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NEWS

Lack of funding for Helene recovery may cause road repair delays across North Carolina



Will Hofmann

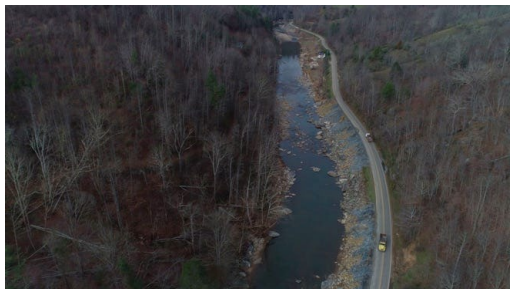
Asheville Citizen Times

Key Points

- A \$917 million funding gap could lead to significant setbacks for the state's roads, which could see a decline in quality as funding is diverted to Western North Carolina.
- As of late May, 97% of closed roads have been reopened, however the costs to repair remaining closed routes and highways are expected to be high.
- NCDOT has spent \$674 million on recovery from Tropical Storm Helene as federal agencies have reimbursed the agency \$141 million.

Regional leaders have called for more funding for infrastructure recovery across Western North Carolina as an estimated \$5 billion in road repairs could lead to deferred maintenance across the state, potentially impacting the quality of state roads.

While roughly 80% of costs for repairs from Tropical Storm Helene are expected to be covered by the federal government — primarily through the Federal Emergency Management Agency and the Federal Highway Administration — estimates indicate the state will spend an additional [\\$1.4 billion on road repairs](#) over five years to cover remaining needs in the WNC.



Aerial scenes reveal damage from Tropical Storm Helene along the Cane River and U.S. Highway 169W on Monday, Nov. 18, 2024, in Yancey County. Michael Clevenger and Max Gersh/USA today Network

The impacts from the expenditures were the subject of a newly released report by TRIP, a Washington-based national transportation research nonprofit. The N.C. Department of

Transportation will have to tap into its highway fund to cover the gap, and those funds would come "from all the divisions across the state," state engineer Alyson Tamer said during a June 5 press conference held by the nonprofit. Tamer was joined by representatives from state and regional chambers of commerce. If funds have to be redirected, the NCDOT estimates statewide route scores would decrease from 83 to 72 over five years, meaning a reduction in road pavement quality and smoothness.

"Our transportation funding challenges are compounded by tremendous growth in our state. Moving people and products safely and efficiently remains a top priority. All of these challenges existed before Helene," said NC Chamber lobbyist Jake Cashion.

Across WNC, infrastructure repairs are expected to last well into 2028, according to the TRIP report. Estimates from the NCDOT indicate the longest projects will be bridge replacements, which began last November and will take around 3.5 years, according to the report.



Aerial scenes reveal damage from Tropical Storm Helene along the Cane River and U.S. Highway 19W on Monday, Nov. 18, 2024, in Yancey County.

Michael Clevenger And Max Gersh/USA Today Network

The NCDOT estimates infrastructure recovery costs will reach nearly \$5 billion. FEMA would pay for \$1.2 billion in repairs, while the Federal Highway Administration would pay for over \$2.8 billion. The state would have to come up with the remaining \$917 million, according to NCDOT presentations.

"That's the equivalent of about 18 months of [road] resurfacing across the state," said Rocky Moretti, TRIP Director of Policy & Research.

"The North Carolina Department of Transportation has really done a heroic job of addressing this devastating damage from

Hurricane Helene," Moretti continued. "But moving forward, they also have significant transportation challenges across the state."



A view of the Main Street area of Chimney Rock, NC, shown Friday, March 28, 2025. Flood waters from Hurricane Helene six months ago heavily damaged the majority of businesses here. Thomas P. Costello/USA TODAY Network

Challenges may be compounded by a lack of federal support for reimbursement. In May, [President Donald Trump again denied Gov. Josh Stein's request for an extension of total reimbursement from the federal government for eligible disaster recovery expenses](#). In March, the federal match dropped to 90% for eligible expenses, like debris removal costs.

As of April 29, NCDOT had spent \$674 million on recovery from Helene, according to a presentation given during a the June 5 [North Carolina Board of Transportation Meeting](#). Federal agencies have reimbursed the NCDOT \$141 million.

As of late May, 97% of the 1,437 closed roads have been reopened, however the costs to repair remaining closed routes and highways are expected to be high. Just eight projects, including repairs to vast damages along Interstate 40 in the Pigeon River Gorge, are estimated to [cost over \\$2.6 billion](#).

The region's rail transportation has also required vast funding for repairs. CSX Transportation and Norfolk Southern have made strides in repairing and reopening rail lines across the region, but smaller short line railroads are still seeking funding to make repairs after the storm. In the latest disaster recovery bill proposed in the North Carolina House, Blue Ridge Southern has been proposed to receive a \$9 million grant from the NCDOT to make repairs to infrastructure damaged by the storm. Great Smoky Mountains Railroad would receive \$1 million for recovery.