

## National report: More Helene funds needed, but 'not at expense of other NC roads'

by Dean Hensley | Thursday, June 5th 2025



Interstate 40 near the Tennessee line remains closed to cars due to severe damage from Hurricane Helene, but some are choosing to travel through on kayak. (Photo: WLOS Staff)



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ASHEVILLE, N.C. (WLOS) — A national transportation nonprofit's June 6 report on Helene's impact in Western North Carolina revealed repairing the roads is the largest reconstruction program in the North Carolina Department of Transportation's history and that more funds are needed - but the executive director of the nonprofit said those funds shouldn't come at the expense of other road repairs needed across the state. The report by TRIP, a Washington, D.C., nonprofit, said that NCDOT workers have logged more than one million hours working to

rebuild roads since Helene hit just over eight months ago, according to a news release. "NCDOT and its partners have done tremendous work to rebuild Western North Carolina's transportation network to keep people and commerce moving in the aftermath of Hurricane Helene," said Dave Kearby, TRIP's executive director, in a Zoom news conference revealing the report on June 6.

Kearby also made this statement about the Helene repair funds:

**"It will be critical that these vital efforts to rebuild do not come at the cost of making needed improvements to the rest of the state's transportation system."**

### More funds needed, but at what cost?

The report said WNC faces significant costs to address the damage, and while funds from the federal government are expected to cover the largest share of the cost, additional storm-related expenditures by the state will leave less funding available for needed improvements and repairs to the transportation network in other areas of the state as the funds are redirected to hurricane recovery efforts, the release said.

The current estimate to repair and replace roads, highways and bridges damaged by Hurricane Helene is approximately \$5 billion, with federal contributions anticipated to cover 81% of that, the report said. That leaves North Carolina to pay for the remaining \$917 million cost.

NCDOT will pay all costs upfront, with the largest impacts to the department's cash reserves occurring in SFY 2026 and SFY 2027 before federal reimbursements are forecast to exceed disaster recovery spend. Through March 2025, NCDOT has spent \$574 million on Helene recovery and has been reimbursed with about \$130 million in federal funding.

Without additional funding to pay for needed road, highway and bridge repairs in WNC, the state may risk further deterioration of its other state-maintained roads and bridges, the report said. The forecasted state share of \$917 million is approximately equivalent to one year of general maintenance spend, 18 months of contracted resurfacing spend, three years of bridge program spend, or 10 years of bridge preservation spend, according to the report. "TRIP's WNC Strong report underscores the urgent need for transportation investment in North Carolina," said Gary Salamido, president and CEO of the NC Chamber, in the release. "To stay competitive and ensure safe, efficient movement of people and goods, we must invest statewide — especially in WNC. The NC Chamber is pushing for diversified funding solutions, including lifting the cap on public-private partnerships, to unlock new opportunities across the state."

NCDOT estimates that deferring maintenance on its transportation system as a result of re-

directed funding in the wake of Hurricane Helene would have significant long-term impacts on the overall condition of the state's transportation system. If approximately \$1.4 billion is redirected from the state's highway fund over the next five years (an average of \$300 million each year), the statewide route score, which evaluates the condition and smoothness of pavements, would drop from its current level of 83 to 71 in five years, the report said.

### Update on the roads

According to the report, as of late May, these are the status updates of WNC's roads:

- 97 percent of storm-related closures on state-maintained roads have been reopened
- 42 state-maintained roads remain closed
- 53 state-maintained roads have only partial access
- Repair or replacement was completed on 447 state-maintained bridges
- Permanent replacement was made for 16 state-maintained bridges
- 138 state-maintained bridges still await permanent replacement.
- After significant repairs to the state's rail network, service has resumed on most lines, although some rail segments in Buncombe, McDowell, Yancey, and Mitchell Counties remain out of service.

According to the TRIP report, "WNC Strong: Rebuilding Western North Carolina's Transportation System Following Catastrophic Damage from Hurricane Helene," flooding from Helene devastated WNC's transportation system, washing out numerous roads, highways, bridges and rail lines, and isolating multiple communities. NCDOT estimated that the storm damaged nearly 9,400 sites, resulting in the closure of 1,400 state-maintained roads and damaging 818 state-maintained bridges.

Some of the most heavily-damaged routes included portions of Interstate 40 along the Pigeon River Gorge, the report said. Of the approximately 9,400 damaged sites that required assistance from NCDOT, 73% (a total of 6,822 sites) would require an additional rebuild of the structure. The largest projects include the reconstruction of portions of Interstate 40, roadways in the Toe and Nolichucky region, portions of U.S. 19W, N.C. 197, and portions of U.S. 64 and 74 in the Chimney Rock area.

"We are grateful for the heroic work that has been done to restore Western North Carolina's transportation infrastructure," Kit Cramer, president and CEO of the Asheville Area Chamber of Commerce, said in the news release. "It's imperative that we find the funding to finish the job for the good of the entire state's economy and the ongoing health of our transportation system."