.

Governor Stein's Helene Federal Funding Request

\$1.56 BILLION

Economic Recovery

- Deliver targeted, forgivable loans to small businesses, help communities rebuild their commercial districts, help workers return to employment and help employers fill critical workforce needs.
- 13,006 – number of workers lost from active workforce in 16 most-impacted Helene counties between April 2024 and April 2026.
- 4,500 – number of unfunded applications for the WNC Small Business Initiative funded by the state and the Dogwood Trust.

\$300 MILLION

Private Roads and Bridges

- Restore access to homes and emergency services for the residents of western North Carolina.
- 3,000+ - number of eligible applications submitted to the state's private roads and bridges program.
- 500 – estimated number of projects to be paid for by the state's \$175 million program.

\$564 MILLION

Repairs to Federal Highways

- Continue to rebuild critical highways while not short-changing critical highway maintenance needs throughout the state.
- \$5.8 billion – total estimated damage to state-maintained Helene roads.

\$600 MILLION

Local Government and Community Support

- Support Special Community Disaster Loans through FEMA with enhanced loan amounts and debt forgiveness, helping shore up local government finances so they can focus on the work of recovery.
- \$1 billion + - unfunded applications for state's local government cashflow loan program.
- \$360 million – expressed need from 23 surveyed local governments for additional cashflow loans.



Tourism Recovery Efforts

Marlise Taylor, Visit NC

Kelly Jones, Mitchell County Tourism Development Authority

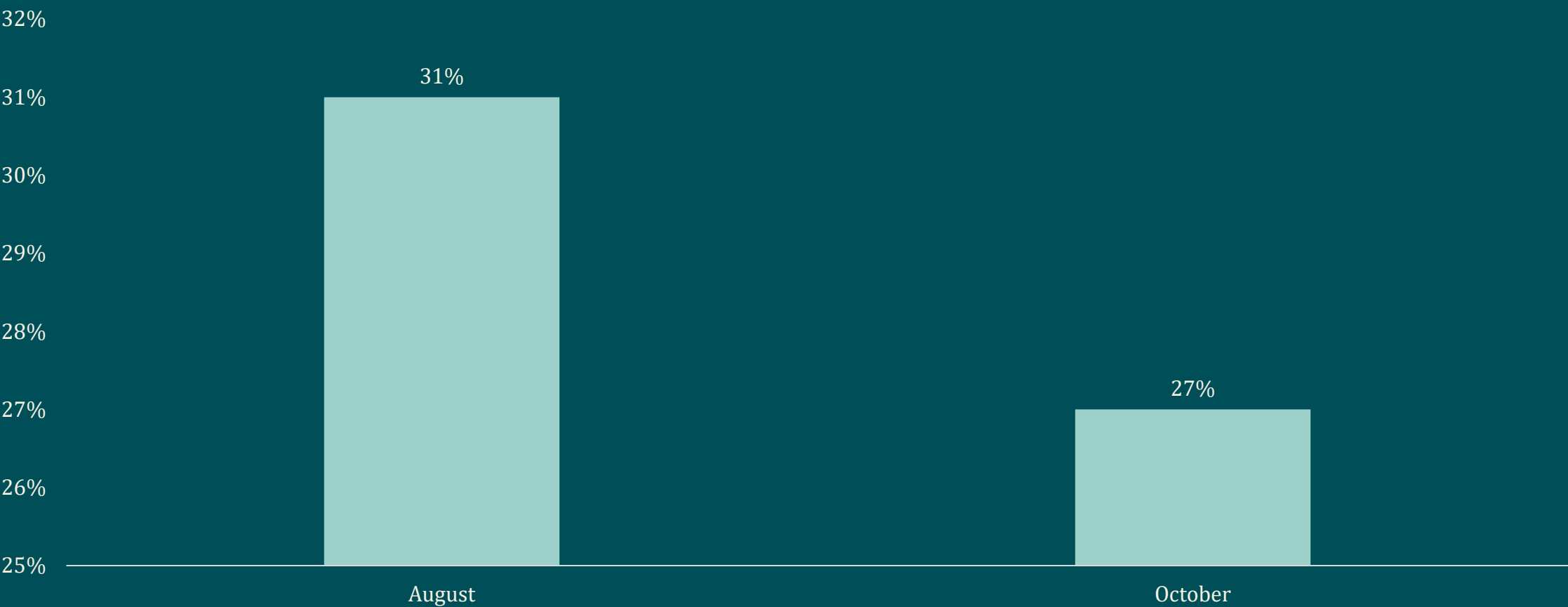


WESTERN NC TOURISM RECOVERY UPDATE

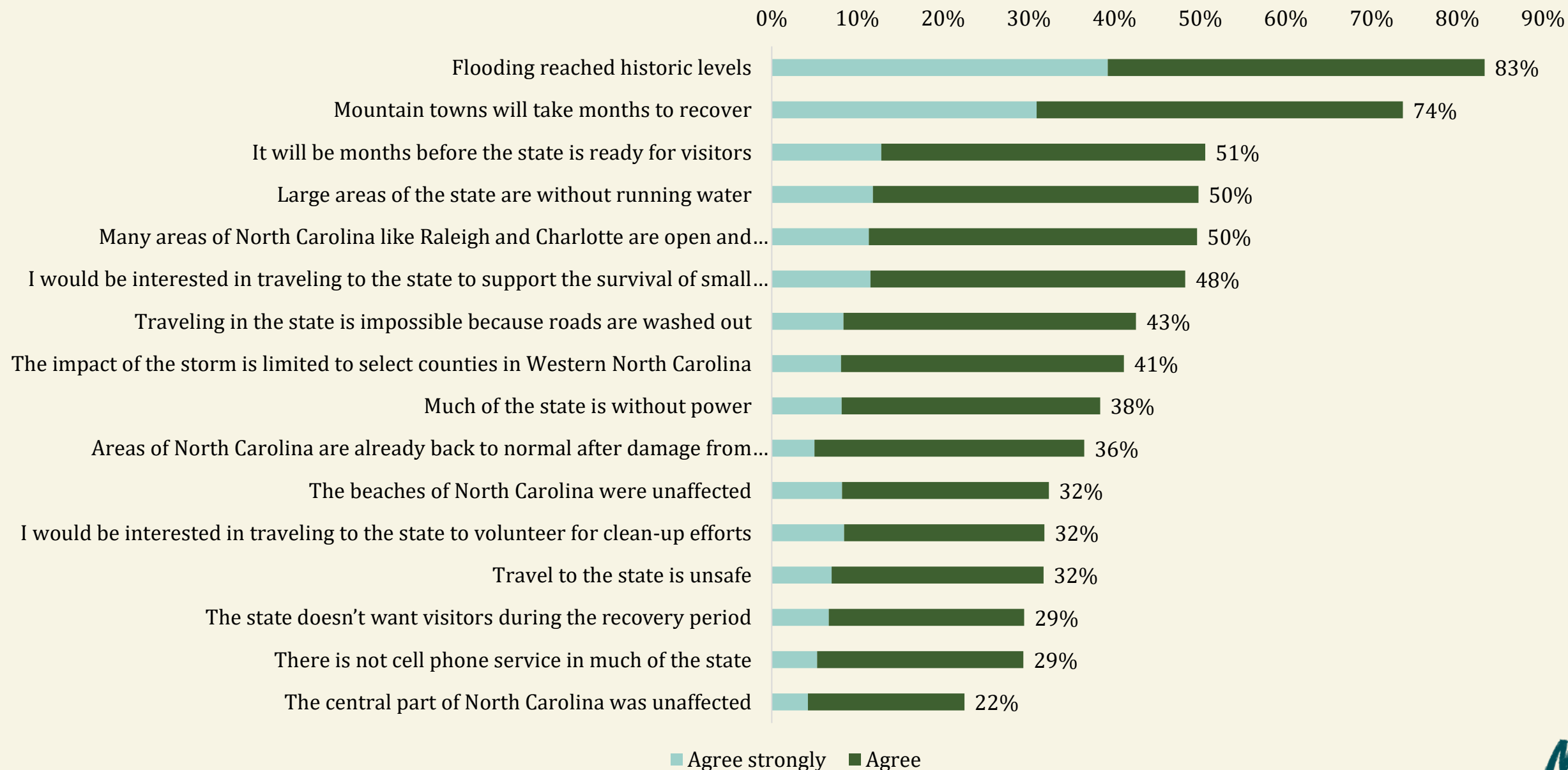
Governor's Advisory Committee on Western North Carolina Recovery
June 22, 2026

CHANGE IN LIKELIHOOD TO VISIT | 2024 SURVEY

Likelihood to Visit North Carolina (Extremely Likely & Somewhat Likely)

