



ECONOMY

‘We are survivors. We have to be.’

Almost three months after a storm brought devastating flooding and mudslides to the Buchanan County community of Hurley, residents and volunteers continue their slow recovery – and wait for help from FEMA that might never come.

by Megan Schnabel November 23, 2021

The aftermath of the flood in Hurley. Photo by Lakin Keene.

HURLEY – On the morning of Aug. 30, Mark Coleman was watching the rain fall and the creek rise.

He wouldn't need to leave for his job driving a coal truck until mid-afternoon, so he was still at home in the Guesses Fork section of Hurley, a community of several hundred homes that stretches into the northern part of Buchanan County.

Later, he would see a photo of the storm cloud that had parked over Hurley, shot from Mingo County, West Virginia, just across the state line.

“That big old cloud was sitting dead on top of this mountain, just dumping water,” Coleman said. “It was like it was pouring out of a bucket.

“It was wicked to see.”

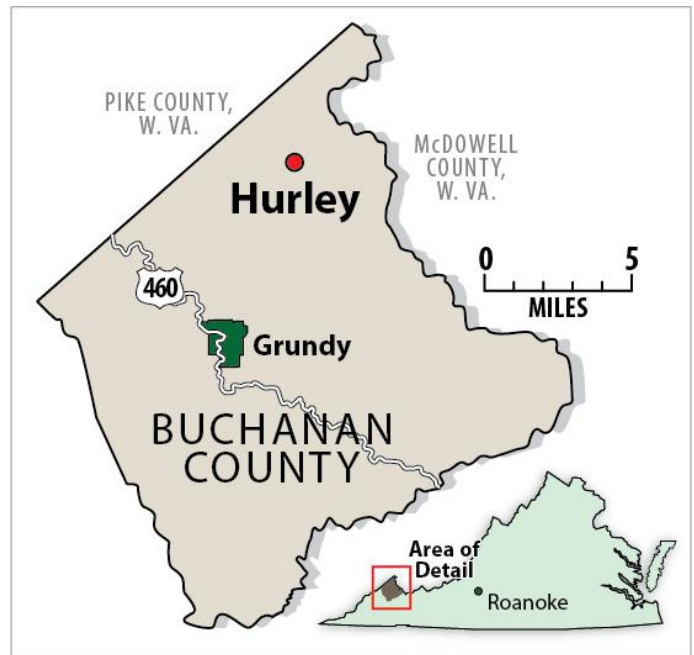
That morning, though, thanks to a warning from his nephew, he just knew that water had started to run over the bridge that spanned Guesses Fork in front of his and his mother's houses. Patty Coleman lived alone in the two-story blue house just up a slight rise from him, and she used a cane to get around.

“I told Mama, ‘You better get in the truck,’” he said. “I said, ‘We got to go.’”

He figures he drove her out of there with maybe five minutes to spare.

“After that, it was mayhem,” he said.

The same rain that was pushing Guesses Fork out of its banks was also pouring down the steep hillsides that hem in this part of Hurley. Within minutes, a wall of mud and rock had slammed



Map by Robert Lunsford



into the back of Patty Coleman's house, through the glass double doors off the kitchen, across the living room and out the front door.

Downhill and a little closer to Guesses Fork, water from the creek rushed under Mark Coleman's mobile home, washing out some of the underpinnings.

Over the course of about four hours that morning, the storm ravaged the Guesses Fork community. One person died: Opal Rife, an 85-year-old woman who was found two days later in her house.

Dozens of homes were destroyed – some washed down the swollen Guesses Fork, some crushed by slides, some still standing but so badly damaged that rebuilding would be impossible.

Scores of others sustained damage but could, in theory, be made habitable again with enough materials and labor and time.

And, of course, money.

Not everyone who lost a home had insurance. And the residents who did carry homeowners or flood policies are discovering that neither one is likely to cover the damage caused by slides, or the immense cost of replacing private bridges that were washed away or crushed. So far, the county has counted 22 of those.

Late last month, the Federal Emergency Management Agency denied the state's request for financial help for individual homeowners, saying in a letter to Gov. Ralph Northam that the

Patty Coleman's house was hit by a mudslide. Her homeowners insurance won't cover any of the damage, her daughter-in-law said. Photo by Lakin Keene.



Mark Coleman (right, standing with Jerry Ray Lester, a relative) lost an outbuilding and a swimming pool, and his own house was damaged. "I was lucky," he said, standing in front of his mother's house, which was hit by a mudslide. "I mean, I got to keep my home." Photo by Lakin Keene.



Fire and rescue agencies from across the region responded in the aftermath of the Aug. 30 storm in Hurley. This photo, posted to the

impact of the disaster “was not of such severity and magnitude” to warrant the assistance.

Roanoke Fire-EMS Facebook page, shows some of the damage the crews encountered.

Volunteers from Buchanan County and across the state have stepped into the void, converging week after week on Hurley – tearing out drywall tattooed with mold, rebuilding disintegrating subfloors, installing new kitchen cabinets.

Donors have given hundreds of thousands of dollars in cash and building materials and food.

But winter, and the holidays, are coming, said Travis Staton, CEO of United Way of Southwest Virginia and a member of the Long-Term Recovery Group, an ad-hoc committee that is overseeing fundraising and volunteer coordination.

Flood water and mudslides destroyed bridges and ate away at the roadway, as seen in this image from Roanoke Fire-EMS.

“There’s a lot of people in Southwest Virginia that honestly could use some help right now,” he said.

et in the truck, 'cause it's coming over the top back there,"
e door. It washed everything out." Photo by Lakin Keene.

The mudslide gutted Patty Coleman's house. Photo by Lakin Keene.

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Calling what happened in Hurley a "flood" doesn't come close to capturing the devastation.

The torrential rain turned the normally docile Guesses Fork into a raging force, inundating some houses with creek water and carrying others away to lodge against the railroad trestle at the top of Guesses Fork Road.

But the downpour also unleashed slide after slide down the mountains, across the road, into homes. Houses that were far enough from the creek to be spared the rising water from the front were hit from behind with tons of mud and rocks that crashed through walls and tunneled through foundations.

The force of the water and the rocks and the mud chewed away parts of the roadway, leaving jagged bite marks along the edges of the asphalt. Power poles along a nearly 3-mile stretch were snapped. Water lines were breached.

There isn't an official rain gauge in Hurley, but TV weather reports from that day used radar to estimate that the area around Guesses Fork Road got as much as 7 inches of rain in just a few hours. Grundy, the county seat 16 miles away, got maybe half an inch.

"I've seen floods. This area is used to floods. But I had never seen one that quick, and I'd never been in it, literally wading in the water and dealing with the aftermath of it," said longtime Guesses Fork resident Stephanie Stiltner.

She and her husband, Ben, had put two of their kids on the school bus that morning and were home with the other three when the water started to rise.

Southwest Virginia floods

Read all of Cardinal News' coverage of flooding in Southwest Virginia [here](#).

By 10:30, water was coming into the house and the five of them headed up the hill, away from the roiling waters of Guesses Fork.

“And then the terror started,” Stiltner said. “The mountain started coming off. Literally, my best description of it is, it looked like the mountains were melting.”

They kept moving up the hillside – 100 feet, 150 feet. They could hear a woman screaming; they later learned it was a neighbor whose house had been destroyed and who had clung to a refrigerator until she could climb into a tree.

Stiltner figures they were on the hill for about four hours. They made their way back to their front porch; a swift-water rescue team ferried them to safety at about 10 p.m.

They lived with her mother for two weeks. They couldn't get back into their house for a week after the storm, and then they worked feverishly for another week – shoveling out mud, hauling away ruined furniture and flooring – so that they could move back into the intact part of the house as quickly as possible. Two of their kids have autism and don't handle change well, and needed to be in familiar surroundings, she said. The other three are foster kids whom the Stiltners are trying to adopt.

“I try to keep a positive attitude,” Stephanie Stiltner said. “I try to tell my kids to have a positive attitude. They did lose some toys and they did lose their bedrooms, but they have their lives and they have their clothes and that's a lot more than some of the people have.” Photo by Lakin Keene.

Help started to arrive. A crew of Southern Baptist volunteers cut out ruined sheetrock, cleaned out the rest of the mud and sprayed chemicals to neutralize the mold and mildew. Several weeks after that, volunteers from the Baptist General Association of Virginia started working on rebuilding.

Sitting at her kitchen table, talking over the whine of a saw in the next room, Stiltner gets emotional when she recalls the phone call telling her that someone was going to fix their house.

“We’ve been very, very extremely blessed, probably more than we deserve – more than I deserve, anyway,” she said. “The community has really rallied together.”

She and Ben have a homeowners policy but have been told it won’t cover anything. They have no flood insurance. The materials alone for a new bridge will run \$18,000, they’ve been told. They lost 25 feet of front yard along the newly widened creek.

But she pointed out what she called the real losses: Two houses above their property, one house below it and a nearby church are all gone.

“I pray daily, I pray nightly, I pray in the car when I’m by myself,” she said. “This is difficult. I’ll be the first to say that: This is very difficult.

“But when I get bummed out or I get down, I tend to think, my neighbors have nothing. And that’s the truth. You’re talking about people who have worked their whole life, in coal mines and things like that, trying to make a living, and then to lose it and have nobody to fall back on. Because very few people had flood insurance.”

Stephanie Stiltner and her husband finished remodeling the back of their house less than 18 months ago. They’d planned to work on the bathroom and the kitchen and then they’d be done. Now, a crew of volunteers is renovating it all over again. Photo by Lakin Keene.

Stephanie Stiltner's home was damaged but is being rebuilt, unlike several nearby houses. "We have issues here, but my neighbors' houses aren't even standing," she said. "To walk back off that hill and see nothing where stuff had been all your life, it is just — I don't even have a word for it. Devastating is the best word I've got." Photo by Lakin Keene.

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Many homeowners were counting on FEMA to come through with assistance to fill the gap left by their lack of insurance, or by the denials of their claims.

But in a letter received Oct. 29 by the office of Gov. Ralph Northam, David Bibo, an acting associate administrator of FEMA wrote:

"The damage to the infrastructure was significant in the area designated for Public Assistance. However, based on our review of all of the information available ... it has been determined that the impact to the individuals and households from this event was not of such severity and magnitude to warrant the designation of Individual Assistance Therefore, your request for Individual Assistance is denied."

In short: FEMA would help pay for the county's infrastructure repairs, but homeowners were on their own.

“My first reaction was, I couldn’t handle it,” said Butch Meredith, who oversees volunteer construction efforts for the BGAV. “It was awful. To talk to these people on a daily basis and see the need and get a feel for what’s going on and to have that, it just knocks your legs out from under you.”

The county is working with the state to appeal FEMA’s denial. How long FEMA has to respond to the appeal is unclear.

“From my experience in past disasters, once you get a denial it’s that much harder to get an appeal approved,” Staton said. “So I think it’s going to be an uphill battle.”

FEMA’s decision-making process is opaque at best, he said.

“My fear is that FEMA’s formula might not be equitable for rural communities,” he said. “But I can’t get a real answer for what FEMA’s formula is.”

When disasters hit densely populated areas – like Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans – the devastation is easy to see: thousands of homes damaged or destroyed, millions of dollars in losses.

The scope might be narrower in a place like Hurley, but that doesn’t mean the need is less, Staton said.

The land and structures that were damaged are valued at \$5.7 million, according to county records. That number is likely to rise by another million or two as more problems are discovered, said Bart Chambers, Buchanan County’s building official.

According to U.S. Census figures, the median household income in Buchanan County was about \$32,000 in 2019. That same year, an estimated 21.7% of the county’s 21,000 residents were living in poverty.

The median value of owner-occupied housing in the county was \$72,300.

“I do think it’s time that some folks really look into how those formulas and allocations are done, particularly from rural communities,” Staton said. “And maybe there’s some conversations that could

be had around how is it done and is it really equitably done for small communities and small populations that aren't as dense but have an even more significant need sometimes.”

Even if FEMA help does come through, it won't fix as much as some residents might hope. The most any homeowner could receive is \$36,000, Staton said; nationally, the average FEMA award is \$4,000 to \$6,000, he said.

Staton said he's been talking to state officials about tapping the Virginia Disaster Relief Fund, a public-private program that was created after a tornado devastated the Washington County community of Glade Spring in 2011 and FEMA denied individual assistance.

But it's a program of last resort, meaning that all other funding assistance – including FEMA money – must be exhausted before it could be used, said Lauren Opett, a spokeswoman for the Virginia Department of Emergency Management, which administers the fund.

The amount of money in the fund is based on donations, so she couldn't say how much might be available to help Hurley residents. And the process isn't quick, she said. Once an application is submitted, it must be approved by a review committee, and then awards are dependent on how much money is available.

Del. Will Morefield, R-Tazewell County, said he's working on a legislative solution. He's hopeful, but he isn't ready to talk about any details yet.

“It's perplexing to me that FEMA would not approve it,” he said. “How bad does it have to be? When homes have been completely wiped off their foundation – how bad does it have to be before you would

Bart Chambers, Buchanan County's building official, said not knowing what caused the flash flood makes it harder to prevent another one. “That's what scares me,” he said. “What I am in fear of more than anything is if these people do go back in their homes, it could happen again. If this had happened in the middle of the night, we'd have been in trouble. We'd be still digging for bodies, I would imagine.” Photo by Lakin Keene.

be eligible to receive private assistance? ...

“Ultimately, it just looks like they decided that they were not going to approve it, and quite frankly, that’s unacceptable and very sad.”

U.S. Rep. Morgan Griffith, R-Salem, wrote to Northam early this month urging him to appeal the denial. “Like you, I have also visited the Hurley area of Buchanan County and witnessed the damage firsthand,” the letter reads. “The devastation is severe, with many individuals being permanently displaced from their households.”

A spokeswoman this week said Griffith had no comment beyond what was in the letter.

Local fundraising efforts have picked up urgency.

A recovery fund launched by the Long-Term Recovery Group and administered by United Way was closing in on its \$500,000 goal last week, said spokesman Scott Robertson.

The Knoxville, Tennessee-based Thompson Charitable Foundation had just provided a \$100,000 challenge grant; Robertson said the group expects to have the final \$20,000 of matching money raised by Thanksgiving, which will bring the fund total to \$450,000.

