

Helene-damaged Beech Mountain dam poses safety threat, water crisis

Two years after Helene, Beech Mountain faces a potential catastrophe. Town officials are begging for federal funding to repair the Buckeye Lake dam.

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BEECH MOUNTAIN, N.C. — Two years after Helene devastated western North Carolina, lingering damage from the historic storm is threatening the safety and water supply of people in Beech Mountain and some only learned about the potential danger from WCNC Charlotte.

Among other deficiencies, the popular resort town cannot release floodwaters from its "high hazard" dam. Town Manager Bob Pudney said the ongoing problem could spell catastrophe in the event of another major storm.

"It is a strong possibility," Pudney said. "We're at the mercy of God with how much water he sends us, because we cannot control it. There's people's property and lives at risk."



Pudney said Helene's historic rainfall sent debris into Buckeye Lake, which is the town's sole water source. The debris damaged the water plant's intake valve and the dam itself, cracked its spillway and rendered the valve responsible for carefully releasing floodwaters unusable. The problems remain unrepaired today.

"The biggest issue we have is the main emergency drain doesn't work," Pudney said. "It's dire. We've identified the people at risk. We've attempted to communicate that risk with them, have talked to a number. We don't want to scare them, but we want them to know that when we call or we send someone to knock on their door, it's time to leave."

Not everyone downstream has received the message. An emergency plan lists Viola Greene's property and dozens of others as at risk. She and some of her neighbors found out about the potential danger from WCNC Charlotte.