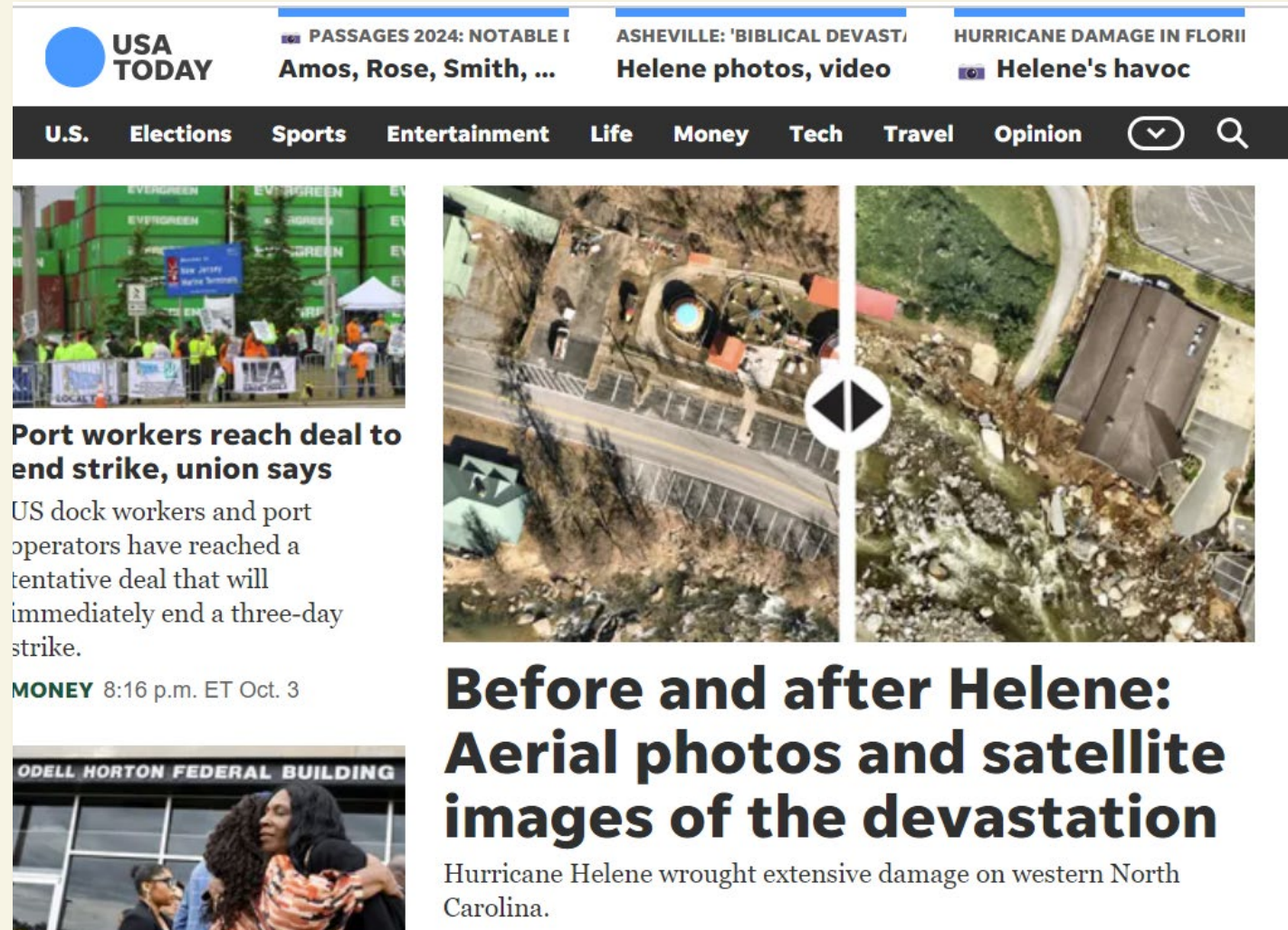


KNOWLEDGE OF HURRICANE IMPACTS | OCTOBER 2024



HELENE MEDIA IMPACT

- More than 1,000 articles published about North Carolina 9/27-10/3
- 89.1% registered with negative sentiment (due to reporting on the crisis itself and its impact)
- Coverage continues to decrease each day after peaking on 9/30
- Total estimated UVM: 20,078,868,941
- Actively reworking and rerouting travel media appropriately



The screenshot shows the USA Today website interface. At the top, there are three main headlines: "PASSAGES 2024: NOTABLE I Amos, Rose, Smith, ...", "ASHEVILLE: 'BIBLICAL DEVAST' Helene photos, video", and "HURRICANE DAMAGE IN FLORII Helene's havoc". Below these is a navigation bar with categories: U.S., Elections, Sports, Entertainment, Life, Money, Tech, Travel, Opinion, and a search icon. The main content area features three articles. The first article, titled "Port workers reach deal to end strike, union says", includes a photo of a protest and text about dock workers reaching a tentative deal. The second article, titled "Before and after Helene: Aerial photos and satellite images of the devastation", includes two side-by-side aerial photos showing the damage caused by Hurricane Helene. The third article, titled "ODELL HORTON FEDERAL BUILDING", includes a photo of people in front of the building.

USA TODAY

PASSAGES 2024: NOTABLE I Amos, Rose, Smith, ...

ASHEVILLE: 'BIBLICAL DEVAST' Helene photos, video

HURRICANE DAMAGE IN FLORII Helene's havoc

U.S. Elections Sports Entertainment Life Money Tech Travel Opinion

Port workers reach deal to end strike, union says

US dock workers and port operators have reached a tentative deal that will immediately end a three-day strike.

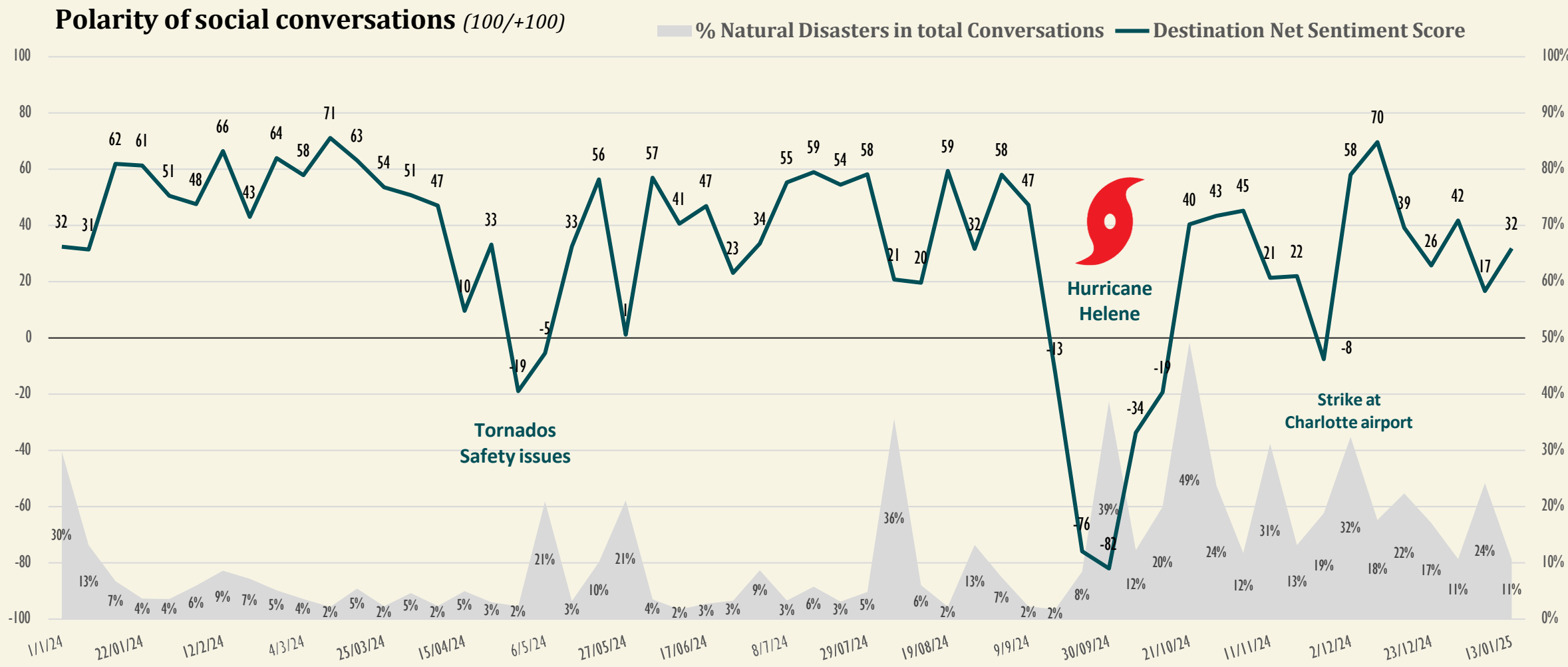
MONEY 8:16 p.m. ET Oct. 3

Before and after Helene: Aerial photos and satellite images of the devastation

Hurricane Helene wrought extensive damage on western North Carolina.

ODELL HORTON FEDERAL BUILDING

SOCIAL REPUTATION TRENDS FOR NORTH CAROLINA

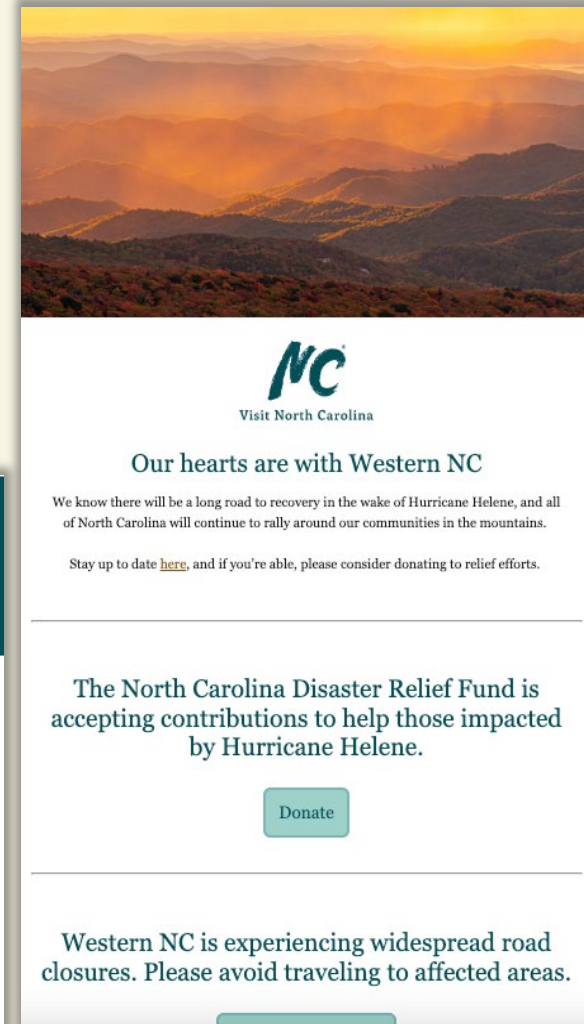
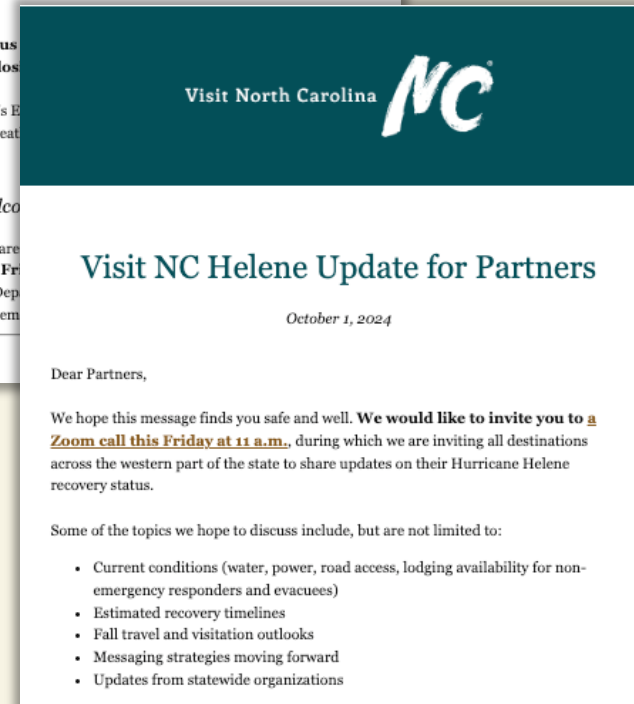
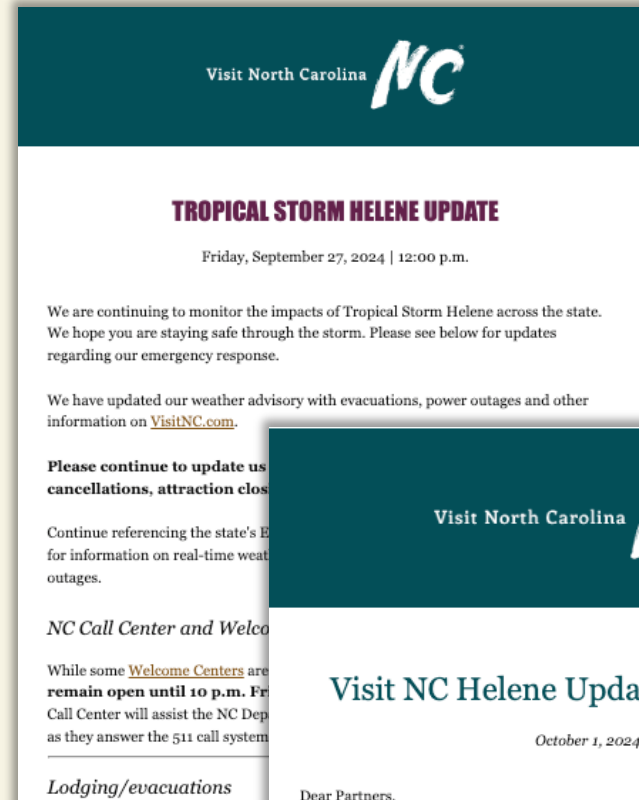