Other donations have included \$20,000 from Buchanan General Hospital, more than \$106,000 from a fund drive led by Food City, \$1,129 from inmates at the Pocahontas State Correctional Center.

Homeowners provide documentation of insurance denials and of the building supplies they need, and money from the fund is paid directly to vendors. The materials are picked up by the volunteer crews, who then make the repairs.

United Way has earmarked \$143,750 for 28 homes so far, Robertson said, a tally that’s expected to grow as the process of assessing damages continues.

Some homeowners have been hesitant to accept the help, he said, worried that it could lead FEMA to turn down their claims if Virginia’s appeal is successful.

Separately, a fundraising effort led by Buchanan County Supervisor Trey Adkins, whose district includes the Guesses Fork area, brought in more than \$150,000, including \$90,000 from an anonymous donor in

Grundy. About \$120,000 was paid out directly to residents, he said; the rest was used to rent equipment to help with cleanup.

The support has been overwhelming, he said. On the day of the storm, hundreds of people converged on Hurley to help with rescue operations. Over the following weeks, the community center, gym and adjacent parking lot were packed with food and pallets of water.

One day, Adkins said, a guy drove up in a pickup truck with North Carolina plates and dropped off a load of corn on the cob.

He said he feels confident that the appeal of FEMA's decision will be successful. But for now, they just have to wait.

“Everybody's been so busy trying to clean up, trying to salvage what they can of their belongings, that they haven't had time to sit down and wrap their minds around what happened or cry or whatever they need to do,” Adkins said. “It's been heartbreaking to see what the folks have been through.”

Trey Adkins, a member of the Buchanan County Board of Supervisors, stands in front of the community center that was a hub for donations and volunteers in the days after the storm. “Everybody's been so busy trying to clean up, trying to salvage what they can of their belongings, that they haven't had time to sit down and wrap their minds around what happened or cry or whatever they need to do,” Adkins said. Photo by Lakin Keene

Debbie Lester consults with Butch Meredith, construction coordinator with the Baptist General Association of Virginia, about the work that BGVA volunteers are doing on her kitchen. She was still hoping that she could host Thanksgiving dinner, and had already bought two 15-pound turkeys. Photo by Megan Schnabel.

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The conversation in Debbie Lester's kitchen could have been any meeting between a contractor and a client.

The new cabinets have arrived, but they don't fit. Can the fridge be moved? The stove?

But in Lester's kitchen, a sofa was parked in the middle of the floor, out of the way of the yellow t-shirted volunteers who were replacing floors and patching walls. The faint smell of river mud still hung in the air.

Lester moved in in 2002 after her last house, which was lower down and closer to the creek, flooded.

She'd had insurance on that property, but the worst of the damage was outside – the bridge washed out, her car flooded – and the policy wouldn't cover it.

The creek – that's where flooding usually came from. She figured she was safe on the hill, until the hill came down. She didn't carry insurance on this house.

And so here she was, surrounded by volunteers in yellow t-shirts and cabinets that didn't fit quite right but would work out somehow. She was joking with the crew, telling them that if they'd just get the kitchen done, she could cook them a real meal. For now, she's living in a camping trailer in the yard.

The homeowners that the BGAV crews work with pick out the flooring and the cabinets and other trim as much as possible, Meredith said. It should feel like their house, as close to normal as possible – hence, his good-natured back-and-forth with Lester over her kitchen design.

BGAV volunteers usually stay for about a week at a time. A few of them have professional construction experience but most learn on the job, Meredith said. They bunk down at night at a church in Grundy.

As of last week, the BGAV crews had worked on six houses and supplied materials for three more.

Many of them come back again and again, he said. "We'll be here as long as we have volunteers coming," he said. They'll be back in the spring if there's more work to do.

Debbie Lester moved into her house 20 years ago, after her earlier home flooded. This time, it was a mudslide that got her. "I've picked myself up and kicked myself in the butt and said, 'Go on,'" she said.
Photo by Megan Schnabel

Meredith lives in Roanoke but spends about half of each week in Buchanan County. He drives from job site to job site, checking on supplies, talking to homeowners. He's been active in disaster relief for years – Katrina was one of his first – and Hurley is as bad as he's ever seen.

“In the first couple of weeks, and maybe still today ... some of these homeowners were like deer in the headlights, so overwhelmed with everything they just absolutely did not know what to do,” he said.

“But once they see that there is help, and it's real – they see people working on houses down the road from them, they know it's coming this way – and I think that does a lot.”

That same day he met with Lester, Meredith delivered some good news to Della Prater.

The morning of Aug. 30, Prater had watched – and prayed – as a mobile home swept down the creek cross-wise, right toward her house. It had turned lengthwise just before it reached her property, and it squeezed past the back of her house without making contact.

But the creek still found a way to leave its mark. Rushing water attacked the foundation, leaving damage so extensive that Prater said she'd been told the house couldn't be salvaged.

But now here was Meredith, telling her that a team of masons would be dispatched to make repairs after all.

She doesn't have insurance. “It probably wouldn't have mattered if we had, the way they're talking,”

Volunteers from the Baptist General Association of Virginia have worked on a half-dozen houses in Hurley, Butch Meredith said.

“We'll be here as long as we have volunteers coming,” he said. Photos by Megan Schnabel

The creek tore through the foundation of Della Prater's house; she initially had been told that it couldn't be repaired. But last week, Butch Meredith (left), construction coordinator with the Baptist General Association of Virginia, stopped by to tell her that masons would be coming by to work on it soon. Photo by Megan Schnabel

she said.

She still says “we”; her husband, who shared the house with her for more than five decades, died 25 days before the flood. Family had been staying with her every night since then. Now she’s living with her daughter, a teacher in Lebanon, an hour and a half away.

“I thank the Lord that he’s helped me,” she said. So many people have helped, she said – neighbors, the United Way. “But I do hope that FEMA changes their mind.”

Bart Chambers and Buckey Blankenship assess the damage to Patty Coleman’s house. Chambers, the county’s building official, and Blankenship, a volunteer, have been going house to house across the Guesses Fork area to determine the extent of the destruction. Photo by Lakin Keene

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Amid all the uncertainty that has been a fact of life for residents of Guesses Fork since Aug. 30, waiting has been a constant.

Waiting to safely get back into their house to assess the damage. Waiting to hear from the insurance company. Waiting for FEMA's decision, and then waiting for the appeal. Waiting for volunteers and for building supplies, and waiting to learn whether they'll have heat so that they can stay put over the winter.

"We are getting help, and we're getting good help," Stephanie Stiltner said. "And all the people are friendly and nice and courteous, and they're working around my kids, so I have no complaints at all. But it took a while to get help. I know it takes time to get organized, but when you don't have anything, it's very, very hard to wait."

As resilient as residents have been, the not knowing has exhausted many of them, said Marci Watson, whose case-management team at the Department of Social Services has been a key part of the Long-Term Recovery Group's work.

"They feel like they're in limbo," she said. "The waiting process is ruthless. It's wreaking havoc on people emotionally."

Local officials, too, have been dealing with uncertainty since the day of the storm.

"These guys got hit, blindsided," Meredith said of local officials. "They had to invent the wheel and then start. And they've done a bang-up job. It's just a mess to deal with and it's going to be a mess for a while. But it's already better."

Chambers has been working his way down the list of houses that need to be inspected, counting up the bridges that were destroyed, tallying the costs. The destruction was so complete that it took a while just to figure out where houses had been, he said.

In addition to being the county's building official, he's also its emergency management coordinator. The first days after the storm, that was his priority – launching search-and-rescue operations,

coordinating help from other localities, calling in a Virginia State Police helicopter to pluck a woman out of a tree.

Marci Watson, director of social services for Buchanan County, is a member of the Long-Term Recovery Group that has been coordinating relief efforts. With winter on the way, a focus now is making sure residents have safe, warm places to live, she said. Photo by Lakin Keene

Last week, he walked through Patty Coleman's house with her son and Buckey Blankenship, a volunteer who's been helping him assess homes.

A blue tarp partially draped the door frame where the mud had rushed in. The floor had caved in, and mold and mildew covered the walls.

Several days later, the house was added to the list of homes that had been completely destroyed.

Teresa Coleman, Mark's wife, said her mother-in-law didn't carry flood coverage but did have a homeowner's policy. She said the insurer told her that nothing will be covered.

Just how many residents will decide to rebuild is an open question. Even if they want to, the stream bed has moved since many of the homes were first constructed, so code might not always allow rebuilding on the same site, Chambers said.

And then there's the question of whether they should rebuild. Until officials can figure out what caused this unprecedented level of destruction, it will be impossible to know how to mitigate the danger, Chambers said.

"What I am in fear of more than anything is if these people do go back in their homes, it could happen again," he said. "If this had happened in the middle of the night, we'd have been in trouble. We'd be still digging for bodies, I would imagine."

Jerry Ray Lester, a relative of Mark Coleman, surveys the damage to Coleman's mother's house. A wall of mud and rock came in the back of the house, through the kitchen and living room and then out the front door. Photo by Lakin Keene

Even the number of houses that could potentially be made habitable again is up for debate, since every agency – FEMA, VDEM, Red Cross – has its own definition of “destroyed.” FEMA guidelines, for instance, use the label if 18 inches of water or mud came into a house, Chambers said, but that doesn’t mean the home couldn’t be rebuilt.

As of last week, the official list kept by the county had 48 structures marked as “destroyed.” Chambers said he has seen about 20 that can’t be rebuilt, period.

The total cost of cleanup for the county is a moving target as well.

Chambers puts the county’s cost of road repairs and debris removal at \$2.8 million. Restoring the water system: another \$8.5 million.

An initial estimate put the cost of stream restoration at \$8 million – but that recently jumped to more than \$30 million based on a new assessment by a regional engineering firm, Chambers said.

FEMA did approve Buchanan County for public assistance. The reimbursement program will cover up to 75% of eligible costs, which could include emergency expenses such as debris removal as well as permanent work such rebuilding roads and bridges and restoring public utilities.

There have been bright spots during the recovery.

In the first days after the disaster, officials were estimating that it could take 30 days to restore

Mark Coleman was alerted to the rising water by his nephew and rushed to get his mother to safety. “I got her out of here about 5 minutes before this happened,” he said of the mudslide that barreled into her house. “It looked like a tidal wave. ... After that, it was mayhem.” Photo by Megan Schnabel

How to help

1. To read more about the work of the Long-Term Recovery Group or to donate to the recovery efforts, visit unitedwayswva.org/hurleyflood/.
2. To volunteer, call 276-935-2954. Volunteers are coordinated through the Mountain Mission School.

power and a year to bring public water back online

Instead, Appalachian Power had electricity back on within a week. Public water was flowing again in mid-October.

Appalachian's crews and contractors replaced 2.8 miles of power line and about 55 poles, said Walter Carlton, a distribution system supervisor for the utility. They worked out a system with the Virginia Department of Transportation and local authorities to close the road for 10 hours a day to give utility crews uninterrupted time to work.

Water crews weren't able to get in and start repairing and replacing pipes for two weeks after the storm but still had restored water to more than 150 households by Oct. 18, said Bob Anderson, executive director of the Buchanan County Public Service Authority.

Watson, with the Department of Social Services, said they're all trying to learn from what worked, and what didn't.

"There probably will be a next time," she said. "It may not be in Hurley, it may be somewhere else, but if we live, there's going to be disaster."

Stiltner's 3-year-old, Jayanna, still gets scared when it rains. Stiltner said she'll hear the toddler playing with her little houses and telling her toys that they need to get on the second floor because the first floor is flooding.

"It's left effects on all of us," she said. "But we are survivors. We have to be.

Appalachian Power crews and contractors replaced 2.8 miles of power line and about 55 poles and had power back on within a week.
Courtesy of Appalachian Power.

"I hope that it will teach my children to be generous and kind and to believe in God. I really hope that is what they get out of this, and not I lost everything or I lost so much."



POLITICS

Morefield to introduce bill for Hurley flood relief

Spurred by August storm in Hurley, legislation would create state flood relief fund.



by **Megan Schnabel**

December 7, 2021



Much of the destruction in Hurley was caused by mudslides, as the torrential rain washed the sides of hills down into houses. Residents with flood insurance have learned that their policies don't cover slides. Photo by Lakin Keene.

Updated 4:40 p.m. Dec. 8:

On Wednesday, Gov.-elect Glenn Youngkin told attendees at a Hampton Roads Chamber of Commerce gathering that he would withdraw Virginia from the Regional Greenhouse Gas Initiative by executive order. (The announcement was first reported by [Virginia Scope](#).)

Del. Will Morefield, R-Tazewell, responded to the news via email:

“Withdrawing from RGGI by Executive Order will send a message to my colleagues in the House and Senate that it is highly unlikely Virginia will be rejoining RGGI under a Youngkin Administration. Roughly \$228 million dollars has been raised from carbon credit auctions since Virginia joined RGGI. It is incumbent upon the General Assembly to ensure those proceeds are invested wisely so that Virginians will benefit from the investments for decades to come. House Bill 5 was officially filed on Tuesday evening. If Virginia withdraws from RGGI the bill will create a \$50 million dollar statewide Flood Relief Fund that will make the flood victims of the Hurley community whole again and ensure that future flood victims from across the Commonwealth will not have to suffer like they have. The bill would also create a fund that could be used for flood prevention and flood protection projects in some of Virginia’s poorest localities. I could not think of a more appropriate use for the RGGI proceeds.”

A devastating flood in Buchanan County – and the Federal Emergency Management Agency’s subsequent denial of financial help for homeowners – has led the region’s delegate to propose a flood relief fund that would fill the financial gap.

Legislation drafted by Del. Will Morefield, R-Tazewell County, would create the fund using money from the Regional Greenhouse Gas Initiative, a cap-and-trade program that over the past year has brought more than \$227 million to Virginia.

“I don’t know how we can honestly look in the eyes of the people that have been affected and just simply give them words of encouragement when we have the ability to legislatively solve this,” he said.

