



FEMA

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News Release

North Carolina Project Repurposes Fallen Trees

RALEIGH, N.C. – Thousands of trees damaged by Tropical Storm Helene will be repurposed under a North Carolina project developed through Interagency Recovery Coordination (IRC), a team of federal, state and local government, non-profits and faith-based organizations. More than 320,000 pounds of wood has already been removed.

“This marks the transition from response to long-term recovery,” said Thomas J. McCool, federal coordinating officer for North Carolina’s disaster operation. “The IRC’s innovative collaboration is tailored specifically to western North Carolina and leverages the unique skills, expertise and tools of every organization involved.”

Stages of the project include clearing debris and fallen trees from the North Carolina Arboretum south of Asheville. The arboretum has walking trails, gardens and an educational center that serve 600,000 visitors per year. Helene knocked down more than 5,000 trees across trails and roads in the 434-acre site in the Pisgah National Forest, making the park nonoperational.

The project is already sending logs to a staging area to be sorted based on potential use. The wood will then be distributed to residents and communities for firewood, furniture material, mulch and more.

The IRC was established by the federal disaster recovery coordinator to meet challenges presented by Helene and ensure interagency coordination for disaster recovery in North Carolina. With debris removal underway at the arboretum, IRC partners have removed 65 truckloads of timber to date, allowing it to reopen to the public last week. Firewood splitting started this week. Instead of disposing the debris at a landfill or burning it, the project minimizes waste by recycling it.

Norma R. Houston, chief of staff to the UNC System Office, said the arboretum – a state entity under the jurisdiction of the University of North Carolina (UNC) System – would still be closed if not for the IRC.

“This is an example of what amazing things can happen when groups sharing a common mission dedicated to helping people in times of need work together,” she said.

IRC partnerships for the project are North Carolina Division of Emergency Management (NCEM); UNC System; Buncombe County; FEMA; the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) and contractors; Team Rubicon, a

nongovernmental organization specializing in disaster response; American Red Cross; Mennonite Disaster Services; U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Rural Development; and U.S. Forest Service (USFS).

USACE and contractors are pulling fallen trees out of the arboretum and sending 20-foot logs to a staging site selected by Buncombe County and the state. Larger logs will go for a special USFS program to supply local lumber mills with wood. Many lost a lot of inventory during the storm.

USDA teams of forest experts are sorting the wood based on intended purpose, including furniture building, home heating and landscaping. American Red Cross and Mennonite Disaster Services provided equipment for firewood cutting, which is being handled by Team Rubicon volunteers trained to use chainsaws, log-splitters and other equipment. Local churches will take the divided wood, kiln dry it as needed and provide burn-ready wood to residents.

“FEMA really tries to listen to state and local partners, and this project was a perfect way for a range of players to come together for a common goal,” said James McPherson, federal disaster recovery coordinator for North Carolina. “We kept the debris out of the landfills and the firewood will go to those who need it most at no cost. We could not have done this so quickly and effectively without the direct support of our IRC partners. We have more work to do, but this is what partnerships look like after a disaster – many hands working together gets the job done.”



ASHEVILLE, North Carolina - FEMA Administrator Deanne Criswell visits the A-B Tech Enka Campus staging site Nov. 9, 2024. FEMA is working closely with federal, state and local government partners, non-profits and faith-based organizations for a new wood project.



ASHEVILLE, North Carolina - The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and contractors move 20-foot logs to a staging site Nov. 7, 2024. The trees will be repurposed under a new North Carolina wood project.



ASHEVILLE, North Carolina - Wood from fallen trees is sorted Nov. 7, 2024. The trees are being sorted by potential use, including furniture material, firewood and mulch.

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