Note: The Travelsat Net Sentiment Score measures the polarity of social conversations about the destination from a scale of -100 to +100 (% of positive - % of negative social mentions)

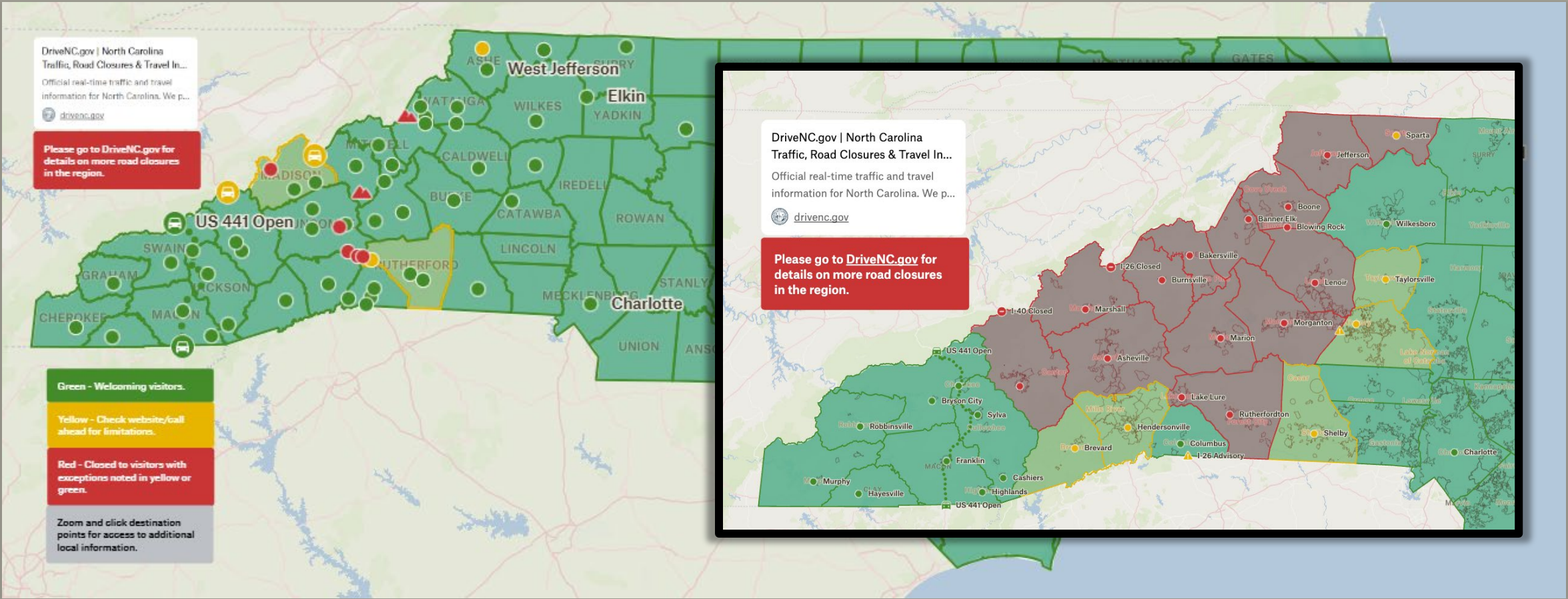


PARTNER OUTREACH AND COMMUNICATIONS

- Recommend avoiding travel to impacted areas and note areas open and welcoming travelers
- Direct travelers to call ahead to confirm plans and ensure safety
- Direct travelers to where they can get more information
- How to help/donate
- Expressing empathy for those impacted



MOUNTAIN STATUS MAP



PUBLIC RELATIONS

GARDEN of GUN

ARTS & CULTURE

Get a Jump on Holiday Shopping and Bolster North Carolina Artists Who Need Help

From Black Mountain to Asheville to Boone to Chimney Rock, creatives in Western North Carolina need support during what would have been their busiest season

By **AMY BRECOUNT WHITE**
October 16, 2024

[f](#) [x](#) [p](#) [e](#) [s](#)



PHOTO: MELINA FERRIS COOGAN

Previously, visitors gathered at Marshall High Studios for the annual holiday market. Due to flood damage from Helene, the studio is in the process of restoration, but the Marshall Handmade Market will continue this year at Odonata Farm in Mars Hill, North Carolina.

Southern Living

FOOD HOME GARDEN TRAVEL HOLIDAYS CULTURE STYLE NEWS SHOPPING ABOUT US [Q](#) [SUBSCRIBE](#)

These North Carolina Towns Are Open And Need Your Business

"We appreciate your support to our local economy this fall, as we rely on this season heavily."

By [Lisa Cericola](#) | Updated on October 18, 2024

[f](#) [x](#) [p](#) [e](#) [s](#)

In This Article

Highlands

Franklin

Cashiers

Bryson City

Robbinsville

Brevard

Shelby

Murphy

Hayesville

Hendersonville



PHOTO: VISIT SMOKIES

North Carolina is a beloved travel destination all year round, especially in the fall and early summer, when its natural beauty really shines. While much of the western part of the state is still recovering from widespread devastation caused by [Hurricane Helene](#), some areas are open for business and in need of visitors.

Visit North Carolina has released a [helpful interactive map](#) that shows the most up-to-date [road closures](#), areas that you should avoid, and where it is safe to travel. (Check out [DriveNC.com](#) for more detailed information on road closures.) Based on that information, we've rounded up our recommendations on where to go, what to do, and where to stay.

If you do decide to travel, be sure to double check any reservations or plans before leaving, as this information is changing frequently.

RELATED: [The 15 Most Beautiful Places In North Carolina, According To Locals](#)

Advertisement

Earn 2 Ways On 2-Night Stays

Join and register, then earn up to 4,000 bonus points on each stay.

T&Cs apply.

[» JOIN NOW](#)

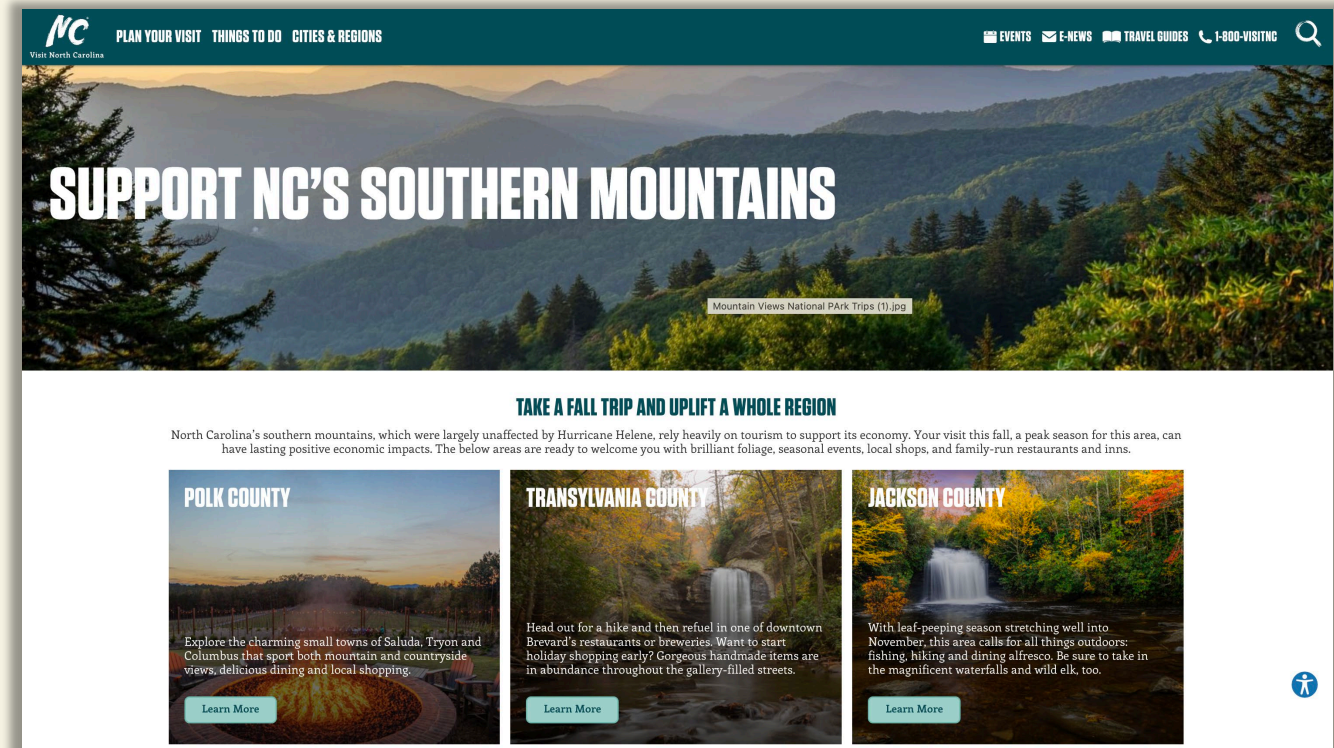
MARRIOTT BONVOY

Advertisement



RECOVERY FALL MINI CAMPAIGN | SOUTHERN MOUNTAINS

- Initial post storm mini-campaign promoting Fall through October 31
- 12 largely less affected destinations
- “Take a Fall Trip and Uplift a Whole Region”
- Instagram, Pinterest and organic social
- Select target markets in NC, SC, GA, TN & AL
- Customized VisitNC.com landing page featuring all 12 partner destinations