Flooding and mudslides triggered by an Aug. 30 downpour destroyed dozens of homes in the Guesses Fork section of Hurley and seriously damaged scores more. One person was killed. Homeowners who had insurance found that their policies wouldn’t cover their losses; even those who held flood policies were denied coverage for damage caused by mudslides.

Del. Will
Morefield, R-
Tazewell County

Although Buchanan County was approved for federal financial help for rebuilding infrastructure and cleaning up debris, FEMA denied assistance to individual homeowners, saying in a letter to Gov. Ralph Northam that “the impact to the individuals and households from this event was not of such severity and magnitude” to warrant such aid.

The fund proposed by Morefield would kick in when a locality or region is declared a major federal disaster area. It would be available to any property owner whose claims were denied by insurance, as well as to those who don't have insurance.

Unlike FEMA, which caps its awards at \$36,000 per property owner, this fund would potentially pay for the complete rebuild or repair of private property.

The fund, which would be administered by the Department of Emergency Management, would provide payments of up to \$500,000 for residential properties and up to \$1 million for commercial properties. Claims made within so-called distressed or double-distressed localities – those with jobless and poverty rates above the state average – would be paid at higher rates, up to 175% of the assessed property value. That would help mitigate the fact that tax appraisals of homes in economically distressed areas tend to be much lower than the actual cost to rebuild, he said.

Map by Robert Lunsford

To pay for the fund, Morefield would tap the money that Virginia receives every year from its participation in RGGI, a cooperative effort among 11 states in the Northeast and Mid-Atlantic to cap and reduce carbon dioxide emissions from the power sector. Virginia joined RGGI last summer, pushed by a Democratic-controlled General Assembly.

Member states cap carbon dioxide emissions, and power plants must either reduce pollution to meet the cap or buy allowances through RGGI auctions. The money brought in through the auctions is then shared among the participating states.

RGGI last week released the results of the most recent quarterly auction, which netted Virginia \$85.6 million. Over the past year, the state's share of the auction proceeds has totalled \$227.6 million.

Southwest Virginia floods

Read all of Cardinal News' coverage of flooding in Southwest Virginia [here](#).

Currently, half of Virginia's RGGI proceeds are earmarked for energy efficiency programs benefiting low-income residents. Another 45% is to be invested in community flood prevention and coastal resilience programs, and the remainder covers administrative costs.

Morefield proposes putting 5% of auction proceeds – taken out of the 45% earmarked for flood prevention – into the flood fund. Under his plan, if Virginia were to pull out of RGGI, \$50 million of the unobligated auction proceeds would be put into the flood relief fund.

“Some may resist giving up the program funds for other purposes, and they may argue that all funds are obligated because they’ve been allocated,” Morefield said. “This is more of a political argument rather than a legal one. The remaining funds have been allocated but not appropriated, it’s still possible to reappropriate them.”

This is “a very small ask,” he said, that could help rebuild a community that has been devastated – and provide hope for victims of future disasters.

In a written statement, state Sen. Travis Hackworth, R-Tazewell County, concurred. “So many individuals and organizations from around the Commonwealth and beyond have donated their time and resources to help the victims. We are very grateful, but ultimately we must do something on a large scale. Until their homes are rebuilt and repaired the victims of the flood will not be made whole.”

POLITICS

Buchanan County turns to state for flood recovery after second FEMA funding denial

United Way of Southwest Virginia asks Youngkin to tap disaster relief fund.



by **Megan Schnabel**
January 20, 2022



Stephanie Stiltner's home in Hurley was damaged but is being rebuilt, unlike several nearby houses. "We have issues here, but my neighbors' houses aren't even standing," she said. "To walk back off that hill and see nothing where stuff had been all your life, it is just -- I don't even have a word for it. Devastating is the best word I've got." Photo by Lakin Keene.

After a federal agency again declined to provide aid to homeowners in the flood-ravaged Buchanan County community of Hurley, local officials are now turning to a state relief program for financial help.

In a letter this week, the head of the United Way of Southwest Virginia asked Gov. Glenn Youngkin to authorize access to the Virginia Disaster Relief Fund, a public-private program that was created a decade ago after a tornado devastated parts of Washington County. In that case, as in Hurley, the Federal Emergency Management Agency refused to provide help to individual property owners.

The fund is a tool of last resort, available only after all other state, federal and private aid has been exhausted. FEMA this week again denied help for Hurley homeowners, paving the way to tap the state fund.

Travis Staton, president and CEO of United Way of Southwest Virginia, on Wednesday said that while the second FEMA denial was disappointing, local officials now can move ahead with other plans.

“This will allow us to get over the hurdle of the unknown and really know what we’ve got ahead of us and what we need to do,” he said.

In late August, the community of Hurley was devastated by flash flooding and mudslides after as much as 7 inches of rain fell in a matter of hours. One person died, dozens of homes were destroyed and scores of other houses were damaged.

While FEMA authorized help for rebuilding local infrastructure, it denied a request for money to help individual homeowners, telling then-Gov. Ralph Northam that the damage “was not of such severity and magnitude” to warrant the assistance.

The state appealed the denial, and members of Virginia’s congressional delegation wrote to President Joe Biden in support of releasing more federal dollars. This week’s FEMA decision was a denial of that appeal.

In the months since the flood, volunteer construction teams from across the state have converged on Buchanan County. Some families

Other Hurley coverage

[“We are survivors. We have to be.”](#)

Months after the flood, people are still living in trailers. Nov. 23.

[“Virginia delegation seeks support from President Biden for federal Hurley flood aid.”](#) Dec. 2.

Commentary: [“An open letter to President Biden.”](#) Dec. 6.

[“Morefield to introduce bill for Hurley flood relief.”](#) Dec. 7.

Find all of Cardinal News’ reporting on Southwest Virginia flooding [here](#).

have been able to return to their rebuilt homes, Staton said Wednesday, but others continue to live with relatives.

[“FEMA again turns down request for Hurley aid.”](#) Jan. 18.

Volunteer efforts and local fundraising have been coordinated by the Hurley Long-Term Recovery Group, a group of residents and local officials. United Way of Southwest Virginia acts as its fiscal agent.

The group has raised just over \$500,000 to buy construction materials and cover other needs, Staton said Wednesday, but that’s not nearly enough. Now that FEMA is out of the picture, a conservative estimate to rebuild or replace the homes and private bridges that were damaged is about \$3.5 million, he said, and that’s if they use all volunteer labor.

“And that’s barely, barely getting it done,” he said.

If the state money comes through, it can only be used for certain work – it can’t be put toward rebuilding bridges, for instance, Staton said, which will likely cost a half-million dollars or more. That work will have to be covered by local donations.

Timing has been a challenge as well, he said. Some homeowners were reluctant to accept any local money for fear that it would hurt their chances with FEMA, which slowed down some rebuilding efforts. And a key volunteer contingent – a group of Mennonite workers with a lot of experience rebuilding after disasters – will have to leave to tend to their own farms once the weather turns warm.

“Timing is everything,” he said. “If we don’t start getting them working now, we’re going to delay the process on some of those things until next winter.”

Staton said he’s heard that the state relief fund currently holds about \$300,000 – “not a lot, and not enough,” he acknowledged. But it’s funded through donations, and he believes the total could grow – especially if Richmond increases public awareness of it and encourages companies and individuals to give.

The fund is an important resource for the whole state, he said, because no one knows where the next disaster will strike – or whether the federal government will help. “It’s today in Southwest Virginia,” he said. “It could be somewhere else tomorrow – in Southside or on the Eastern Shore.”

Staton said he’s confident that Youngkin will sign off on using the state fund to help Hurley. Long-Term Recovery Group caseworkers have been assessing damages and collecting documentation. As soon

NEWS BRIEFS

Flood damage in Buchanan County called 'apocalyptic'

All are safe but there's a long clean-up ahead.



by **Megan Schnabel**

July 14, 2022





Flood damage in the Pilgrim's Knob section of Buchanan County. Photo by Lakin Keene.

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The happy news started spreading around Buchanan County around lunchtime Thursday: The last of the nearly four dozen people who initially had been unaccounted for after flood waters swept across the county two nights earlier were safe, the sheriff's office had just announced.

The word made its way only slowly to places like Pilgrim's Knob and Whitewood and Jewell Valley, where widespread power outages and downed phone lines continued to make communication difficult – the very reason, in fact, that the whereabouts of so many people had remained unknown for so long.

The relief that accompanied the news was twofold:

No one had died during a flash flood that had come in the dark of night and had swept cars and RVs downstream and carried houses off their foundations.

And now all of the resources that had been funneled into the excruciatingly slow process of home-by-home canvassing could be redirected toward a rebuilding effort that will be even slower.

“The damage is – I keep going to the word ‘apocalyptic,’” said K.T. Vandyke, who lives in Bristol now but rushed back to Whitewood on Wednesday morning to check on his parents.

Their house, part of a community of about a half-dozen homes, is still standing, although whether the foundation is damaged remains to be seen. Their bridge is in bad shape, although they’ve been using it cautiously, and on Wednesday a group of about five people with shovels cleared a mudslide that had blocked the roadway.

It was much worse in some of the other communities Vandyke and his wife drove through on their supply run to Grundy.

“It’s pretty terrible,” he said. “Kind of hard to put into words. It seems like describing it pales in comparison.”

Just how many homes were damaged or destroyed isn’t known yet. The Virginia Department of Emergency Management will have crews in the area on Friday to begin assessing the extent of the damage, spokesperson Lauren Opett said Thursday.

The rain came from a storm that moved through West Virginia and Virginia on Tuesday night, prompting weather alerts and, at 8:30 p.m., a flash flood warning for Buchanan County. The storm damaged roads and homes across the region, including in McDowell County, West Virginia, [where Gov. Jim Justice declared a state of emergency](#), and Tazewell County, where [some residents had to be rescued by boat](#).

In Buchanan County, the water came down relentlessly; the National Weather Service office in Charleston, West Virginia, saw reports of up to 5 inches of rain in just a few hours.

How to help

Donate to the Buchanan County 2022 Disaster Fund at <https://unitedwayswva.charityproud.org/Donate/Index/19717> or by calling Cristie Lester at 276-525-4071.

And all of that water did what water does in places where steep mountainsides drop down into narrow hollers: It poured down the hills and it overcame the usually narrow creeks along which people like Vandyke's parents had built houses decades ago.

The story wasn't all that different not even a year ago on the other side of the county, when the community of Guesses Fork in the Hurley area was hit by flash flooding spawned by another torrential, and very localized, rainstorm.

That community is still recovering. A tally by the Virginia Department of Emergency Management says 31 homes there were destroyed. Another 27 sustained major damage, and eight more saw minor damage. One person was killed.

Volunteers and donations poured into Hurley in the weeks and months following the late August flood, and workers are still busy. Crews from the Baptist General Association of Virginia, who cleaned out and repaired houses that were salvageable, drove their last nail in Hurley on Wednesday, said Butch Meredith, who coordinated the group's work there. Other volunteers are still fixing bridges and building new homes from the ground up for families whose houses were beyond repair.

And now the efforts will start all over again, 30 miles away.

Meredith said his group got the go-ahead Thursday from the Virginia Department of Emergency Management and the Red Cross to start feeding people, which is exactly where they began their efforts in Hurley last summer. They're setting up kitchens now and plan to begin serving meals on Saturday. He'll make his first trip to the newly flooded area on Monday to survey the damage with county officials so they can make a plan for how to proceed.

Then he'll start recruiting volunteers to clean and gut the houses, and then to start the rebuilding process.

"I'm getting texts and emails and calls now wanting to know when we're going, what we're going to do," he said. "They're already anxious to come get started."

[United Way of Southwest Virginia](#) also is collecting volunteer information through an online form, and it launched a fundraising effort this week. In Hurley, the hundreds of thousands of dollars raised

Southwest Virginia floods

Read all of Cardinal News' coverage of flooding in Southwest Virginia [here](#).

through a similar campaign went toward expenses including buying building materials for the volunteer construction crews.

Meredith said he hopes that the generosity shown to the residents of Hurley will be repeated. It's hard, he acknowledged, when there's so much need in such a small area.

"I don't know how this is going to affect the area as far as giving," he said. "So many folks did so much for people in Hurley and Guesses Fork, and I don't know if their pockets are deep enough to make another contribution for their neighbors."

Vandyke said he doubts that many of the people who live near his parents carry flood insurance.

"If you live in these little communities, nobody can afford it," he said. "My parents, they worked all their life, they've made pretty good money, they made a good living, for the most part. But they couldn't afford it. So I can imagine that the vast majority of the older folks and people that aren't as well off are that much more hurting."

Most of their neighbors are, like his parents, older. One, a woman in her late 80s, slept through the storm and awoke Wednesday morning to find her first floor caked with an inch of mud, he said.

The community along Benny Branch at the base of Brown Mountain where Terry Keen's mother, Shirley Keen, lives is similar. The group of houses is at the end of a mile-long holler, reached by a one-lane road. Most everyone there is in their 80s, said Terry's wife, Susie, and they're all family.

There, too, everyone was lucky, she said. Her mother-in-law lost a couple of outbuildings, as did several other people. A cousin's car was washed down the road.

But no one was hurt.

"Thank the Lord they're all safe," she said. "Material things can be replaced; people can't. ... That other stuff is aggravation and stress and worry. But the main thing is your family's OK."

The water had come up fast at Shirley Keen's house. Her grandson had come home from work around 9 p.m.; the rain was pouring down, but the roads were still passable. An hour later, the yard had become a lake and big slabs of concrete had been washed out from the bridge over the creek, carried by the force of the debris-filled water.

“We could stand out on the porch and see logs the size of me, just rolling,” said Teresa Reynolds, Keen’s daughter, who happened to be staying with her that night. “We knew it was bad.”

The next morning, Terry Keen waded in through thigh-high water to check on them; it took him an hour to get from the main road to her house. On Thursday, he delivered a new generator and plenty of gasoline for her and several aunts who live nearby. That took three hours; he “carried and pulled and tugged,” he said.

Appalachian Power Co. estimated that about 1,300 customers were without electricity on Thursday morning, spokeswoman Teresa Hamilton Hall said. That total includes houses that have been destroyed or so badly damaged that can’t be reconnected, she said.

