

3

RIVERS OF SOUTHERN APPALACHIA

THREAT: Extreme weather, flooding, unsafe dams, lack of federal capacity

STATES: North Carolina, Tennessee, South Carolina, Georgia

AT RISK: Water quality, public safety, local economy

SUMMARY

The rivers of Southern Appalachia weave a rich tapestry, vital to the region's culture and economy, and supporting an abundance of life. But Hurricane Helene devastated these rivers and communities with record flooding and landslides. Federal, state, and local partners have already allocated resources to the region, but there is a long road to recovery and preparation for the next storm in the years to come. Together we must continue to restore the rivers, invest in communities, and remove unsafe dams to strengthen the region so people and businesses can thrive despite increasingly extreme weather.

THE RIVER

Southern Appalachia's rivers span the eastern continental divide, providing clean drinking water to over 2 million people throughout more than a dozen communities from Newport, Tennessee to Charlotte, North Carolina. These rivers are the economic, recreational, and environmental drivers of the region and are vital to the local and regional economy. The French Broad River watershed alone contributes over \$3.8 billion annually to the region, largely from tourism and recreation.

The Rivers of Southern Appalachia are home to unique and rare species of fish like bright orange tangerine darters and Southern Appalachian brook trout, and other species like the river otter, majestic blue heron, and Eastern hellbenders.

In September 2024, Hurricane Helene devastated communities in the French Broad watershed (including the French Broad, North and South Toe, Cane, Nolichucky, Swannanoa, and Pigeon Rivers), Broad River (including Green and Pacolet Rivers), Watauga River (including the Elk River), New River, Catawba River, and many other rivers, creeks, and waterways. The record rainfall and the largest flood in the region's history claimed 104 lives, destroyed drinking water and wastewater infrastructure, sent debris and pollution into waterways, reshaped river valleys in a landscape-scale event, breached dams, and obliterated sensitive fish and wildlife habitat.

Despite the risks of significant flood events, population growth and development continue unabated, which has led to such significant levels of pollution that several of the rivers are on state and federal lists for polluted water bodies. This indicates that they are limited in their ability to provide clean water and healthy recreation to the communities that depend on them.

RIVERLINK

3

RIVERS OF SOUTHERN APPALACHIA

Continued

FOR MORE INFORMATION:

ERIN SINGER MCCOMBS
Southeast Conservation Director
American Rivers
828-649-7887
emccombs@americanrivers.org

GRAY JERNIGAN
MountainTrue
828-423-0578
gray@mountaintrue.org

LISA RALEIGH
RiverLink
970-274-2012
lisa@riverlink.org

TAKE ACTION:

**[AMERICANRIVERS.ORG/
RIVERSOFAPPALACHIA2025](https://AMERICANRIVERS.ORG/RIVERSOFAPPALACHIA2025)**

THE THREAT

Hurricane Helene caused the economic and environmental destruction, but how the response is handled will create the path forward for the vulnerable human, plant, and wild-life communities left in the wake of this storm. Local communities need support and partnership from each other as well as from government sources. The federal government has a critical role in delivering resources and coordinating the response across state lines and throughout the region. Specifically, federal support is needed to address:

- **Unsafe Dams:** More than 44 dams failed or were damaged leaving a trail of high hazard dams in poor condition which threaten communities when the next storm comes, unless we remove these hazards from the landscape.
- **Debris:** Storm debris ranging from cars and fuel tanks to litter like plastic hanging from riverside trees and garbage along the riverfront harm wildlife and people and put the local economy from the river's recreation industry at risk.
- **Floodplains:** Many property owners are eligible for voluntary buyouts to get themselves out of harm's way before the next flood comes.
- **Erosion:** Miles of streambanks have been scoured of vegetation and undercut by erosion, leading to property loss and sediment pollution that threatens fish habitat and other sensitive aquatic life.
- **Economic Development:** Federal actions can help the region's economy – which relies heavily on

outdoor recreation and agriculture – bounce back as quickly as possible. Federal and state parks need to be safe and open to the public. Reconstruction permit review needs to be efficient. Crop and forestry support must be provided. Without the capacity to address these issues within the federal agencies, communities will suffer long-term economic consequences.

WHAT MUST BE DONE

The fate of Southern Appalachian rivers impacted by Helene rests on decisions that prioritize long term recovery and resilience funding. Mountain communities must not be forgotten and should have the capacity to address these impacts. Recovery efforts will require robust funding and staffing to ensure our region's economic recovery, to keep our communities safe during the next storm, and to bring back the health of the Rivers of Southern Appalachia. Regional nonprofits and local governments are poised to act as funding becomes available.

Federal natural resource agencies should prioritize the restoration and protection of the region's rivers so that they are resilient to future storms. Funding must be released to implement projects on the ground including debris cleanup, floodplain buyouts, infrastructure improvements, streambank stabilization, dam removals, floodplain protections, and stormwater mitigation. Congress must provide oversight of the federal agencies to ensure that there is adequate staffing to effectively implement the work as directed and funded by Congress including ensuring the Federal Emergency Management Agency, U.S. Forest Service, and regulatory agencies have boots on the ground needed to respond to the needs of communities.

ERICA SHANKS