DEDICATED MOUNTAIN RECOVERY CAMPAIGN

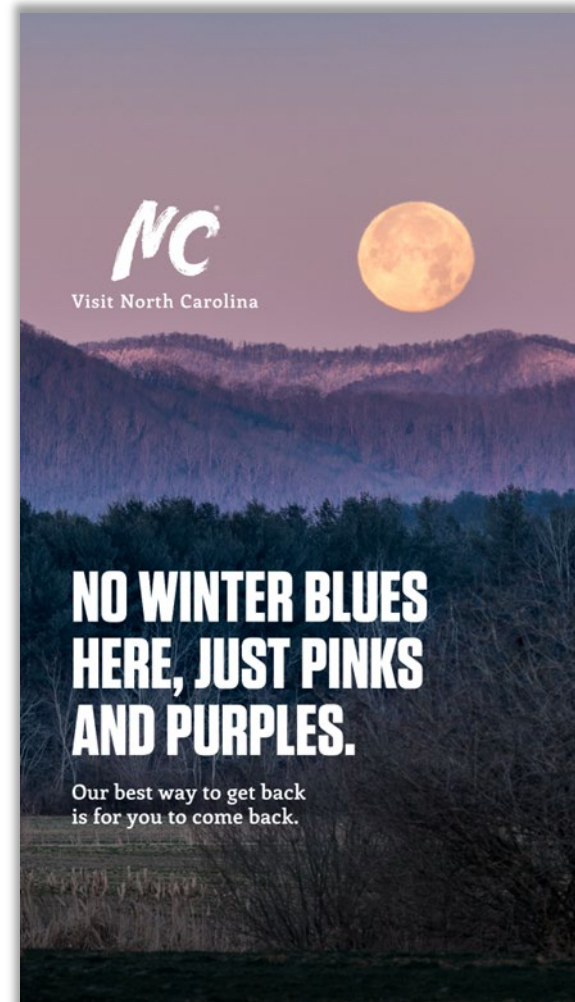
\$14 Million, Full Year

RECOVERY CAMPAIGN | PAID MEDIA

Mountain-focused recovery paid media

- Four seasons Nov '24 – Dec. '25
- Top markets of origin for region
 - Proximity to state
 - NC, SC, GA, FL, TN and AL
- Plus International

Piedmont and Coast messaging benefiting from modest Core budget increase



RECOVERY CAMPAIGN | HOLIDAY 2024/ WINTER/ SPRING/ SUMMER

**NEVER MIND SANTA,
WHEN ARE YOU
COMING TO TOWN?**

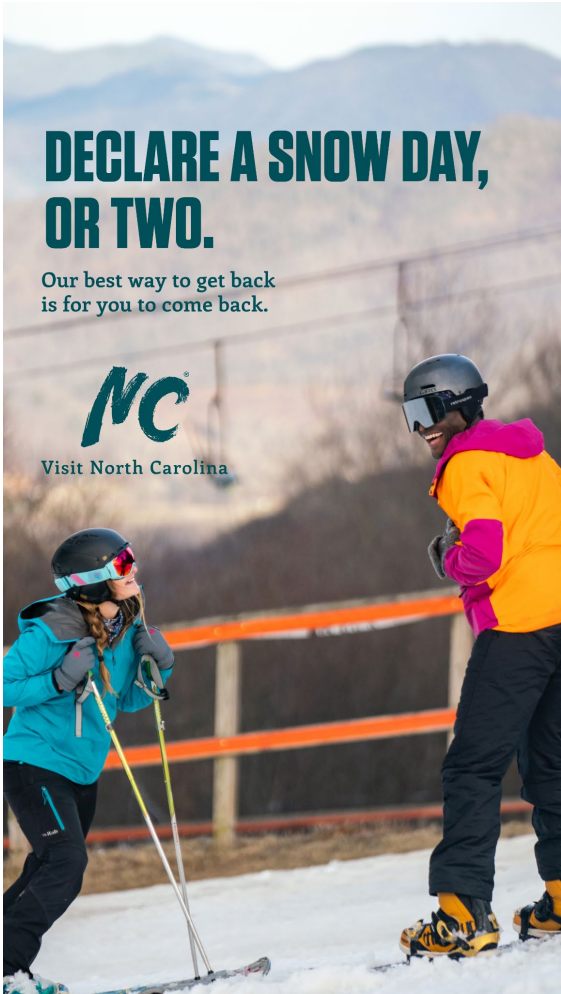
Our best way to get back
is for you to come back.



NC
Visit North Carolina

**DECLARE A SNOW DAY,
OR TWO.**

Our best way to get back
is for you to come back.

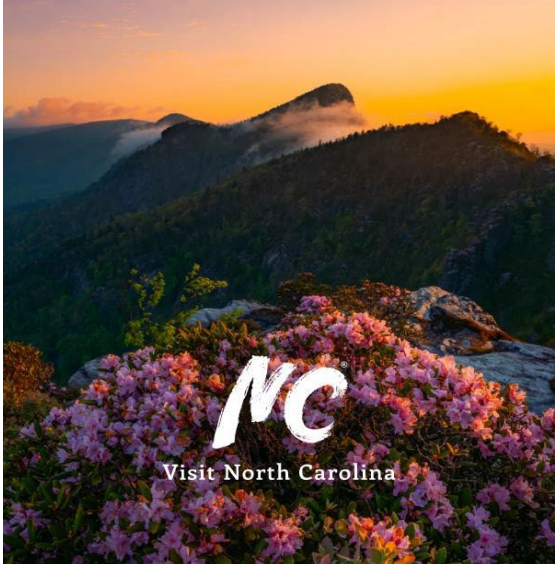


NC
Visit North Carolina

**SPRING IS A TIME
OF RENEWAL,
INCLUDING OURS**

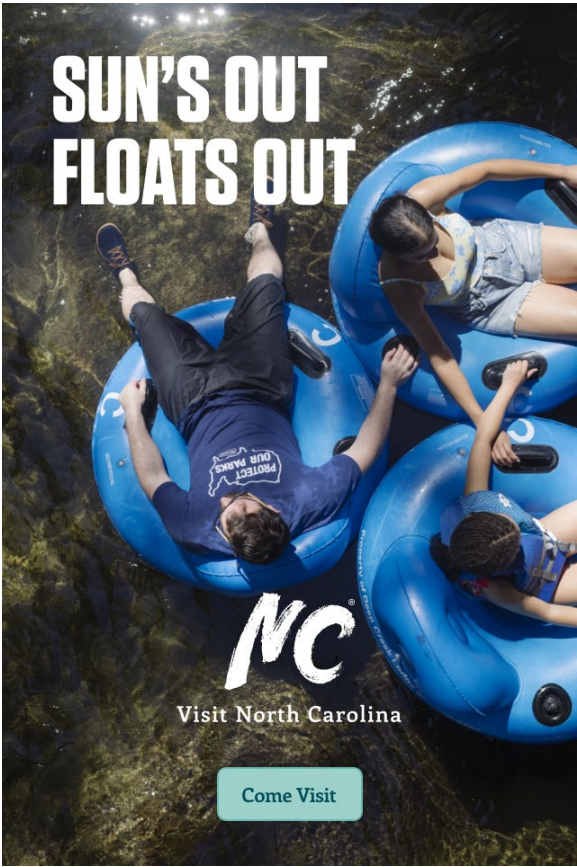
Our best way to get back
is for you to come back.