Rob Arnold, manager of distribution systems for the utility’s Kingsport district, said his goal is to have power restored to 85% of the homes that are capable of reconnections by late Friday or early Saturday.

His crews probably will end up replacing 40 to 50 poles, and one substation was destroyed and will have to be replaced.

They’ve been able to use what they learned in Hurley – where he said the damage was worse, from a power-distribution standpoint – to work more efficiently on this job.

“There’s not a positive about having anything like this,” he said. “However, by us just going through this in Hurley less than a year ago, everything was fresh on our minds, so we knew what we needed to do.”

Previous coverage:

[Report: All accounted for in Buchanan County](#)

[Heavy flooding in Buchanan County, at least 44 missing](#) (with multiple photo galleries from the scene)

POLITICS

Youngkin tours flood damage, says Virginia needs state relief fund

About 150 homes in Buchanan County were damaged in some way by this week's flooding.



by **Megan Schnabel**

July 15, 2022





Gov. Glenn Youngkin speaks in Buchanan County. Photo by Megan Schnabel.

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OAKWOOD – Standing in the mud on the banks of the still-swollen Dismal River, the flood-ravaged shell of a family-owned body shop behind him, Gov. Glenn Youngkin pledged that the state would aggressively seek federal aid to help this Buchanan County community come back from week’s flash flooding – but he also emphasized the need to pursue longer-term recovery efforts on the state level.

“There’s a lot of work to do, a lot of hard times ahead, I think,” he said. “Now we’re going to have to rebuild, and the state’s going to do everything that we possibly can do to help.”

Youngkin flew in by helicopter on Friday, meeting first with local officials and first responders at Twin Valley Elementary/Middle School – where local social services agencies are helping residents with needs ranging from prescription medications to housing – and then visiting several sites affected by Tuesday night’s storm.



Gov. Glenn Youngkin meets with first responders in Buchanan County. Photo by Megan Schnabel.

As much as 6 inches of rain fell on parts of Buchanan County in just a few hours Tuesday night, sending debris-littered water rushing down the mountainsides and into creeks and culverts that couldn't handle the onslaught. Bridges were crushed, houses moved off their foundations, cars and RVs carried away by the current into the sides of buildings.

It was the second time in less than a year that Youngkin had visited Buchanan County in the aftermath of severe flooding. During last year's campaign, he toured the community of Hurley, about 30 miles away, which was hit with similar flash flooding and is still working to recover.

While the damage in Hurley was spread across a smaller geographic area, "The heartbreak is the same," Youngkin said. "And the community response is the same. It's just uplifting. To be back here again this summer, and be dealing with this again, just really, really does bring you to your knees."

Youngkin said the state will “aggressively” pursue a federal disaster designation for the region, which would open up access to various federal assistance programs.

He also pledged that the state will work with county authorities to seek Federal Emergency Management Agency assistance, which was only partially granted in the aftermath of the Hurley flood.

While FEMA authorized aid to help rebuild local infrastructure, it denied a request for individual assistance for homeowners. The state appealed the denial, but FEMA again turned it down, saying that the damage “was not of such severity and magnitude” to warrant the assistance.

The Virginia Department of Emergency Management has said that 31 homes in Hurley were destroyed, 27 had major damage and another eight had minor damage. United Way of Southwest Virginia has said that a conservative estimate of the cost to rebuild or replace the homes and private bridges that were damaged in Hurley was \$3.5 million, using all volunteer labor.

“We’re going to jump all over it and make sure we’ve done a comprehensive, comprehensive damage assessment,” Youngkin said. He said that VDEM head Shawn Talmadge, who joined him on the Buchanan County visit, would collaborate with county officials on the FEMA request.

“They’ve got to work together in order to get this done, and we’ve got to do that fast,” he said.

Youngkin said he spoke to U.S. Sens. Tim Kaine and Mark Warner about flood relief efforts this week, and they’re all working together.

“We’re going to get the right response from the president and from FEMA,” he said.

But he said he also sees an increased role for the state in disaster recovery. He said he was pleased that the General Assembly appropriated \$11.4 million for Hurley flood relief, an ask brought to Richmond by Del. Will Morefield, R-Tazewell County. And he said he’d been “very supportive” of Morefield’s original proposal to create a state fund that would have made money available to property owners whose claims were denied by insurance, a hurdle encountered by many in Hurley.

Southwest Virginia floods

Read all of Cardinal News’ coverage of flooding in Southwest Virginia [here](#).

However, that fund would have been paid for using money from the Regional Greenhouse Gas Initiative, a cap-and-trade program that has brought more than \$227 million to Virginia. The day after Morefield filed his bill, however, then-Gov.-elect Youngkin told a chamber of commerce gathering that he would withdraw Virginia from the initiative. Virginia remains in RGGI, but Youngkin is still committed to withdrawing the state.

The extent of the damage across Buchanan County communities including Oakwood, Pilgrim's Knob and Whitewood is still being determined. Four VDEM teams began working in the county on Friday and are taking stock of the destruction, said John Northon, the department's deputy state coordinator for disaster services.

Travis Staton, president and CEO of United Way of Southwest Virginia, said local authorities believe that about 150 homes have sustained some kind of water damage but don't know yet how many of those were destroyed.

A fundraising campaign launched this week has collected nearly \$100,000 so far, Staton said, and the agency also is seeking volunteers to help clean and rebuild. But the need will be at least as great as it was in Hurley, he said, and he knows that public attention eventually moves on.

"That's why it's important to get the volunteers and support as quickly as possible," he said.

Youngkin ended his visit at M&M Body Shop, where mud-brown lines more than 5 feet high on the doors and walls mark the extent of the floodwaters.

How to help

Donate to the Buchanan County 2022 Disaster Fund at <https://unitedwayswva.charityproud.org/Donate/Index/19717> or by calling Cristie Lester at 276-525-4071.

Melissa Moore said she and her husband, whose body shop was inundated by floodwater, are trying to figure out what to do now. “We’ve never been here before,” she said. Photo by Megan Schnabel

Flood damage in the Pilgrim's Knob section of Buchanan County. Photo by Lakin Keene.

The shop has been in business for 32 years and had never taken on this kind of water before, said Melissa Moore, whose husband, Bill, owns it. They've lost six of their nine tow trucks, a paint booth and countless tools. The shop is filled with muck and mud; they spent yesterday trying to dry out paperwork and invoices.

The Moores live right across the road and could hear the roar of the water as it rushed past, but they couldn't see the condition of their shop until the sun rose Wednesday morning.

They don't have flood insurance, she said; it's prohibitively expensive, and based on past flooding, they didn't think they'd need it.

Now they're trying to figure out what to do next. They'd like to rebuild, but they're not sure they'll be able to on that site. They also own a small trailer park on the other side of the road; it's been destroyed, and the families who lived there have been displaced.

“We’ve never been here before,” she said. “Is there going to be help? Is there going to be any allocation for the community?”

Is FEMA going to help this time?

“That’s my question,” she said. She fears that the area just isn’t populous enough to meet FEMA’s guidelines, or get much attention.

“It’s a very family-oriented community, and there’s a lot of families hurt here,” she said. “They lost everything, literally. All they’ve got is the clothes on their back.”

Previous flood coverage:

Flood damage in Buchanan County called ‘apocalyptic’

Report: All residents now accounted for

Heavy flooding in Buchanan County; at least 44 missing (with photo galleries from the scene)



POLITICS

No clear path for flood relief in Virginia

Youngkin's planned withdrawal from RGGI complicates the state's effort to establish a permanent fund supporting victims of disasters like the Buchanan County flood.



by **Markus Schmidt**

July 27, 2022



Flood damage in the Pilgrim's Knob section of Buchanan County. Photo by Lakin Keene.

When Gov. Glenn Youngkin visited Buchanan County earlier this month to view the destructive path left behind by yet another bout of violent flash flooding, he vowed to aggressively seek federal aid to help the battered locality to recover from the second such disaster in less than a year. Most notably, Youngkin emphasized the need to pursue longer-term recovery efforts on the state level. “There’s a lot of work to do, a lot of hard times ahead, I think,” he said. “Now we’re going to have to rebuild, and the state’s going to do everything that we possibly can do to help.”

But freeing up more cash to help Virginia communities hit most hard by extreme weather events is easier said than done – even during times of a historic budget surplus. Such a effort



faces not just bureaucratic hurdles but also would have to take into consideration other localities competing for money, particularly in the coastal regions, that have been pushing to fund costly flood prevention measures to combat the rising sea tides.

Another complicating factor is the fact that Virginia's existing flood fund programs are largely dependent on money from the Regional Greenhouse Gas Initiative (RGGI, pronounced "Reggie"), a cap-and-trade program in the Northeast and Mid-Atlantic that places a limit on electricity sector emissions. In December, just a month after his election, Youngkin made known that he would withdraw Virginia from RGGI via executive order – a move that he has begun implementing since taking office.

Virginia formally joined the list of RGGI states last summer. Together, the 11 member states set an enforceable regional limit on the amount of carbon pollution that power plants are allowed to emit and sell pollution permits up to this limit through quarterly auctions.

RGGI's design requires large fossil fuel power plants to buy the pollution permits, and the number of permits is lowered each year, so that the region's power plants contribute progressively fewer emissions to global warming. Auction proceeds are used to generate local and regional economic benefits, including investments in local businesses that provide jobs for residents, weatherization of homes, upgrades of heating and air-conditioning systems, and clean, renewable energy.

"As energy costs increase on Virginia families, Governor Youngkin will continue advocating to lower the cost of living for all Virginians by eliminating policies like RGGI that drive up energy costs on Virginia consumers and impose an unnecessary carbon tax on Virginia's ratepayers," Youngkin spokeswoman Macaulay Porter said in an email last week.



Gov. Glenn Youngkin speaks in Buchanan County. Photo by Megan Schnabel.

Instead, Youngkin is “working with federal, state and local officials to deliver resources that support families” impacted by the flood. “Resiliency is a priority for the governor and he is committed to significant new strategic and coordinated investments leveraging available federal and state resources,” Porter said, without providing further details.

Before Virginia joined RGGI, there was practically no state funding going into flood protection and resilience. The [Dam Safety and Flood Preparedness Fund](#), administered by the Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation, was the only state program that provided funding for flood protection. All other flood protection funding prior to RGGI came from the federal government and was usually linked to a disaster.

Southwest Virginia floods

Read all of Cardinal News’ coverage of flooding in Southwest Virginia [here](#).

But even federal disaster aid is often denied, especially when a request does not meet Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) standards. After flash flooding and a mudslide damaged or destroyed dozens of homes in the community of Hurley last August, FEMA turned down a request for aid for people who had lost their homes, telling then-Gov. Ralph Northam that the damage “was not of such severity and magnitude” to warrant the assistance.

The state appealed the denial, but to no avail. “After thorough review of all the information contained in your initial request and appeal, we reaffirm our original findings that the impact to the individuals and households from this event was not of such severity and magnitude to warrant the designation of the Individual Assistance program,” FEMA administrator Deanne Criswell wrote to lawmakers in January.

And Virginia’s two fairly new flood funds are aimed at supporting flood prevention efforts rather than dispensing financial aid in response to disasters.

The Community Flood Preparedness Fund (CFPF), a statewide grant and loan fund set up in 2020 to provide support for regions and localities across Virginia to reduce the impacts of flooding, uses money from RGGI. Virginia is the only member state in RGGI to have such a fund, and to date more than \$170 million has gone into the fund from RGGI.

The money is being used to not just fund the Department of Conservation and Recreation planning work and flood master plan work, but to also [fund actual projects in cities and counties](#). In 2021 Buchanan County was among the first localities to receive a \$387,000 grant to help communities like

Hurley avoid future disasters with planning and remediation projects. The Lenowisco Planning District in the far Southwest also received a \$150,000 planning grant in the second funding round.

The [Resilient Virginia Revolving Loan Fund](#) – the state’s second flood fund – was created during the 2022 legislative session earlier this year. It is a loan and grant fund for revolving loans to localities to deal with flood problems in addition to pass-through loans to private property owners for work on their lands. This fund was given \$25 million diverted from the CFPF in RGGI money to get started. But under this legislation, these funds cannot be used for post-hazard mitigation because its definition of “project” does not cover disasters.

After last year’s flood in Buchanan County, Del. Will Morefield, R-Tazewell County, filed legislation that sought to create a designated fund for flood victims, funded by 5% of Virginia’s annual RGGI proceeds.

In its original version, Morefield’s [House Bill 5](#) would have made relief money available to any property owner whose claims were denied by insurance, as well as to those who don’t have insurance, once a locality or region is declared a major federal disaster area. Flood victims could have claimed up to \$1 million for commercial properties and \$500,000 for residential properties. The payouts would have been exempt from individual and corporate income tax.

But less than 24 hours after Morefield filed his legislation, Youngkin announced his plan to exit RGGI, putting the potential success of Morefield’s original proposal at risk. During the legislative session in February, the House Committee on Agriculture, Chesapeake and Natural Resources tabled the bill at Morefield’s request, after he had determined “a clearer path in securing relief for the residents Hurley,” as he [told Cardinal News](#) later that month.

Instead of tapping into RGGI resources, Morefield worked with lawmakers to free-up a total of \$11.4 million in relief money to benefit flood victims in Hurley through the budget process – a proposal that Youngkin signed in June.

However, Morefield’s original legislation also included a provision that would transfer \$50 million of any unobligated proceeds from the RGGI allowance auctions to support the flood relief fund in the case of Virginia’s withdrawal from the initiative. “Unobligated proceeds would be the funds available that have not already been committed to the approved projects that RGGI currently funds. There would be enough funding available to create the fund if Virginia remains or does not remain in RGGI,” Morefield said Monday.

Skip Stiles, the executive director of the Norfolk-based nonprofit Wetlands Watch, said that despite his group's empathy for the people affected by the flood, they were "really conflicted" about Morefield's original plan, because it would have taken money from flood prevention efforts. "The RGGI money is supposed to be used to plan for and prevent future floods, not react to current ones. If this becomes an emergency relief fund, we'll be playing catch up forever, responding to yesterday's flooding and falling farther behind the increasing rates of rainfall," Stiles said.