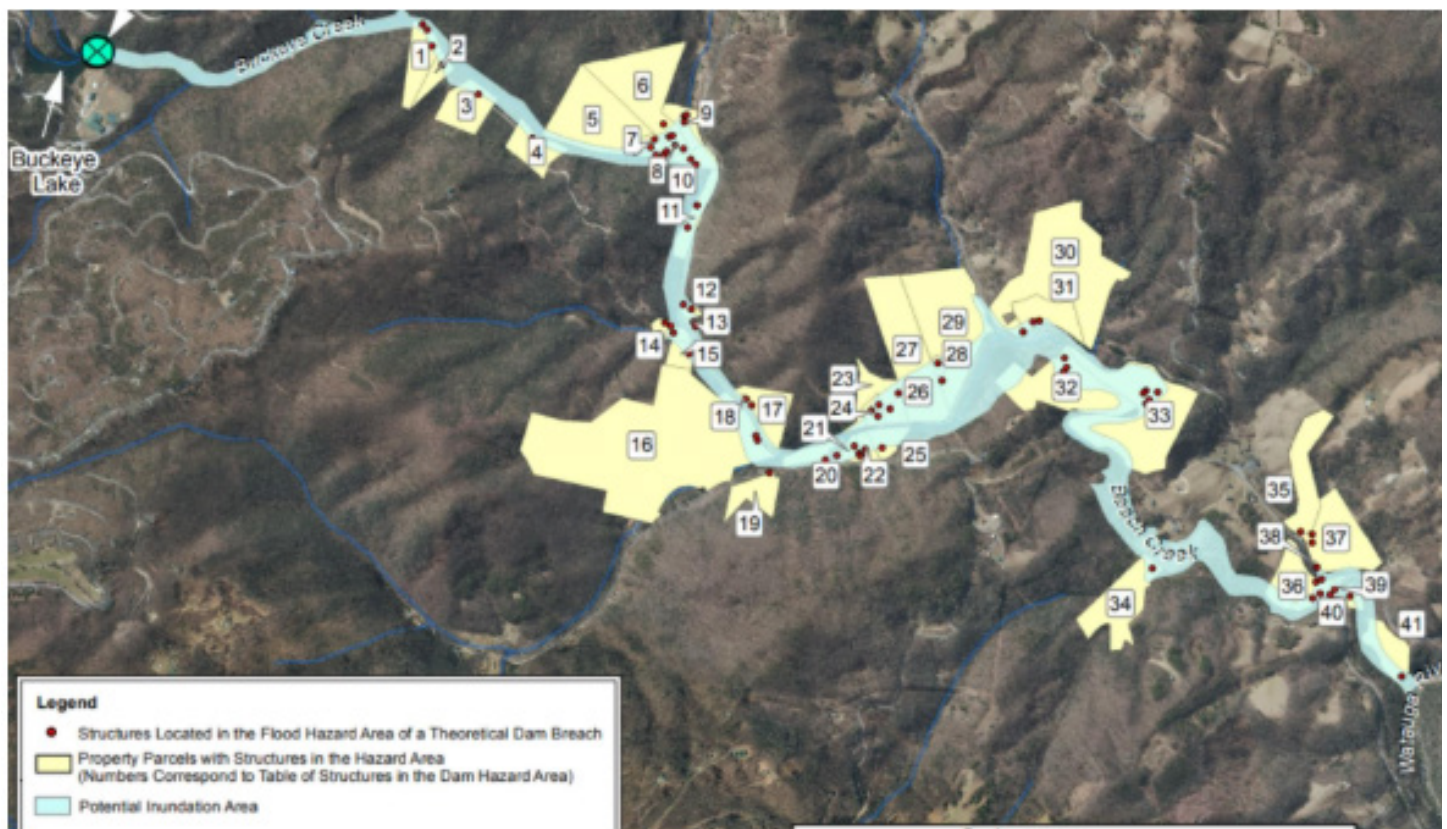
Credit: WCNC Charlotte

"I feel like I missed something," she said. "Like somebody's not telling us something we need to know. It's not good."

"I know more than I did, but what can I do about it? I live here," she said. "Now, what happens to the new house if the dam breaks?"

Amid communication concerns raised by WCNC Charlotte, Pudney pledged additional action.

"I will institute another public outreach for those properties identified in our (Emergency Action Plan)," he said.



Credit: Town of Beech Mountain

In the meantime, town officials told WCNC Charlotte that engineering firms have recommended Beech Mountain drain the lake to fully evaluate the damage and make the needed repairs. Pudney said that process will take almost a year and require the town to build a temporary drinking water source. All said, the town estimates the cost for the entire project to be \$60 million on the low end.

According to Pudney, the town has raised about \$20 million for the project, but with an annual operating budget of \$16 million, it is tapped out and desperately needs a partner. In recent months, he's warned town leaders that, despite efforts to secure funding, the project is stalled.

"We're two years into this and there hasn't been any improvement," Pudney said. "We've got to get moving. We've got to get this solved."

At a July meeting, he raised concerns that "a catastrophic event" is not a matter of "if," but "when." The following month, he warned, "another 50, 100-year storm could be catastrophic."



Credit: WCNC Charlotte

This summer, [FEMA](#) denied the town's funding request to build an emergency water supply, noting an "alternate water source is not eligible under FEMA Public Assistance." Pudney said Beech Mountain has already spent millions of dollars of its own money trying to come up with a solution.

"We're doing everything possible as a town," he said. "This is certainly where the federal government needs to step in and assist us."

Members of Congress are trying to advocate on behalf of the town. [Sen. Ted Budd \(R\), NC](#), escalated Beech Mountain's concerns during a [Senate Appropriations Committee Hearing](#) this summer, telling his colleagues, "we can't delay any longer."

"The issues with Beech Mountain's water treatment facility are something my team and I have been tracking for months, and we've worked closely with both the town management and FEMA to identify additional avenues to funding under various programs," Sen. Budd said in a statement. "My office will continue to do everything we can to support any of Beech Mountain's applications for assistance, and I remain committed to fighting for additional Helene funding as part of a supplemental spending bill in Washington."



A spokesperson for Congresswoman [Virginia Foxx](#) (R), NC-5, told WCNC Charlotte she's made congressional inquiries on the town's behalf and continues to have ongoing conversations with FEMA representatives.

"Most recently, on September 9th, the Congresswoman's district office spoke with the Town's manager and offered further assistance in connecting with FEMA's representatives for updates related to the Town's resubmission of its project request," spokesperson Alex Ives said. "The Congresswoman has also been personally in touch with the Town's officials in recent weeks as well. Every step of the way, the Congresswoman and her office have made themselves available for any and all help requested by the Town's manager and officials."

In May, the [North Carolina Department of Environmental Quality](#) issued a deficiency letter to Beech Mountain after finding the town in violation of state rules tied to the damaged water intake valve. The town is using an emergency floating pump system currently.

The town has a history of water troubles, especially in times of drought.



Credit: WCNC Charlotte

Known for its elevation, ski resort and other outdoor activities, fewer than 1,000 people live in Beech Mountain year-round, but Pudney said another 5,000 to 20,000 tourists are there at any given time, depending on the season. The town manager said this is bigger than just a western North Carolina problem.

"If the Town of Beech Mountain can't solve this problem, it will have wide-ranging impact to the state," Pudney said.

A FEMA spokesperson noted the federal agency has already obligated \$23.3 million overall for Beech Mountain's recovery projects.

"The town and its engineer are working on the Buckeye Lake Reservoir scope of work and will provide the information to FEMA for review when ready," the agency said. "We previously obligated \$3.5 million towards this project. FEMA and the state continue meeting weekly with Beech Mountain officials to support their Helene recovery."

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