Come Visit



NC
Visit North Carolina

**SUN'S OUT
FLOATS OUT**



NC
Visit North Carolina

Come Visit

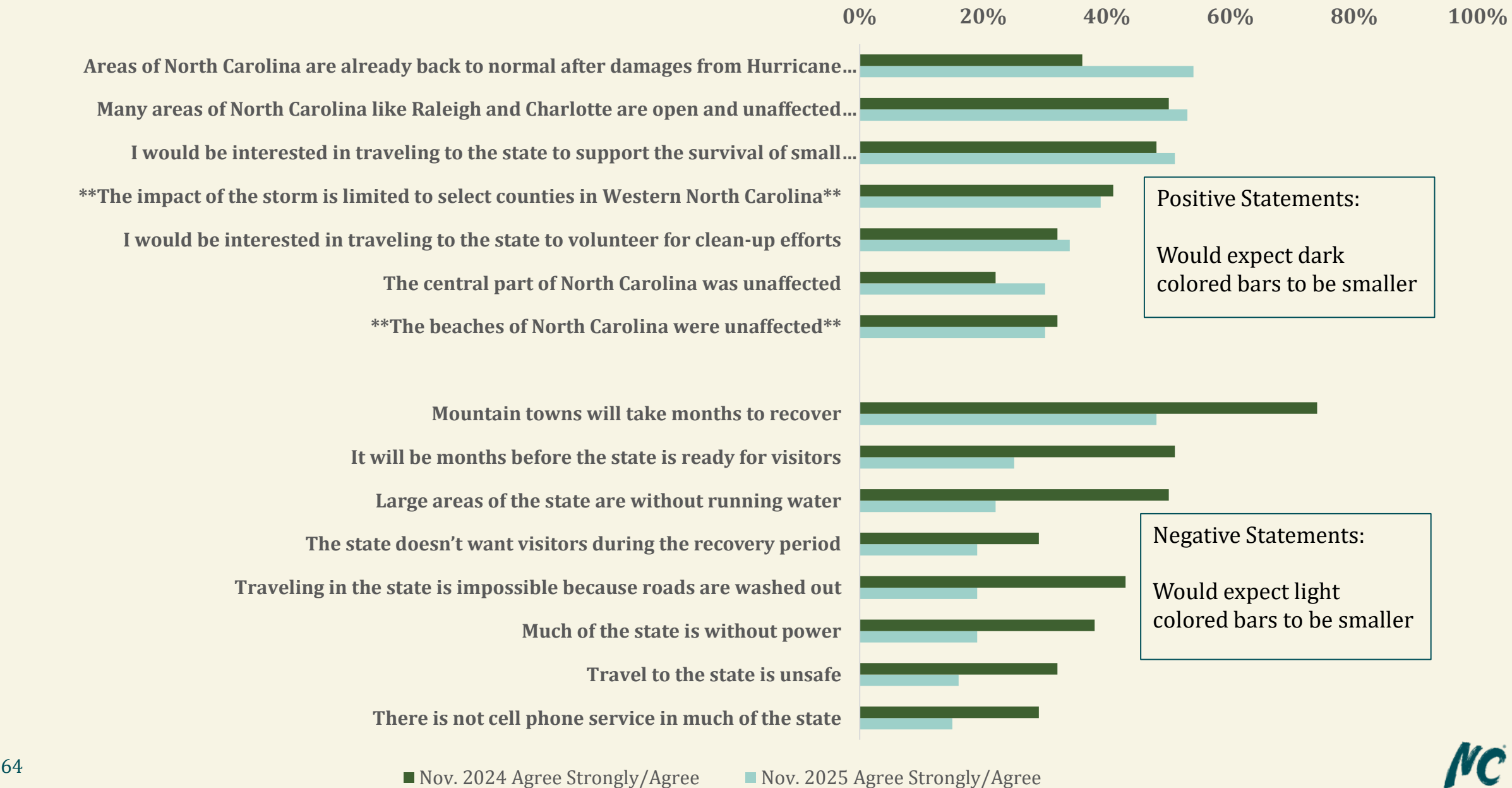
★ REDISCOVER ★
— *the* —
UNFORGETTABLE

Visit the Mountains of North Carolina

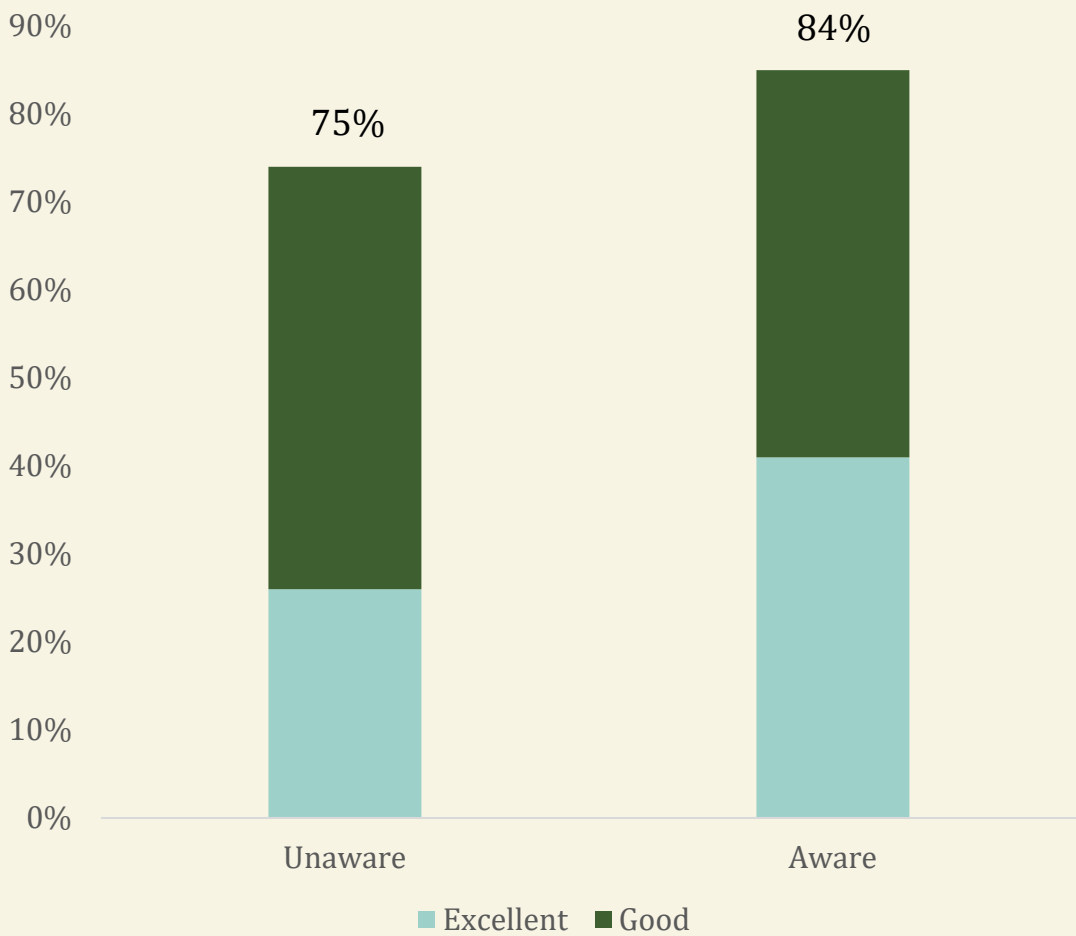


VisitNC.com/Rediscover

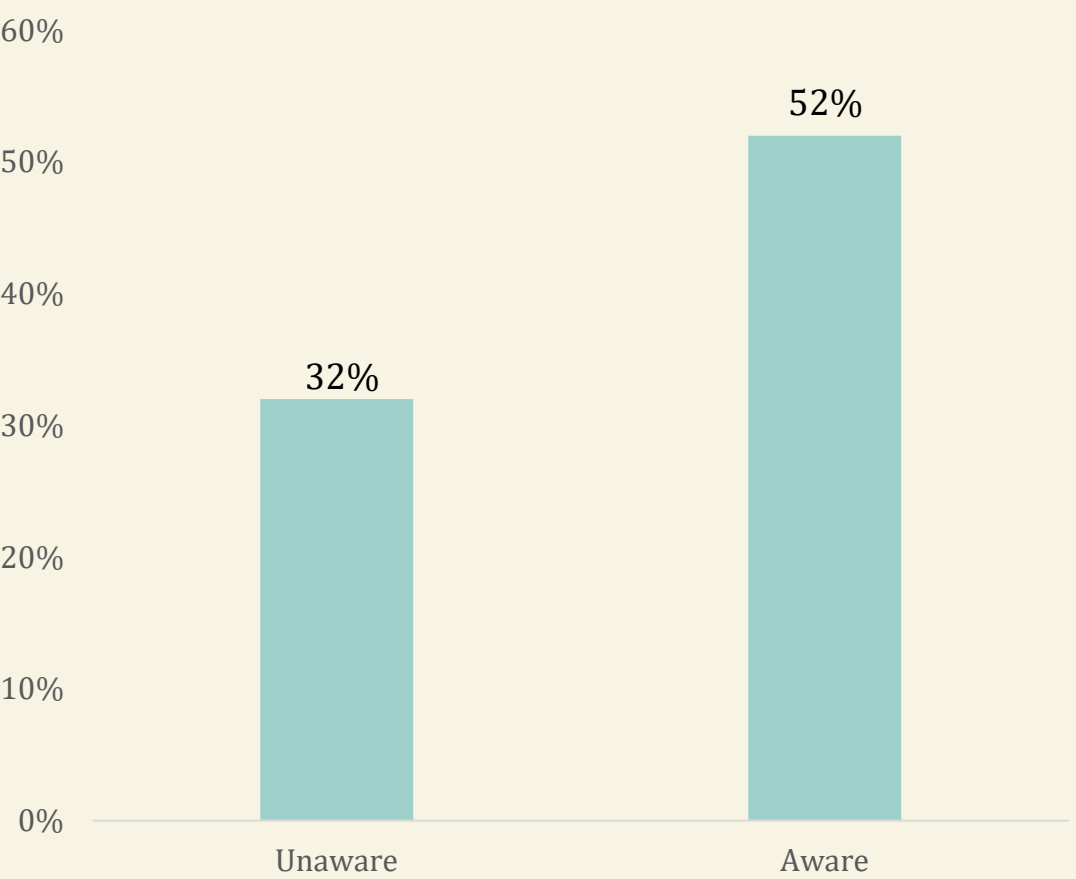
KNOWLEDGE OF HURRICANE IMPACTS — 1 YEAR COMPARISON



IMPACT OF RECOVERY ADVERTISING ON PERCEPTION OF NORTH CAROLINA



IMPACT OF RECOVERY ADVERTISING ON LIKELIHOOD TO VISIT



MOUNTAIN RECOVERY CAMPAIGN PERFORMANCE TOPLINE

Nov. '24 – March. '26 (17 months)

Total Paid impressions:

- +924M

Visits to Mountain Recovery Campaign Landing Page:

- 2.5M

Paid Social Engagements:

- +7.6M engagements
(likes, comments, shares, clicks)



CAMPAIGN RETURN ON INVESTMENT

Advertising Impacts	2025
Ad Awareness	53%*
Ad-Influenced Trips	885,337
Ad-Influenced Visitor Spending (total)	\$1.67 billion
ROI (Visitor Spend Per Dollar of Investment)	\$133
State and Local Taxes Generated	\$147.5 million
Tax ROI (State and Local Taxes Generated Per Dollar of Investment)	\$12

** Consumers that were aware of at least one campaign (brand or recovery)*

Source: SMARInsights 2026



2025 DOMESTIC VISITATION RANK

Market Share Change 2024-2025

1. California	+0.2 pts
2. Florida	+1.0 pts
3. Texas	+0.3 pts
4. New York	Flat
5. Pennsylvania	+0.1 pts
6. Georgia	+0.3 pts
7. North Carolina	-0.3 pts
8. Tennessee	Flat
9. Michigan	Flat
10. Ohio	-0.1 pts