And if Youngkin's planned withdrawal from RGGI succeeds, the state will have to find other means to pay for both flood protection and disaster relief, Stiles said. "If he wants to divert this funding to react to emergencies, we'll never get ahead of the problem. The problem will get worse," he said, citing data from the [Mid Atlantic RISA](#) showing that actual rainfall numbers for Buchanan County for 2022 have already exceeded the original estimate from last year by 18%.

"The bottom line is that what we're seeing is just the start of more rainfall and more intense rainfall," Stiles said. The \$300,000 that the state spent on flood prevention in 2020 before joining RGGI was nowhere near enough to pay for flooding relief and deal with the rainfall that is expected to increase. "We need to get ahead of this wave, and the only way is to stay the course with the CFPF, do the planning and project work, use the RGGI money, and spread it outside of the coastal zone to the valley and Southside areas," Stiles said.

Youngkin, however, doubts the RGGI's usefulness. In March, his administration [released a report](#) that concluded that the initiative "operates as a direct tax on households and businesses because all fees paid to the RGGI Board are passed through to utility-captive ratepayers." The report also stated that the imposition of the RGGI carbon tax "fails to offer any incentive to change behavior" as current law allows power generators, such as Dominion Energy, to "pass on all their costs, essentially bearing no cost for the carbon credits."

Environmental groups, however, have argued that the report proves the opposite and that RGGI plays a significant role in the reduction of carbon emissions.

After a withdrawal from RGGI – and without a plan to pay for a designated flood fund – Youngkin will have to own the problems that are likely to occur from the damage caused by a rising number of flood events. In June, he vetoed [legislation](#) that would have transferred administration of the CFPF from the state's Department of Conservation and Recreation to the Virginia Soil and Water Conservation Board, keeping the agency's responsibilities within the executive branch, as opposed to a citizen body working with the state's soil and water conservation districts and other stakeholders.

With or without Virginia's participation in RGGI, the state will have to come up with a designated flood fund one way or another, said Travis Staton, president and CEO of United Way of Southwest Virginia. "The governor has the best interest in mind for Southwest Virginia and all Virginians, and anything that his administration can do to support us, we are open and willing to support these efforts," he said.

How to help

Anyone wishing to donate to the Buchanan County 2022 Disaster Fund may do so at <https://unitedwayswva.charityproud.org/Donate/Index/19717> or by calling Cristie Lester at 276-525-4071.

And most people don't realize the financial impacts of these disasters, not only in the short term, but in the long term, Staton said. "It is extremely worrisome," he said, adding that providing relief to the victims of last year's flood in Hurley faced several delays, caused by the FEMA denial and the state's budget amendment process that dragged out into June.

"A challenge like this impacts people, and you have monetary loss, but you also have to think about what else is there in that cost, from infrastructure, water and utility lines, county personnel working, and people not being able to work because they are cleaning mud out of their home, not even mentioning the trauma of children being rescued from their homes with rafts," Staton said. After two major flood events within one year, the people in Buchanan County are "physically and mentally exhausted."

Morefield, the delegate from Tazewell County, still hopes that his flood fund legislation will open the door to the creation of a more permanent solution to help flood victims. And unless Virginia finds a way to establish a statewide flood relief administratively before the next General Assembly session, he said he plans to reintroduce his proposal in 2023.

"Establishing a state flood relief fund is desperately needed, especially in economically distressed localities. Most homeowners cannot afford flood insurance and like we saw in Hurley most people have no form of insurance," Morefield said.

Redirecting 5% of the yearly RGGI proceeds or – if Virginia withdrawals from RGGI – \$50 million dollars of unobligated proceeds is a small ask for something that could provide potential relief to flood victims across the commonwealth for decades to come, Morefield said. "HB5 was drafted to allow for unused proceeds in the fund to be invested and grow interest, which in turn would help extend the life of the fund," he said.

ECONOMY

Two weeks after Buchanan County flood, 'the hardest part is getting ready to happen'

Dozens of homes were destroyed or damaged when rain and runoff poured into narrow mountain streams. The recovery is just beginning.



by **Megan Schnabel**
August 5, 2022



Steve Proffitt's daughter escaped the floodwaters that inundated her mobile home in Buchanan County on July 12. The home is salvageable but will need extensive cleanout and rebuilding. Photo by Megan Schnabel.

GRUNDY – Ida Proffitt sat on a couch in the lobby of the Comfort Inn in Grundy and folded clothes, one eye on the dark green swirls of the radar image that was lighting up the TV a few feet away.

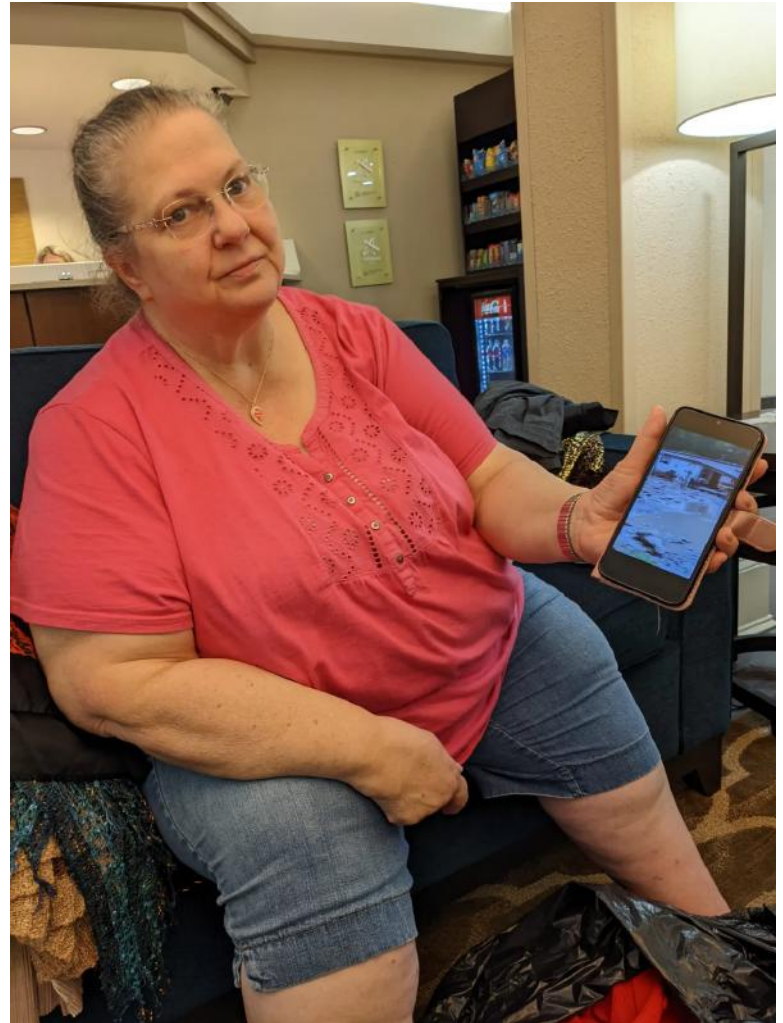
It was July 28, two weeks and two days since Proffitt had escaped from her mobile home on Dismal River Road as floodwaters had risen around her. Now more rain was pouring from the darkened sky, and the National Weather Service had issued a flood watch for that day and the next.

She'd been set to head out that morning and do some work on the trailer she'd be moving into, just outside Grundy. But then she saw the sky falling, and the river rising, and even though her new home was on higher ground, she just couldn't do it. She headed back to the Comfort Inn, where she had a room on the fourth floor – the top floor. She has panic attacks now, she said, which she'd never had before.

“The sound,” she said. “They can act like they know on TV about how it sounds, floods and stuff, but they don't know the sound. And once you hear it, you don't forget it. And you're constantly watching: Is it raining? Is water out there?”

On the night of July 12, 5 to 6 inches of rain fell on parts of eastern Buchanan County and western Tazewell County in just a few hours. The water rushed down the steep mountain slopes and, with nowhere else to go, filled the narrow hollers where people had built their homes on the flat land along the Dismal River.

An initial damage estimate completed in the days after the flood found that [33 structures had been destroyed](#) and another 60 damaged, more than half of them severely.



Ida Proffitt moved into the Comfort Inn in Grundy after the July 12 flood rendered her rented mobile home uninhabitable. A Jeep carried along by floodwaters crashed into the trailer, she said. Photo by Megan Schnabel.

A new round of heavy rain fell on Buchanan County last week. Some homes that had already been cleaned out were flooded again, and concern grew about the possibility of more mudslides and downed trees. "It seemed like the momentum was going the right way, up until today," Jeff Cooper, a member of the county board of supervisors, said July 27. "I talked to many people, and it's kind of like the air just was let out of their balloon today." Photo by Megan Schnabel.

Two weeks later, state and federal teams had come to the region to further assess the damage, in preparation for a request for a federal emergency declaration. But then came the new storm, and their plan to survey the flooded areas was halted due to concerns about more flash flooding.

By midday that Thursday, it had become clear that while the new round of rainstorms was wreaking some havoc on Buchanan County – inundating again some homes that had just been mucked out and left to dry – much more severe impacts were being felt in Wise and Dickenson counties to the southwest, and across eastern Kentucky, just over the state line.

Even before that, the deflections had come again and again: We're the lucky ones. Our neighbor, or cousin, or friend a mile away lost everything.

The refrain grew more emphatic as the magnitude of the death and destruction in neighboring Kentucky came into focus. As of this week, the confirmed death toll there had climbed to 37.

We have our lives. The rest is just stuff.

No one died during the July 12 flood. No one was seriously injured.

But a great disaster in one place doesn't negate suffering somewhere else. And weeks after the flood – after [Gov. Glenn Youngkin had toured the region](#) and declared a state of emergency, after national and regional media attention had faded – dozens of families remained in limbo as they waited to learn what would become of their homes.

* * *

Steve Proffitt (left) and Butch Meredith survey the damage to the trailer where Proffitt's daughter and granddaughter lived, on the banks of the Dismal River. Meredith, who coordinates volunteer crews from the Baptist General Association of Virginia, was hoping to have a team available within a few days to finish the cleanout in preparation for repairs. Photo by Megan Schnabel.

Just a few yards from the muddy creek bank where the governor had talked to reporters days after the flood, Steve Proffitt led the way up a buckled wooden ramp and into the shell of his daughter's mobile home.

His daughter and his niece and a couple of their friends had taken out the furniture and shoveled out as much mud as they could, but that's as far as they'd gotten, he told Butch Meredith, who had stopped by to assess the damage.

The scene was familiar to Meredith, who lives in Roanoke and coordinates volunteer crews from the Baptist General Association of Virginia, and who was spending the day visiting flood victims despite the steadily falling rain. BGAV volunteers spent much of the last year cleaning and rebuilding houses just 30 miles away in the Guesses Fork section of Hurley, which was hit by a similar flash flood in late August and saw more than two dozen homes destroyed and scores more damaged.

In fact, the BGAV volunteers had driven their last nail in Hurley on July 13, the day that the sun had risen on new flooding on the other side of the county.

Now they were in full recovery mode again. They'd set up temporary showers and laundry facilities right after the flood and had started cleaning out houses in preparation for repairs:

tearing out drywall and floors and kitchen cabinets, clearing out mud, spraying chemicals to retard the growth of mold.

Meredith looked around the nearly empty mobile home and started making notes: The walls would have to be cut out a couple of feet up from the floor. The flooring would have to come out, and maybe some of the plywood under it. Insulation would have to be replaced. The base cabinets in the kitchen probably would have to go. The whole home would be sprayed for mold and mildew and then would have to dry for a couple of weeks.

He might be able to get a crew there as early as Monday, he told Proffitt.

Southwest Virginia floods

Read all of Cardinal News' coverage of flooding in Southwest Virginia [here](#).

The night of the flood, Steve Proffitt's 3-year-old granddaughter was staying with him and his wife a mile away. But he wasn't able to get to his daughter and didn't know if she was safe. "I went back home, cried a little bit, prayed a little bit," he said. He heard from her the next morning. Photo by Megan Schnabel.

Proffitt's daughter and granddaughter are staying with him and his wife for now; their house, about a mile distant, wasn't damaged, although part of their yard had washed away. He cracked a joke: He used to complain about having to mow multiple lawns – his daughter's, his own, and his mother-in-law's – but now there's just half of one left. Be careful what you wish for, he said.

But it was clear he was still reeling from what had happened two weeks earlier. By the time he'd realized how fast the water was rising that night and had gone to check on his daughter and his wife's mother, he couldn't get to them because the road was blocked.

"I told a deputy there, I said, 'My daughter's on one end, and my mother-in-law's on the other end.' I said, 'There's got to be some way I can get across,'" Proffitt recalled. "He said, 'Ain't no way you can get

across.' I said, 'Buddy, you don't understand. My daughter's on one end, my mother-in-law's down here. I got to get across.' He said, 'No, you don't understand. You can't get across. We can't even get rescue units across.'

"I went back home, cried a little bit, prayed a little bit," he said.

"We just couldn't get to her. ... I couldn't get to her no way." It wasn't until 8 the next morning that he got word his daughter was safe.

He said he's sorry that his daughter had just put in a new floor and bought new appliances and living room furniture. And he told Meredith he's grateful for any help that the volunteers can give her.

"But everybody survived. So that's the main thing," he said.

Volunteer efforts and donations have been key to the recovery in Hurley and will be for the Dismal River flood area as well; few homeowners in either place carried flood insurance. More than \$250,000 has been raised so far to buy building materials that will keep groups like BGAV supplied for months.

The outpouring of volunteer help across Whitewood and Pilgrim's Knob and the other affected communities has been something to witness, Meredith said; it has far surpassed what he saw in Hurley not quite a year ago.

That may be because this disaster attracted national attention. Immediately following the flood, local officials had announced that 44 people were unaccounted for – probably, they said, because they had been cut off from phone service and their homes made inaccessible by floodwater.

The dramatic details made the national news – CNN, USA Today, The New York Times, the Weather Channel – although most of those outlets stopped reporting on it once everyone was found to be safe. By contrast, the flooding in Hurley, which killed one person, got very little media attention from outside the immediate region.