Source: TravelTrakAmerica, 2026

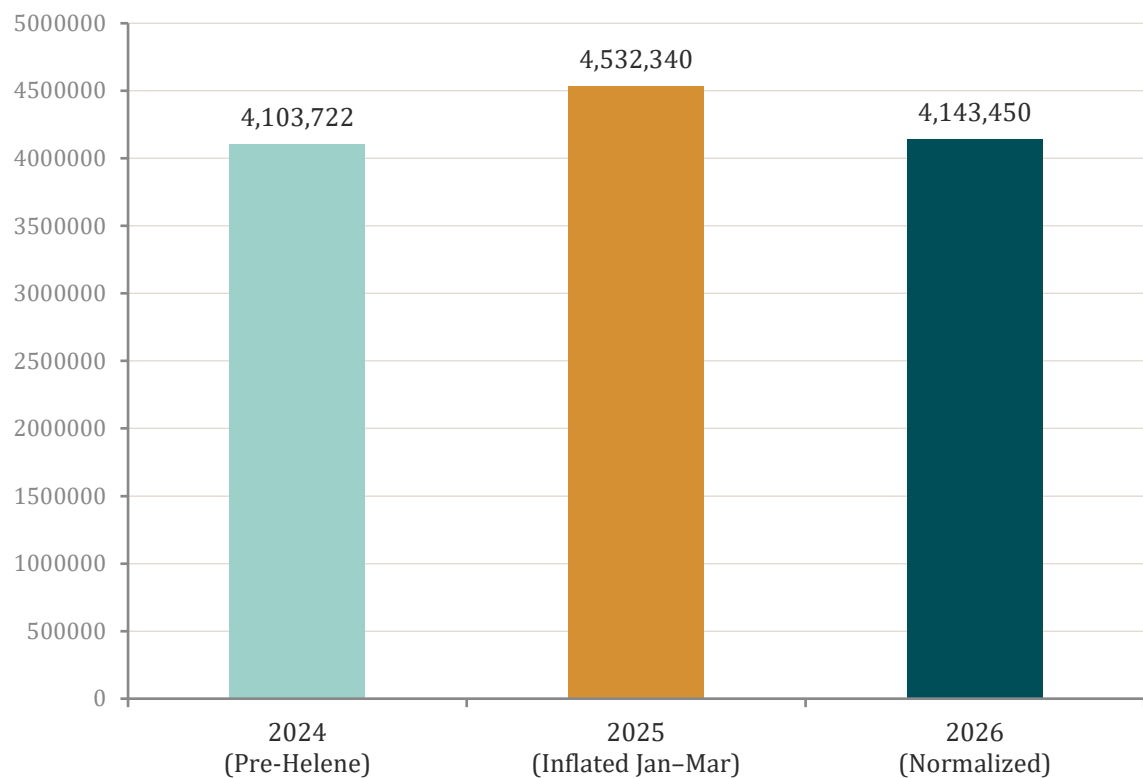


WESTERN NORTH CAROLINA LODGING DEMAND RECOVERY

Hotels vs. Vacation Rentals — January 2024 — May 2026

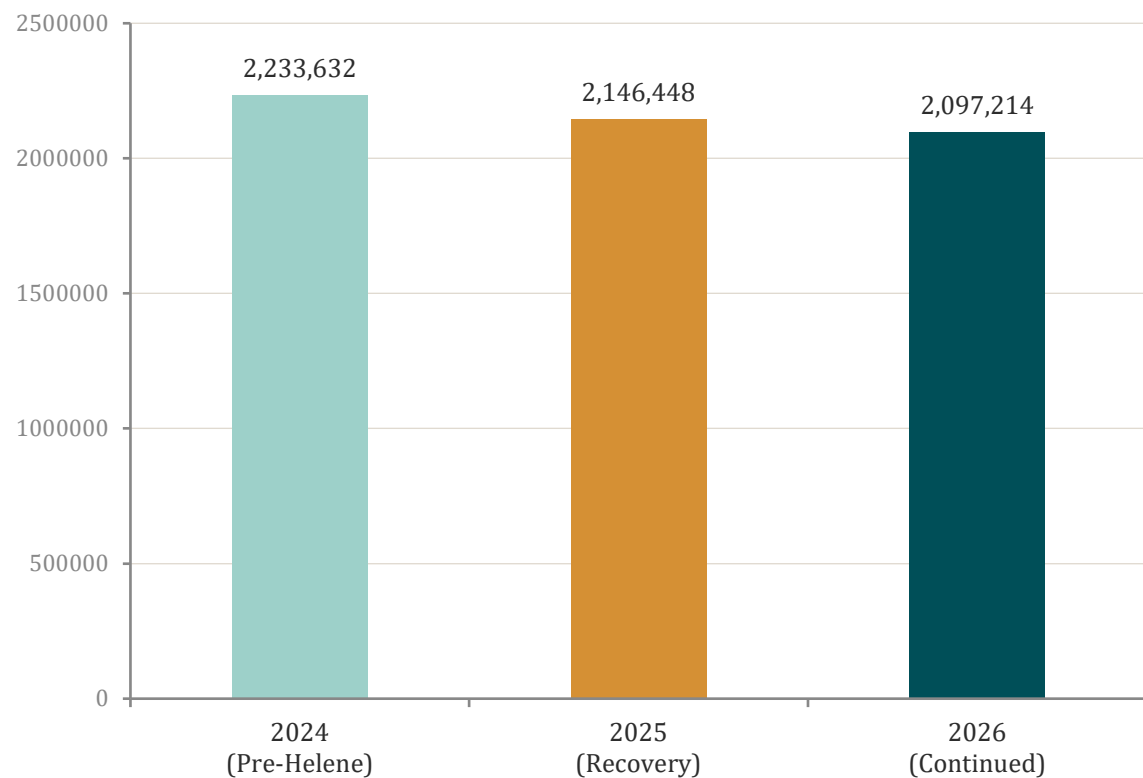
YEAR-TO-DATE WESTERN NC DEMAND | JANUARY THROUGH MAY — APPLES TO APPLES

Hotel Demand (YTD Jan–May)



Hotel YTD 2026 vs 2024: +0.96% | vs 2025 (inflated): **–8.6%**
2025 inflated by relief housing — 2026 is the first true normalized comparison to 2024.

Vacation Rental Demand (YTD Jan–May)



Rental YTD 2026 vs 2024: –6.1% | vs 2025: **–2.3%**
Rentals gradually improving year-over-year, but still below pre-Helene 2024 baseline.

RECOVERY OUTLOOK

WHAT THE DATA TELLS US



HOTELS

Recovery Clouded by Displacement

Hotel data from Oct 2024–Mar 2025 was significantly inflated by displaced residents and Helene relief workers. True visitor recovery is visible from April 2025 onward. YTD 2026 hotel demand is essentially flat vs. pre-storm 2024 — a strong signal.



VACATION RENTALS

Cleaner Signal, Slower Recovery

Rental demand was not distorted by displacement housing, making it a better gauge of genuine visitor activity. 2025 summer demand ran ~10–15% below 2024 peaks. YTD 2026 is still ~6% below 2024 but improving each month.

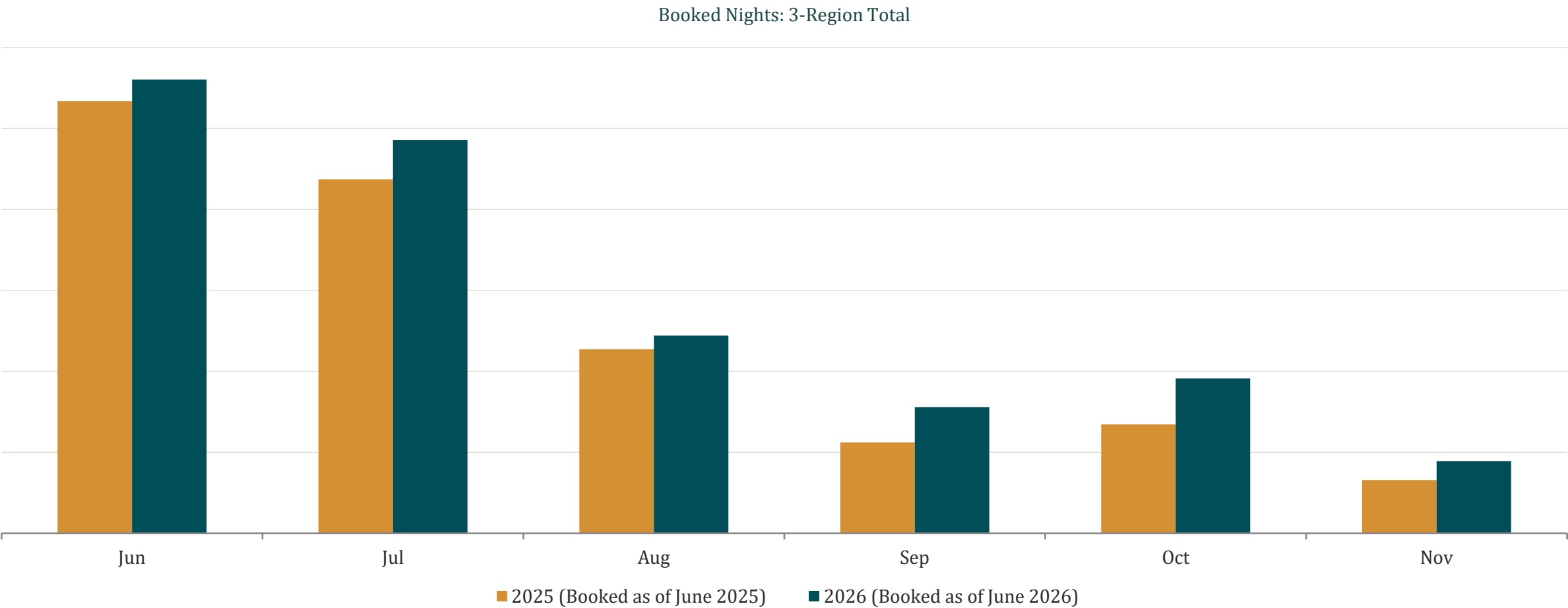


TRAJECTORY

Positive Momentum in 2026

Spring 2026 is tracking near 2024 pre-storm baselines. Seasonal patterns are intact — highs and lows mirror pre-storm behavior — indicating visitor confidence is returning. Summer 2026 data will be the next critical test.

VACATION RENTAL PACING: SUMMER 2026 | BOOKINGS AS OF JUNE vs. SAME POINT IN 2025



METHODOLOGY: Both years reflect only **bookings made as of June** — a true apples-to-apples pacing comparison. Fall months naturally show fewer total bookings than summer months at this point in the calendar, but 2026 is running ahead of 2025 in every month except High Country June and August. The strong Sep–Nov leads suggest growing traveler confidence in the region's recovery.

A person wearing a light-colored shirt, a hat, and a fishing vest is standing in a river, casting a fly fishing line. The river is surrounded by dense green trees and foliage. The scene is bright and sunny, with sunlight filtering through the leaves.

THANK YOU

Visit North Carolina

NC[®]



Local Tourism Development Authority Update

Kelly Jones, Mitchell County



EXPLORE

FOR A DAY OR A WEEK!





Recovery Updates

Matt Calabria & Emily Gangi, GROW NC



Now Open – N.C. Forest Service (NCFS) Disaster Mitigation Program (DMP)

This new program provides wildfire risk reduction treatments at no cost to eligible private and public landowners in the 39 federally declared Helene disaster counties.

Project work includes:

- Prescribed burning to reduce dangerous and excessive fuel loading;
- Home ignition zone treatments to create defensible space around homes; and
- Restoration to fuel breaks and roads to reopen access routes to improve response capabilities.

Application process:

- Contact your local [NCFS county ranger's office](#) to request a DMP project.
- NCFS personnel will visit the tract/residence, confirm eligibility criteria, and submit your project for approval.
- Landowners sign a no-cost NCFS forestation or prescribed burn contract before work begins.



For more information: bit.ly/Disaster-Mitigation-Program

NC DEQ awards \$25 Million for Waste Reduction & Debris Management

DEQ recently awarded \$25M in grant funding for 16 projects in WNC designed to improve waste reduction infrastructure and debris management systems through the Helene Recovery Recycling Infrastructure grant program. These projects will help ensure long-term resilience against future storms.

Helene Recovery Recycling Infrastructure Grant Recipients

- Alleghany County
- Ashe County
- Avery County
- Town of Black Mountain
- Buncombe County
- Graham County
- Haywood County
- Jackson County
- Macon County
- Town of Marshall
- McDowell County
- Mitchell County
- Rutherford County
- Watauga County
- Wilkes County
- Yancey County



For more information, visit the bit.ly/Helene-Recovery-Recycling-Infrastructure

Applications Open – Helene Debris Recovery Disposal Grant

DEQ received \$18M in grant funding from the EPA to help communities shorten timeframes and/or fund remaining Helene solid waste disaster debris clean-up and removal projects that are not covered by FEMA or other funding sources. Max award per applicant: \$3M.

Eligible applicants: Local governments (counties, municipalities, councils of government) and non-governmental organizations

Eligible project types:

- Solid waste debris collection, storage, reduction, and final disposal (if not covered by FEMA)
- Non-hazardous waste collection and disposal
- Clearing, management, and disposal of non-hazardous waste from shorelines, floodplains, farmland, animal mortality sites, compost management sites, residential clean-up sites, state and local park lands

Application deadline: September 14, 2026

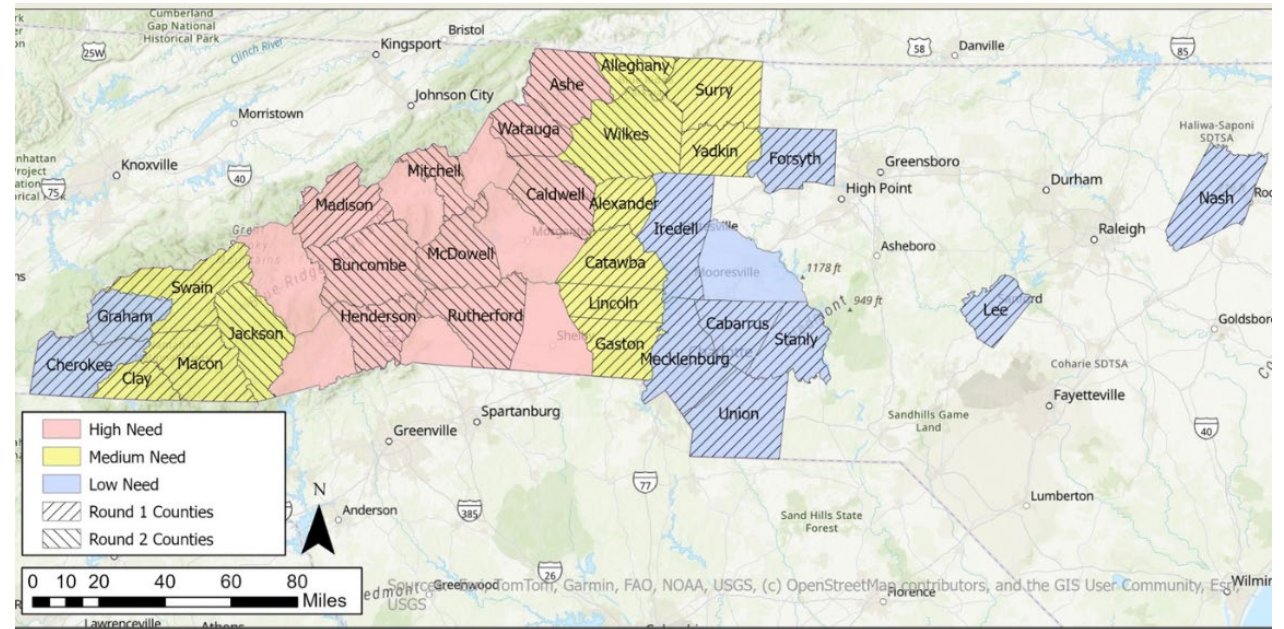


For more information: bit.ly/44g2twO

Streamflow Rehabilitation Assistance Program (StRAP) Awards Announced – *Second Round*

The NC Soil and Water Commission has approved the second round of StRAP awards – over \$9.8M to thirteen grantees – to support stream debris removal, streambank stabilization, and stream restoration projects.

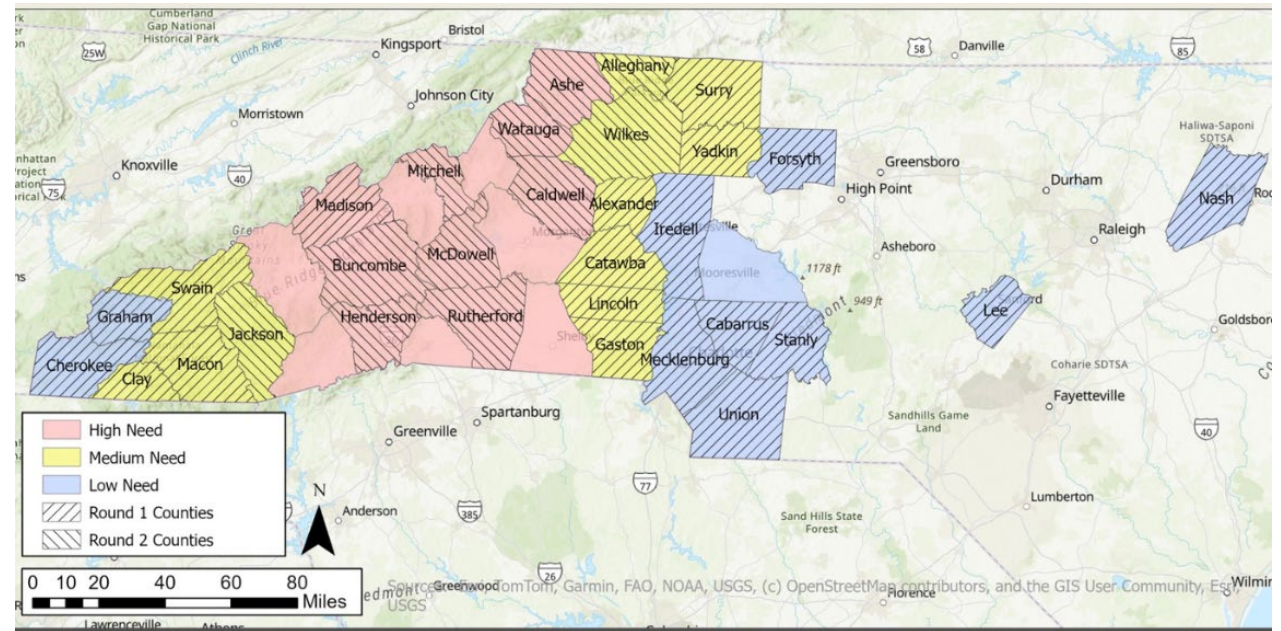
- Alleghany SWCD
- New River Conservancy - Alleghany
- Ashe SWCD
- New River Conservancy - Ashe
- Buncombe SCWD
- Mountain Valleys RC&D
- Caldwell SWCD
- Jackson SWCD
- McDowell SWCD
- Mitchell SWCD
- Rutherford SWCD
- Watauga County
- Wilkes SWCD



Streamflow Rehabilitation Assistance Program (StRAP) Awards Announced – *Third Round*

The NC Soil and Water Commission approved the third round of StRAP awards – over \$10.5M to eleven grantees – to support stream debris removal, streambank stabilization, and stream restoration projects.

- Avery SWCD
- Burke SWCD
- Cleveland County
- MountainTrue (Cleveland and Polk)
- Haywood SWCD
- Henderson SWCD
- Mills River Partnership (Henderson)
- Mountain Valleys RC&D (Henderson)
- Rowan County
- Transylvania SWCD
- Blue Ridge RC&D (Yancey)



In the coming weeks, StRAP will award supplemental funds to grantees who previously applied for funding but did not receive their full requests due to county caps.