How to help

To donate to the Buchanan County 2022 Disaster Fund, go to <https://unitedwayswva.charityproud.org/Donate/Index/19717> or call Cristie Lester at 276-525-4071.

Chris Mitchell, who runs the Mountain Mission School in Grundy and is coordinating volunteer efforts for the flood recovery, listed off some of the other groups that have come to help or have said they're on the way: Samaritan's Purse, Team Rubicon, God's Pit Crew, Operation Blessings, Christ in Action. Rotarians from across the district are planning to help, as are groups of Latter-day Saints and Southern Baptists.

Some came to help with the initial cleanup and then left, he said; others, like BGAV, expect to stay through the entire recovery process.

Local churches are pitching in. So are businesses and civic groups and neighbors.

Scott McCormack and his wife and son live in the Bandy community, just over the county line in Tazewell County. "We've had flooding in this area before, but nothing like that," he said. "Usually the water comes up from the creek and we just need to move the boats and the vehicles further away from the banks. This was a rare one, because the water came across the road and poured into this whole bottom area." Photo by Megan Schnabel.

Scott McCormack, whose home was one of a handful in neighboring Tazewell County to be flooded, is a firefighter and paramedic and is used to being the one to provide help.

“I’ve never been on this end of it,” he said. “It’s been a humbling experience.”

He lives with his wife and their toddler son in a house that used to belong to her grandparents. They moved in 17 years ago and have been fixing it up, one room at a time. Now it’s been cleaned out down to the floor joists and the wall studs, with the help of friends and coworkers and a bunch of people he’d never met before.

“Strangers pouring down the driveway: Do you need water? Do you need bleach? Do you need money?” he said. “When a stranger pulls in the driveway and hands you \$20 and a pizza, you can’t help but think about the goodness in people.”

He’s been an emotional mess, he said, unable to even talk about the help they’ve received without getting choked up. But once they’ve pulled their lives back together, he and his wife want to help with whatever the next disaster might be.

But first, he wants to feed everyone.

“I was raised by an Italian woman from New York, and I love to cook,” he said. “We’ve got a running list of everyone who’s stopped by to help. I’m going to fill the entire back field with people and I’m going to feed every single one of them until they’re sick. Everyone is going to know exactly how much their contribution to our lives has meant.”

* * *

Scott McCormack and his wife have spent the last 17 years fixing up their home, which used to belong to her grandparents. Now they’re waiting for it to dry out so they can start over. Photo by Megan Schnabel.

Linda Mullins made sure they salvaged bathroom vanities, toilets, countertops, even strips of molding as they cleaned out the house where she and her husband, Bob, have lived for 45 years. “Honey, we saved everything we could, because it’s up to us to put it back,” she said. “Cause I know FEMA’s not going to help.” Photo by Megan Schnabel

For Buchanan County, last year’s flood in Hurley was a crash course in responding to a natural disaster: coordinating volunteers, managing donations, filing paperwork, clearing roads, distributing aid.

The lessons that the county and its partners learned then are playing out now across the Dismal River area in ways that local officials believe are making the response more efficient.

As County Administrator Craig Horn put it: “It kind of helps on the second one that you’ve been through the first one.”

Meredith’s group, for instance, stopped serving hot meals after a week because it saw how demand had tapered off in Guesses Fork as the power came back on and as people found temporary housing.

A case manager hired after the Hurley flood has helped speed aid to residents this time around, Horn said. The Hurley Long Term Recovery Group, which brought together local government representatives and social services staff and nonprofit agencies, is still working in Hurley but has been expanded to the newly flooded areas and is coordinating activities including fundraising and volunteer scheduling.

“We knew what to do as far as procedure and operations and funding, and how we’re going to structure everything that comes through,” Horn said, “so we didn’t have to have a bunch of meetings, which really helped.”

One complication encountered in Guesses Fork that has also turned out to be an issue in the newly flooded areas: the reliance on private bridges to access homes, and the regulatory and funding challenges related to repairing or replacing scores of them.

“We have learned more about bridges and more about engineers and more about the complexities of water and what’s in the water and environmental review,” said Travis Staton, president and CEO of United Way of Southwest Virginia. They also learned that state and federal aid generally can’t be put toward private bridges, so they had to figure out the best ways to leverage private donations to cover the costs. That will likely need to happen in Whitewood as well.

Another lesson they learned through Hurley: just how difficult it can be for residents to navigate the network of aid resources. Some families in Hurley turned down local financial help, for instance, because they feared it would prevent them from accepting money from the Federal Emergency Management Agency, which never ended up coming.

“Just helping people know what’s available, what the rules and regulations of some of those things are – that’s one thing that we’ve got to pay close attention to,” Staton said.

The county, with help from the state, will try again to obtain FEMA help for flooded-out residents. The federal agency provided financial assistance to rebuild infrastructure after the Guesses Fork flood but [twice denied a request for aid](#) for individual property owners. The damage just wasn’t severe enough, the agency ruled.

The denial still rankles, as does what both some local officials and residents see as an unnecessarily opaque approval process that leaves localities in the dark about what it takes to qualify for federal money.

“We have asked, and continue to say, what is the formula for FEMA?” Staton said. “And to be honest with you, we still don’t know.”

Jeff Cooper, who represents the Whitewood area on the county board of supervisors, thinks the chances of getting individual assistance from FEMA are “very slim.” The county will certainly apply, he said. “But I don’t know what it takes.”

Bob and Linda Mullins carried flood insurance for 20 years or so but let it lapse. It was expensive, Bob Mullins said, and from everything they’d been told, the land where they built their home wasn’t prone to flooding. “Even that night, as bad as that water was, I didn’t think it would get up in the yard,” he said. “I was ready to go to bed.” Photo by Megan Schnabel.

Linda Mullins, whose home of 45 years was inundated with water from the Dismal River, isn’t expecting any federal help. When her son-in-law and his friends started clearing out the house two days after the flood, she made sure they salvaged bathroom vanities, toilets, countertops, even strips of molding.

“Honey, we saved everything we could, because it’s up to us to put it back,” she said. “Cause I know FEMA’s not going to help.”

Her husband, Bob Mullins, said they carried flood insurance for the first 20 years or so that they lived in the house but gave it up when finances got tight. It seemed unnecessary anyway, he said.

Before they bought the land, he’d asked the oldest man in the community about whether the property had ever flooded.

You’re safe to build there, the man told him. The land hadn’t even flooded in 1977, when so much of the region was underwater.

“Of course, he’s dead and gone now,” Mullins said with a chuckle. “I can’t tell him, ‘You owe me one.’”

He and his wife try to laugh, he said, because what else are they going to do?

“We got no insurance, we got very little savings. What’s it going to do to cry?” he said. “I just try to think positive.”

They’re hoping Meredith can help them get the building materials they need to repair the house. They have a crew of family and friends already lined up to do the work.

Meredith said he’d do his best but warned them that it could take several weeks to get an answer, as local officials were still figuring out how much the fundraising campaign was bringing in and what the overall needs would be.

“Well, if you can do anything, we sure appreciate it,” Bob Mullins said. “And if you can’t, we’ll understand.”

His wife added: “And we’ll love you anyway.”

* * *

Preliminary damage estimates shared by the Virginia Department of Emergency Management said that 33 structures were destroyed and another 60 damaged in the July 12 flood. Photo by Megan Schnabel.

The initial cleanup is just the beginning of what will be a long slog, Horn said.

“The hardest part is getting ready to happen,” he said. “The hardest thing to deal with are the expectations of the people after about three or four weeks. Because their expectations are pretty high. They want help and they can’t see why you don’t help them.”

The county can’t go on private property and clear out debris, he said, which is why so many damaged and abandoned houses still stand along Guesses Fork Road in Hurley.

Nor, he said, will the federal government allow the county to dredge creeks to remove sediment and rocks that have filled them up and made future flooding more likely, or to rechannel the creek to restore it to its previous path. That’s why Guesses Fork is wide in some places, narrow in others, and generally

less deep than it used to be. He knows it's an ongoing source of frustration to Hurley residents. And he knows he'll be dealing with a similar issue in the newly flooded area.

Buchanan County has pursued state and federal aid to help both with flood cleanup and with mitigation programs. But the paperwork can be complicated and time-consuming, and, as they saw in Hurley, applying for aid doesn't mean receiving aid.

(The Hurley recovery ended up receiving [\\$11.4 million from the General Assembly](#) earlier this year; discussions are still going on in Richmond about how that money will be distributed, Staton said.)

Last fall, Buchanan County got almost \$400,000 from a state fund designed to help localities prepare for flooding. But that program, and a newly created revolving loan fund targeted at flood prevention efforts, both are paid for with money from Virginia's participation in the Regional Greenhouse Gas Initiative. Youngkin has pledged to pull Virginia out of the program, leaving the future of the initiatives unclear.

[Read more about Virginia's flood relief programs [here](#).]

Tracking the decline of the coal industry that used to employ thousands in the region, the population of Buchanan County has been dropping steadily for years. It fell by 18% between 2010 and 2021 and now stands at not quite 20,000. Meanwhile, the county's median age has rocketed upward: from 26 in 1980 to 47.8 last year, according to census data.

Horn knows that residents, especially older ones, are struggling with the question of whether to stay after this most recent disaster.

There are rules about building homes and bridges in a place that has flooded – rules that typically mean delays and extra expense – and he expects that up to a quarter of the people whose homes were destroyed won't rebuild. Maybe because they don't want to shoulder the expense, maybe because they're elderly and can't handle the extra stairs that would come with a floodproofed house, maybe because they simply can't see moving back to the site of a disaster.

He doesn't like it, but he understands. So does Cooper.

"I think we may lose some population because of it," he said. "We're trending down anyway. It's not a good thing. But I look at them, and I can't blame them for it."

Gay Maxwell moved into her house 62 years ago and raised her children there. She's determined to move back in. "It's my home," she said. Photo by Megan Schnabel.

Gay Maxwell is one longtime resident who has decided to stay. Her house was damaged, not destroyed, but the rebuilding process is going to take time. The flooring has been torn out, the walls taken down to studs.

"For two weeks, we've been here about every day, working," said Maxwell, who's 91.

She and her husband moved into the house 62 years ago; it stands on land his parents gave them. The cluster of a half-dozen homes is called Maxwell Bottom, and nieces and nephews and children and grandchildren live nearby.

The house doesn't have to be perfect, she said. But it's home.

She didn't have flood insurance; it was too expensive. Besides, she said, even the flood of '77 only came up to the first step of her patio.

She and her son were talking recently with someone about whether the house was salvageable.

"My son made this remark – it broke my heart, because they have a beautiful home on the mountain," she said. "My son said, 'Do you think it can be fixed?' And he said, 'Yes, but it's going to take money.' And Terry said, 'Well, I'll sell my home so my mother can have her home back.'"

Cooper, who has lived in the area his whole life, said it seems like the county just keeps getting hit with disasters that push its people to their limits.

"When I come visit their houses and talk to them, they thank me for things that I do," he said. "They're worn out. They're mentally and physically exhausted, and they're thanking me for things I'm doing, and I'm like, I'm not doing anything.

"I feel worthless when I talk to them," he said. "But they're hugging you, they're thanking you. It's been very difficult to be in that situation where you can't help somebody that needs it. ... Me and my wife, we've left many homes through this in tears."

* * *

More than two weeks after the flood, signs of the devastation dot the landscape. “The hardest part is getting ready to happen,” said Craig Horn, Buchanan County’s administrator. “The hardest thing to deal with are the expectations of the people after about three or four weeks. Because their expectations are pretty high. They want help and they can’t see why you don’t help them.” Photo by Megan Schnabel.

At the Comfort Inn, as rain poured down outside, Ida Proffitt shared the story of how she and her husband managed to escape the floodwater, and on her phone she scrolled through photos and videos of the devastation.

But it was clear she’d rather talk about her widowed neighbor, whose home of 46 years was destroyed, or about all of the other folks in her community who lost so much.

“You look around and you see people a lot worse than I am,” she said.

Her daughter, Frances Justus, set up a GoFundMe page to help Proffitt get back on her feet. It has raised more than \$3,200 – enough, Justus said, to replace what Proffitt and her husband lost in their rental

trailer.

But her mother keeps suggesting they use some of the money to help others, Justus said.

“She was in the hotel and someone gave her \$100,” said Justus, who lives in Ohio and has been traveling back and forth to Buchanan County to help her mother. “She turned right around and gave it to another one of the people who was there who had lost their home. I mean, didn’t even have time to put it in her purse.”

Proffitt said she has a couch and a table and chairs that she wants to give to anyone who needs it.

“If you’re in need, you’ve still got to help others who are in need, too,” she said. “If you can’t help your neighbor when they’re in need, then why have neighbors?”

That’s the fundamental guiding principle of her mother’s existence, Justus said. And it’s something that she has witnessed around the community.

“I’d grown up in that area, so I always thought everyone was that strong, I always thought everyone was that resilient, I always thought everyone was that selfless,” she said.

“But moving away from that area, I realized that is something very innate to that area. Just different people who look at things beautifully.”

Coming soon in Cardinal News: Almost a year after flooding devastated the Buchanan County community of Hurley, the recovery continues.

A team from the Mennonite Disaster Service is building new homes in Hurley. Photo by Megan Schnabel.