Governor Stein Signs Executive Order Aimed at Increasing Housing Opportunities and Affordability

- Executive Order No. 36 directs cabinet agencies to work together to increase housing supply, affordability, and access and to use technology to deliver data-driven solutions.
- As Senior Advisor for Housing Policy, Janneke Ratcliffe will work closely with local and tribal governments, state agencies, and cross-sector partners to define the statewide housing strategy, establish measurable goals, and communicate North Carolina's housing policy.
- The executive order takes action in the following priority areas:
 - Establishes a Senior Advisor for Housing Policy role in the Governor's Office tasked with defining and coordinating a statewide housing strategy
 - Calls on state agencies to prioritize housing access, creation, and resilience in relevant policies and planning
 - Establishes a framework for state agencies to align their housing goals and coordinate housing-adjacent resources, programs, and services
 - Directs state agencies to work with partners and leverage their data, information technology, platforms, and research to enhance support for local governments and builders, including small ones, who are trying to increase housing options in our communities



Renew NC Single-Family Housing Dashboard

6/21/2026 12:27:28 PM

Latest Data Refresh

Applications in Progress
But Not Submitted

2,189

Total Applications
Submitted

7,924

Total Active
Applications

2,680



Inactive or Ineligible
Applications

5,244



Application Submission Deadline

January 31, 2026

Verified Eligible Phase and Priority

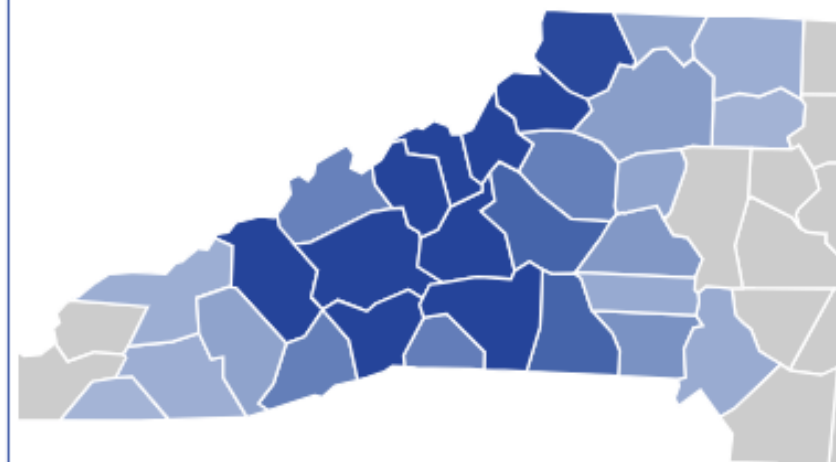


Phase	Priority 1	Priority 2	Priority 3	Priority 4	Total
Phase 1	1,375	228	103	16	1,722
Phase 2	197	69	12	7	285
Phase 3	141	4	N/A	N/A	145
Phase 4	442	16	N/A	N/A	458

Hover over the
information bubble for
Phase and Priority
definitions.

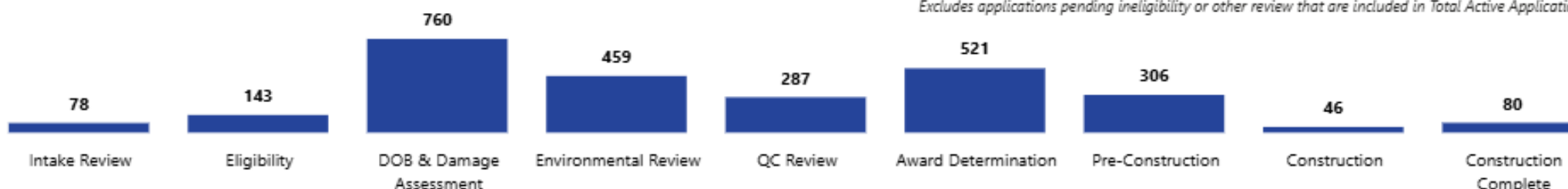
Applications will be
processed beginning
with Phase 1, followed
by Phase 2, etc.

Applications by County

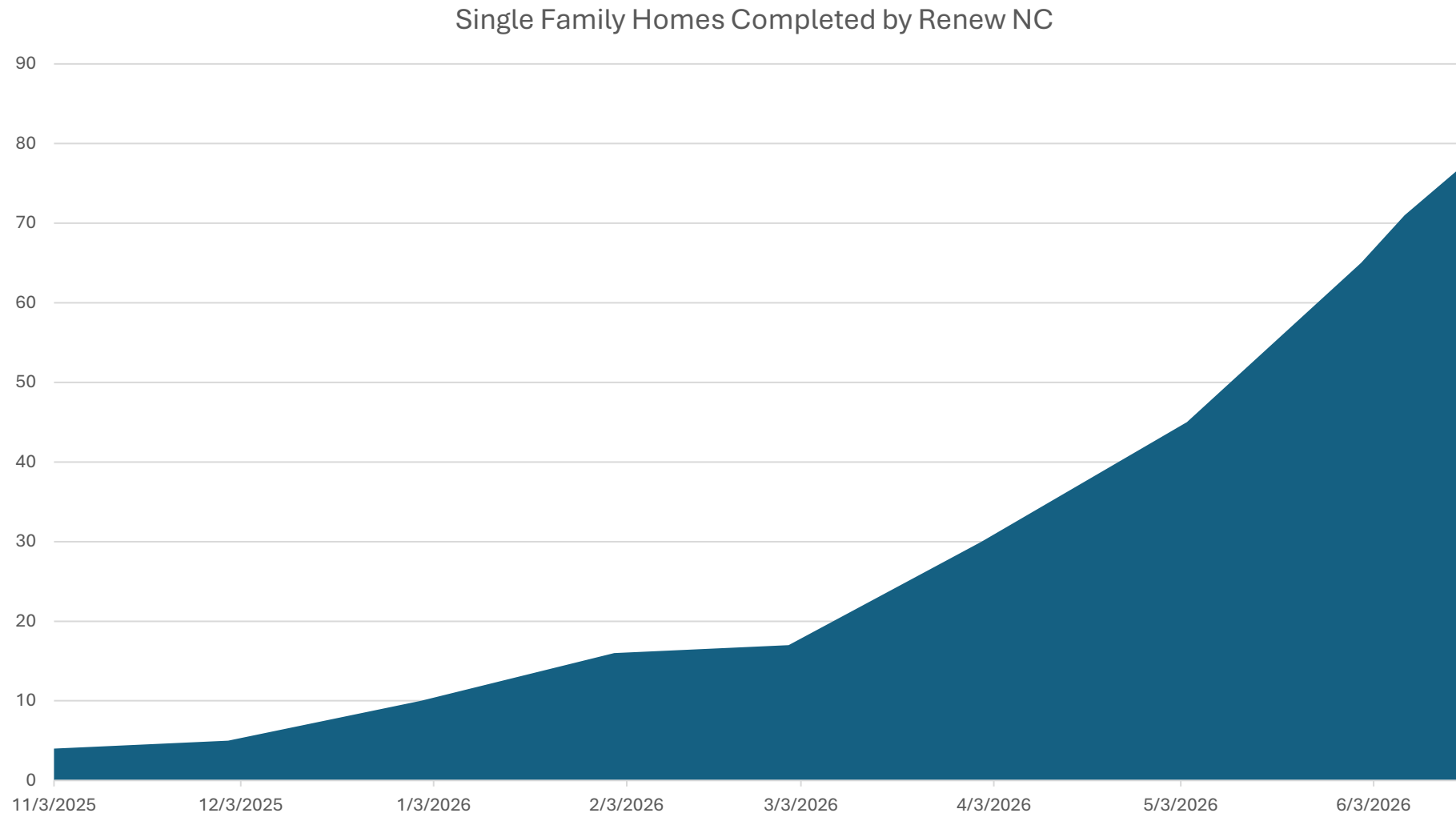


Active Applications by Workflow Status

Excludes applications pending ineligibility or other review that are included in Total Active Applications count.



Rate of Single-Family Home Completions is Accelerating



Prescreening Open: Multi-Family Construction and Repair Program

- Who the Program Serves: Multi-family rental properties with five or more units
- Funding Available: Approximately \$70 million through HUD CDBG-DR for non-LIHTC projects.
- Eligible Applicants: For-profit, non-profit developers, public housing authorities, local governments, and joint ventures between these entities. Must be located in HUD- or State-MID areas.
- Eligible Uses of Funds: New construction and substantial rehab of multi-family units.
- Award range: \$500,000 to \$15 million per project.



For more info: bit.ly/RenewNC-Multi-Family-Housing

Prescreening Open - Renew NC Community Infrastructure (CI) Grants

- Renew NC is offering a prescreening opportunity to help potential applicants prepare for the launch of the CI program. While not required for application submission, prescreening is strongly encouraged.
- Eligible applicants: local governments
- Eligible uses of funds include flood control and stormwater management systems; restoration of infrastructure (e.g., water, sewer, streets, bridges); and restoration of public spaces, including parks and community centers.
- Award range: \$500,000 to \$15 million per project.



For more information: bit.ly/RenewNC-Community-Infrastructure-Program

Applications Open - Renew NC Commercial District Revitalization (CDR) Grants

Application Period, Round 1: April 6, 2026 – August 4, 2026*

- Grants to revitalize designated commercial districts damaged by Helene.
- Eligible applicants: Local governments and nonprofit organizations in the HUD- and State-identified Most Impacted and Distressed (MID) areas.
- Eligible uses of funds include:
 - Acquisition, demolition, site preparation, or rehabilitation of commercial structures
 - Assistance for small businesses for rehabilitation and physical improvements to their places of business
 - Mixed-use projects involving commercial revitalization and housing components
 - Facade improvements to private or public structures in commercial areas
- Award range: \$500,000 to \$10 million per project.
- \$40 million of the total \$111 million CDBG-DR allocation will be available in Round 1.



For more info: commercerecovery.nc.gov/renew-nc-programs/commercial-district-revitalization-program



NC Commerce Still Accepting Applications for Small Business Infrastructure Projects in WNC

More than \$25M remains of the \$55M appropriation from the NC General Assembly to assist small businesses by expediting infrastructure repairs impacting the operation and patronage of small businesses in the affected area. There is a max award per project of \$1M.

Eligibility: Local governments impacted by Hurricane Helene and designated under a major disaster declaration from Helene. Special consideration given to local governments in Tier 1 and Tier 2 Counties.

Timeline: Applications accepted on a rolling basis; awards announced:

- June 30, 2025 – \$7.3m announced
- November 12, 2025 – \$13.8m announced
- March 20, 2026 – \$8.5m announced
- June 30, 2026 (anticipated)



For more information: commerce.nc.gov/SmBIZ



Wrap Up and Next Steps

Matt Calabria, GROW NC

Next meeting: **Friday, July 17**, 10 a.m. to 12 p.m.
(in person, Caldwell Community College –
Watauga Campus)



Stay Connected

GROW NC is sharing recovery news, resources, progress metrics, and more.



STAY CONNECTED



wncrecovery.nc.gov



wncrecovery@nc.gov



bit.ly/GROW-NC-news



[@wncrecovery](https://twitter.com/wncrecovery)