CULTURE

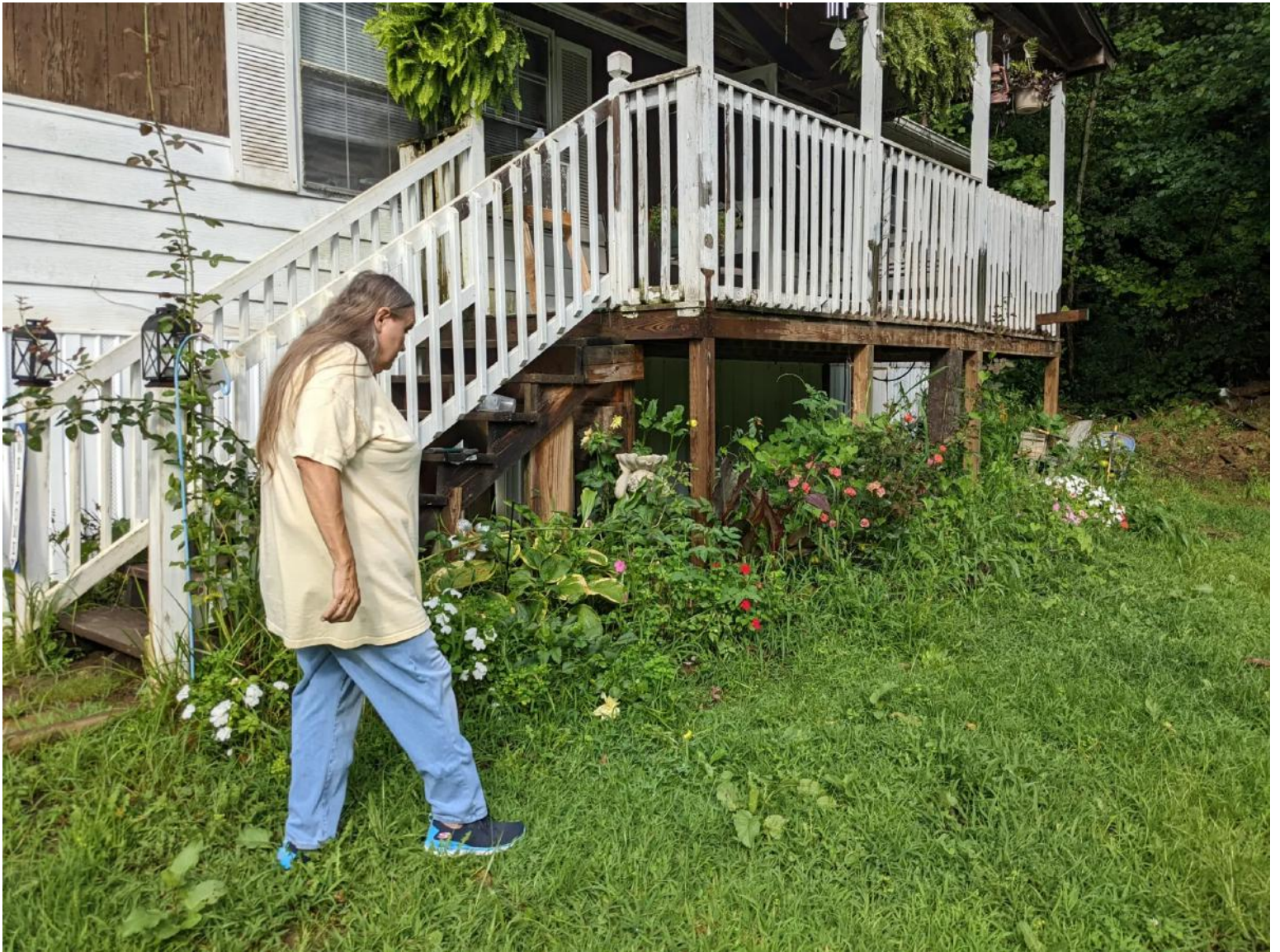
'We have to figure out how to deal with the water in a better way'

A year after a flash flood killed one person and left dozens of families homeless in the Buchanan County community of Hurley, cleanup continues. So does planning for how to keep the next flood from wreaking such devastation.



by **Megan Schnabel**

August 30, 2022



Debbie Lester was surprised to see her flowers come back after last year's flood swamped her home. She still has work to do in the yard, and she hasn't been able to mow very often because it's been so wet this summer, but her life has returned to more or less normal. "I'll get there," she said. "I can't complain." Photo by Megan Schnabel.

HURLEY – Debbie Lester's roses came back.

So did some of her calla lilies, and even the purple shamrocks that her mother had planted for her in the front flower bed.

That last one surprised Lester. She thought the plant had been washed away last August when the floodwaters had swept down from the hills and across her yard and under and through her mobile home. The muddy water had carried away so much else; why not the shamrocks?

But then this spring, they popped up out in the middle of the grass in her front yard. So she dug them up and put them back where they were supposed to be, where they had been growing so well.

Lester appreciates roots. Even after she was almost trapped by the flood, even after she had to live in a borrowed trailer while total strangers took her home apart and put it back together, even after her kids urged her to move, she was determined to stay right where she was.

“I’m kind of too old to start over,” said Lester, who’s 66. “Plus my church is right down the road, my kids are right down the road. I’ve known this community – I mean, I can name everybody on this holler, and if I need help there’s not a one of them that wouldn’t come and help me.

“So I just said, ‘I can’t start over. I’ll fix this one.’ And then the help just started pouring in.”

Southwest Virginia floods

Read all of Cardinal News’ coverage of flooding in Southwest Virginia [here](#).

It’s been a year since the Guesses Fork area of Hurley was stunned by a morning storm that dropped up to 7 inches of rain in just a few hours. Water and rocks and mud poured down the steep mountain slopes that flank the community on two sides. Guesses Fork, the creek that runs alongside the road and the houses, rose far out of its banks, fed by rain and hillside runoff and eventually choked by tons of flood-borne debris.

One person died. Dozens of families were left homeless. The final tally from the state: 31 structures destroyed, another 30-plus damaged, many severely.

Last year’s flash flood sent water coursing across Debbie Lester’s yard and into her home. Photo by Megan Schnabel.

[Read our coverage of the Hurley flood [here](#).]

The recovery work started immediately. Donations and volunteers poured in. Local officials quickly formed a task force to manage the recovery.

Nearly a year later, signs of progress dot Guesses Fork Road: Kids’ toys are piled outside houses that had been ravaged by floodwaters, trucks are parked in driveways that had been rendered inaccessible when

bridges were destroyed.

But reminders of the devastation are just as visible. All along the road, gutted houses bear spray-painted X's, the mark left by search and rescue teams. Old foundations peek through waist-high weeds. Portions of the creek remain clogged with debris, raising fears of more flooding.

Residents and local officials are effusive in their gratitude for the million dollars in donations and countless volunteer hours that have restored their community to where it is today.

Map by Robert Lunsford

But they are also frustrated that bureaucratic red tape and a lack of funding have hampered further recovery efforts. A denial of aid from the Federal Emergency Management Agency still stings. [More than \\$11 million in state money](#) earmarked for Hurley flood relief remains just out of reach as Gov. Glenn Youngkin's administration discusses how to disburse it. Federal rules that govern rebuilding in floodplains and clearing out waterways have caused confusion. More than a dozen families lack permanent homes.

In many ways, the issues raised by the Hurley flood – and by a strikingly similar flash flood in Whitewood, on the other side of the county, in July – aren't new. They're just recent.

[Read our coverage of the Whitewood flood [here](#).]

With its steep mountains and narrow hollers, Buchanan County is no stranger to flooding. Old-timers all have stories about the flood of 1977, which left three people dead and led to a years-long effort to move much of the town of Grundy to higher ground.

The county has counted roughly 50 floods – 65% of them flash floods – since 1996, when the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration started tracking such events in an [online database](#).

Seven people have died in those floods, more than any other locality in the state.

Efforts are underway – still, and again – to make the county both less susceptible to floods and more resilient when they do happen.

“The reality is, we can’t make it stop raining,” said Tee Clarkson with First Earth 2030, a Richmond-based consulting firm that’s helping Buchanan County develop a flood resiliency plan. “It’s hard to identify the next area that’s going to be hit with something, so we have to look at it universally across the county, and say, OK, how are we going to position the county and the residents and the structures and the infrastructure to better absorb these sorts of rainfalls, which are not going to stop?”

“We have to figure out how to deal with the water in a better way.”

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Stephanie and Ben Stiltner and three of their five children spent hours huddled together on a hillside when the rising waters of Guesses Fork drove them out of their home. A year later, their lives are pretty much back to normal, Stephanie Stiltner said – with the exception of the anxiety that creeps in every time it rains. Photo by Megan Schnabel.

Almost a year after the flood, Stephanie Stiltner still talks about how she should have been better prepared for it: how she should've known what to do when the deluge struck so suddenly that morning, how she shouldn't have hesitated in any of the split-second decisions she had to make.

How she has to be ready the next time the water cascades down the hollers and rises from the creek.

She got a scare in late July, when the same storm that delivered devastation across eastern Kentucky dumped torrential rain on Southwest Virginia. She was awake at 4:30 a.m., watching the creek. By 7, she was bagging up medicine, collecting her kids' shoes, finding her purse.

Memories of Aug. 30, 2021, came rushing back. The hours huddled on the hillside, the late-night swiftwater rescue, her childrens' terror.

"The last time the water was at the edge of the yard, we started getting coats and shoes," she said. "By the time we got coats and shoes on, it was under the house. By the time we got out the door, it was thigh-high. So I'm a little anxious about it."

She didn't let her kids play in the yard that day in July, fearful that the sodden ground would collapse under them and plunge them into the creek. She didn't let her 12-year-old son go away with friends for the weekend because heavy rain was in the forecast; during the flood, she hadn't known for almost eight hours whether her two children who had gone to school were safe, and she doesn't want to be separated from any of them like that ever again.

The kids still have bad dreams, and the 4-year-old will insist on checking the creek if she wakes up in the night and it's raining.

But in many ways, life has returned to normal.

The kids are involved in baseball, football, basketball, cheerleading. Stephanie and her husband, Ben, shuttle them to practices and games and doctor's appointments across the new bridge that once again connects them to the main road.

After months of cleanup and rebuilding work by volunteers, and by the Stiltners themselves, the house has been restored, more or less, to its pre-

flood condition: new floors, new drywall, new trim, donated furniture. There's some painting to be done, and the kitchen countertops haven't come in yet. They still have to replace their fence and do some landscaping.

But they're no longer sleeping seven people to one bedroom, and the smell of mud and stagnant water is long gone.

And this month they celebrated the start of a new chapter: The family finalized the adoption of three of their children, who had been placed with them through the foster care system and joined the family's other two kids.

The Stiltners finally were able to build a new bridge to replace the one that was destroyed by the flood. For months, they had to make due with a foot bridge across the creek (below). Photo by Megan Schnabel.

November 2021 photo by Lakin Keene.

"We're thrilled with that," Stiltner said. "Thrilled everything's kind of getting back to normal. ... All in all, we are as good as we were. Other than being a little bit traumatized, we are as good as we were."

She knows, despite the anxiety and the nightmares, that her family is fortunate.

"Ben and I, we're sitting nice," she said. "We're not living in half a house, or we're not living in somebody else's house. But there's so many people that don't have homes, and they don't know when they're going to get a home."

By Denise McGeorge's count, there are 15 families whose homes were destroyed and who are still waiting to move into permanent housing. McGeorge, who was hired by the Buchanan County Department of Social Services last fall to work with flood victims, still meets every week with her team to talk about the open cases.

There's some good news on the horizon: One of those families has bought a home but hasn't moved in yet. Another eight are in line for new houses being built by volunteer crews from the Mennonite Disaster Service; three are under construction now along Guesses Fork, and five more are planned.

"When you're dealing with volunteer labor and time, and working around schedules, it doesn't go

as quickly as I'm sure everyone would like," McGeorge said.

"I just try to remind everyone that this has definitely been a marathon, it's not a sprint. And that we've had another flood since this flood," she said. "We want to step as quickly as we can but as surely as we can."

Craig Horn, the county administrator, and Lee Moise, the county attorney and floodplain coordinator, know that residents are frustrated about the pace of rebuilding. They said they're frustrated, too.

Mennonite Disaster Service crews from Harrisonburg have been building houses in Guesses Fork. The work was delayed by floodplain permitting issues and heavy rains, but eight families are on the list for new homes. Photo by Megan Schnabel.

Horn said permitting and engineering requirements and expenses related to replacing several of the private bridges delayed some of the homebuilding projects – without bridges, work crews couldn't access the sites.

Further complicating matters have been what Moise said are inaccuracies with the county flood maps that FEMA has used since the mid-1990s.

Those maps govern how, and whether, houses can be rebuilt in flooded areas. They lay out the contours of floodplains and floodways, and they establish the so-called base flood elevation, or the level to which the water would be expected to rise during a 100-year flood.

"It's been a problem for the county ever since," Moise said. "We have people who live on the top of the hill, and they have been determined to be in the floodplain, even though they may be 75 feet elevation above the creek. But yet they're being shown in the floodplain."

The county has been "pleading" for new maps for years, he said. He understands that the whole state is up for remapping, and that Buchanan County supposedly is on a priority list. He credits FEMA with starting the process of remapping the Guesses Fork area immediately after last year's flood. The agency has already sent the county a draft of the first of three map segments, he said.

In the meantime, confusion has continued. After the flood, county staff got conflicting information about which information it could use to approve building permits, Moise said.

He said only two or three building permits have been approved for the Guesses Fork area since the flood, and he believes they were issued using the new draft map.

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Mennonite Disaster Service volunteers from Harrisonburg are building new houses in Guesses Fork. Photo by Megan Schnabel.

Recovery takes money. And waiting for that money to materialize has in some cases led to delays with rebuilding.

Local fundraising brought in more than \$1 million that has purchased construction materials and other necessities. Faith-based organizations including the Mennonite Disaster Service and the Baptist General Association of Virginia have donated thousands of hours of labor to clean and repair and build.

But some residents were hesitant to accept the help, afraid it would mean they'd lose out on aid from FEMA. So they waited while the federal agency assessed the state's request for assistance.

And when, in late October, FEMA told then-Gov. Ralph Northam that it wouldn't be sending money to property owners – that “the impact to the individuals and households from this event was not of such severity and magnitude” to warrant help – they waited, again, while the state appealed the denial.

And then, in January, [FEMA again said no](#).

The agency did approve Buchanan County and the state of Virginia to receive up to \$1.6 million in grants to help repair infrastructure. But neither residents nor officials understand why FEMA twice denied the individual assistance request, and the opacity of the agency's decision-making process has led to the theory that places like the coalfields just don't count for as much in FEMA's math.

“I think we're all in concert that the rules need to be changed, because they seem to be weighted against rural areas,” said Rep. Morgan Griffith, R-Salem. He said he's been working with Virginia's two senators – Democrats Mark Warner and Tim Kaine – to figure out how to implement change. They're trying to make sense of what he called “subjective” FEMA standards.

“They will tell you that they don't look just at the dollars,” Griffith said. “And that's true. There's a whole list of different things they look at, but it's very difficult for a community to figure out, what do we need to show you?”

Warner said last week that one solution might be to use communities' average home values to set damage award thresholds. That way, he said, a high-income, high-density community in Northern Virginia and a lower-income, sparsely populated area in Southwest Virginia would be on more equal footing.

In truth, FEMA assistance wouldn't have been a magic bullet in Hurley; the most that a property owner can receive from FEMA is \$36,000, and the average payout is closer to \$4,000 or \$5,000.

But the rejection stung in a community that has long felt that it occupies a forgotten corner of Virginia. And it galvanized state lawmakers to act.

Del. Will Morefield, R-Tazewell County, [proposed creating a statewide fund](#) to help Virginians whose property had sustained flood damage. It would pay up to \$500,000 for residential properties and

up to \$1 million for commercial properties, and it would be funded by revenues from the Regional Greenhouse Gas Initiative.

In early December, Youngkin said he wanted to pull Virginia out of the initiative. By February, Morefield and fellow legislators had introduced an alternate plan: an \$11.4 million budget appropriation that would provide similar aid, but just to victims of Hurley's flood. Youngkin signed the budget in June.

Two months later, Guesses Fork residents are anxiously awaiting any news about how to apply for the money. A half-dozen of the families that still don't have permanent housing are holding off on making a decision about how to proceed until they learn how much money they might receive, and how they can use it, McGeorge said.

It's still unclear how eligibility will be determined or how, exactly, the funds can be used.

The money will be administered by the state Department of Housing and Community Development, which is still creating a process to manage it, spokeswoman Amanda Love said in an email.

"At this time, we are working with our local stakeholders and partners, as well as other state agencies, to determine eligibility, timelines for distribution of funding, parameters on funding based on the passed legislation, etc.," Love wrote.

Morefield said he has urged the state department to collaborate with the Buchanan County Department of Social Services, which has amassed reams of data about local needs.

Both Marci Watson, the department's director, and Travis Staton, president and CEO of United Way of Southwest Virginia, said that their offices are eager to work with the housing department but that they're waiting for word from Richmond.

"We stand ready to partner and help and collaborate," Staton said last month. "We're all patiently waiting to see what their plan and process is going to be."

Morefield said he hopes that an announcement with details about how to apply for funding will come within weeks.

* * *

Guesses Fork was running fast and high after two days of heavy rain in late July. Residents say that until debris can be cleared from the creek, they fear more flooding will come. Photo by Megan Schnabel.

Even as cleanup from the last flood continues, fears mount among Guesses Fork residents that another one is coming.

After two days of rain in late July, the creek was running high and fast in front of the Stiltner's house.

The water is probably 15 feet wide there, Ben Stiltner pointed out, but it narrows to just 6 feet or so a little farther down the road. It didn't used to be like that; tons of dirt and debris carried by the flood changed the size and, in some places, the course of the creek.

His wife's fears about another flood aren't just the stuff of paranoia; she looks at how the creek has changed since last year and predicts disaster.

“You have anxiety because when it rains, you know the creek’s full of dirt, rock and concrete bridges,” Stephanie Stiltner said. “So where’s the water supposed to go?”

McGeorge said that other than housing, the state of the creek is the biggest concern she hears from residents.

“The creek has naturally rechanneled itself, and the waterway runs differently now,” she said. “There are areas that were many feet deep that now may be a foot or a few inches. It continues to be a concern and a worry and a stress. ... When there are major storms, they’re very concerned.”

Soon after the flood, the county asked an engineering firm for a back-of-the-envelope estimate of what it would cost to restore the creek to its pre-flood state, Moise said. The answer: \$30 million.

But the regulatory requirements might be even a bigger hurdle than the cost.

The Army Corps of Engineers, which oversees work on the nation’s waterways, takes dredging and rechanneling requests very seriously, said Jennifer Serafin, chief of the Corps’ Western Virginia regulatory section in Roanoke.

Some permits are relatively easy to get, she said, like those for bank stabilization or repairing road crossings after a flood. Depending on how you do the work, you might not even need a permit to scoop out debris that’s blocking a culvert or threatening a bridge, she said.

But when you start talking about dredging a creek or moving its channel – even back to its prior path – the permitting process becomes much more stringent. The Corps has to weigh the need versus the potential ecological effects and impacts on downstream neighbors, Serafin said.

“Part of the reason I think why flooding gets so bad sometimes – in not just this area but all over the country – is that we’ve spent so much time rerouting channels and not giving the actual water, the stream or the river, its access to its floodplain. Because that’s what it’s trying to do,” she said.

“I’m not saying that the river or the creek is more important than the homeowners, because they live there now, they have property, they have a right to protect that property. But we have to understand those dynamics of why that creek is going outside its banks, and where it’s trying to go, because that was its floodplain at one time. It’s trying to use that land that it doesn’t have access to. It’s trying to get access to it now, there’s just a house in the way.”

And the Army Corps isn't the only agency that must sign off on a dredging or rechanneling project.

If the creek in question is habitat for an endangered species – Guesses Fork hosts the Big Sandy crayfish – then the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service would get involved. If the work could adversely affect a cultural resource, the National Historic Preservation Act comes into play. If any of the affected area includes Native land, then the appropriate tribes would also be consulted.

Moise said the county got the distinct impression from FEMA that returning Guesses Fork to its pre-flood condition wouldn't be "viable or feasible." Horn said much the same thing: "My understanding, we'll never be allowed to do that. Now, the federal government will not tell us we *can't* do that. But they won't tell you you *can* do that."

Serafin said her office hasn't received an application to work on Guesses Fork from Buchanan County but said she'd be happy to talk with local officials. She said she doesn't want to discourage anyone from requesting a permit, but she said her staff tries to give applicants a realistic look at their chances.

"We can't tell somebody, no, you're never going to get a permit, because anybody's welcome to apply for a permit," Serafin said. "We certainly will give people kind of that worst-case scenario, in the sense of like, well, you could go through all of this and we could ultimately deny the work."

She said she encourages communities to look at smaller projects that could achieve some of the same goals: bank stabilizations, upgraded road crossings, larger culverts for driveways.

In fact, Buchanan County is already trying to bite off smaller pieces of the work, starting with the trees and building detritus that still clog sections of the creek.

The county tried to handle the cleanup itself but found that the work was too much for its limited resources, Moise said. So several weeks ago the county asked FEMA to send its own contractors – and pick up the bill – to finish the job in Guesses Fork.

He hasn't gotten a response yet. But Moise said FEMA has done similar work in other areas, so he's hopeful. He also thinks FEMA would be in a

better position than the county to obtain all of the permits that would be needed to do the work.

Debris, including pieces of old bridges, still clogs parts of Guesses Fork. Photo by Megan Schnabel.

The county probably will make a similar request for help in the Whitewood area, where cleanup from the July flash flood continues.

“It’s just more than a county our size, with our minimal resources, can handle,” he said. “We just need more help.”

The county is also working with the Natural Resources Conservation Service, part of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, to pay for smaller-scale creek cleanup projects through the Emergency Watershed Protection Program.

The service helped the county identify several sites along Guesses Fork that are eligible for the cost-sharing program, said Wess Stanley, district conservationist in the service’s Lebanon office.

The timetable will depend on weather and crew availability, he said, but he’d like to see the work finished within a few months. The total estimated cost is just over \$900,000, he said; NRCS will pay 75% and the balance will fall to the county.

* * *

A year after a flash flood devastated the Guesses Fork community, vacant houses still dot the landscape. Photo by Megan Schnabel.

The very week that Guesses Fork flooded, Buchanan County submitted an application for a state grant through the newly created [Community Flood Preparedness Program](#), which is also funded through RGGI revenues.

By October, the county had received \$387,500 and had convened a project team. Tee Clarkson of First Earth, who's helping county staff navigate the process, said they face a challenging task: figuring out how to better protect the county's people and structures while dealing with topography that both limits available building acreage and contributes to flash flooding.

The group has been gathering data about areas that have traditionally flooded, and about other parts of the county that might be at risk. They plan to start holding public meetings next month and hope to hear from residents about trouble spots like blocked culverts or places that consistently take on water.

Clarkson expects they'll look at projects to strengthen creek banks and remove debris throughout the county, and to create an expanded disaster alert system.

They hope to have the plan completed by early next year, he said. But their work won't be done.

"Where is this money going to come from?" Clarkson asked. "Once the plan is complete, where do we go for funding to get some of this work done?"

It's likely to be a combination of state and federal dollars, he said. But Buchanan County almost certainly will join a long line of localities with their hands out.

"When we're talking about federal dollars, think about what just happened in Kentucky," he said. "There's going to be a lot of people looking at some of these federal dollars to help."

There's already a large pot of federal money available for floodproofing houses in Buchanan County. But not everyone can benefit.

In 2019, Congress appropriated more than \$235 million for flood mitigation in the county. Much of it is being used to move Hurley High School and the county's career and technical center, both of which are in high-risk areas. The rest is earmarked to floodproof homes by raising their first floors above the flood elevation or to buy and demolish houses that can't be altered.

About 500 properties were deemed eligible, said Bob Peterson, who manages the project from the Army Corp's Huntington office. His team has received applications for about 60% of those parcels, he said, although some property owners dropped out after the final vetting process started. (The program is voluntary.)

But there's a catch: The Army Corps first got Congressional authorization to develop plans for flood mitigation in the region following the flood of '77. And even though funding for the work didn't come through until 2019, and even though weather and flooding patterns have changed in the decades since the mid-1970s, only properties that would have been affected by the '77 flood are eligible for the program – which leaves out many of the recently flooded homes in both Guesses Fork and Whitewood.

Peterson understands that the limitations might frustrate residents.

"I realize that these recent flooding events are fresh on everybody's mind, and I'm sure they want us to jump in and appraise their home and properties and offer them funding to buy them out," he said. "But

unless they were part of our authorized project, we're not going to be able to do that. ...

"This is really the sad part for us as well: We really understand the situation with a lot of people. A lot of people don't have flood insurance, a lot of people just don't have the means to rebuild after a flooding event."

It would take an act of Congress to expand the Corps' authorization, Peterson said.

Warner said he's heard complaints about the limitations of the program and is sympathetic. The idea that the '77 flood is the litmus test today, when so many factors are different, "just doesn't cut it." He said he needs to learn more about the issue before proposing any action, but he believes that Army Corps processes in general – including the permitting requirements that make stream cleanup so difficult – deserve a close look.

A spokeswoman for Kaine said that it's possible that the Corps' floodproofing efforts could be extended by Congress, and that his team will look into it. Griffith said he hadn't heard concerns about this particular issue but wanted to learn more about it.

There isn't going to be a single solution to fix the kind of flooding that has been seen across the region in recent months, Warner said. Maybe a flood fund could be created from some of the money paid for mineral rights, or maybe the Army Corps and the state could collaborate on a stream cleanup blitz, or maybe the state could set aside more money for emergency relief.

"These are communities that have lived through tough times, and they've got to have faith that the system writ large is actually going to hear their needs and respond to it," he said. "I think oftentimes what people feel in rural communities is, you know, that they've been forgotten. And in many cases, that has been the case."

As it happens, even meeting that '77 threshold might not be enough to get relief.

Two Guesses Fork houses that were to be part of the Corps floodproofing program were destroyed by last year's flood, Moise said.

The Corps told those homeowners that because there was nothing left to floodproof and nothing left to appraise, they wouldn't get a payout.

* * *

Debbie Lester lived in a camper for several months after the flood. “I thought, what am I going to do? How am I going to do this? I got to a really low point and then I thought, no, get up, you’re going to fix this place.” A couple of days later, volunteers from the Baptist General Association of Virginia said they’d do the work for her. “And I was like, really? And they said, yes, we are. And I thought to myself, they haven’t seen it. Because I’d been in here raking the mud out with a hoe because it was getting really smelly.” But they came, and they fixed it up, and she moved back in just before Thanksgiving. Photo by Megan Schnabel.

Debbie Lester never did have the heart to tell the volunteers who fixed up her house that she’d accidentally let a little brown snake in the front door one day.

It was before the helpers had arrived, when she’d been trying to muck out the house on her own to keep the mold at bay.

But even though she knew that the snake had to be long gone by the time the crews started working, she couldn’t keep her mind from going there sometimes. Like when she’d sit on the couch that she’d salvaged from the floodwater and wonder if the snake might’ve made a home in the upholstery.

She's still somewhat amazed that total strangers gave up weeks of their time to put her house back to rights. For weeks, she said, they worked in the damp fall chill, in a trailer that smelled of mud and decay and that maybe – but *probably* didn't – feature a snake.

“There's nothing I can do for them like they did for me,” Lester said, sitting on that rescued couch while Van Morrison's “Days Like This” played in the background. She gave them all wooden Christmas ornaments or keepsakes made of coal; that's what she was able to do, she said.

Stephanie Stiltner still stays in touch with some of the BGAV workers who spent so much time restoring her gutted home and making friends with her kids. The help almost felt like too much sometimes – they'd tell her that they'd be coming back to put up the trim, while she was grateful to even have new drywall.

“I said ‘thank you,’ but it don't feel like it's enough,” she said. “Maybe someday it'll come so I can help somebody else as much as they helped me.”

She's already donated to the Whitewood recovery effort – as have other Guesses Fork flood victims, McGeorge said. They know what their neighbors are up against, she said.

Both Lester and Stiltner said maybe, just maybe, Whitewood will get some FEMA help because the flooding there covered a larger geographic area than in Hurley. Neither sounded particularly hopeful.

“Those people over there are just like us,” Stiltner said. “I don't feel that they are going to get the help that they should get.”

* * *

To donate to ongoing flood relief efforts for Buchanan County, visit the [United Way of Southwest Virginia](#). Funds are also being collected for flood relief in Tazewell, Dickenson and Wise counties.

ECONOMY

A flood took their homes. Three months later, some in the community are frustrated by the pace of recovery.

In July, a flash flood devastated parts of Buchanan County. Winter looms for residents who lost homes as public attention wanes and federal and state funding is denied and delayed, respectively.



by **Megan Schnabel**
November 1, 2022



Dozens of homes were destroyed and scores more damaged by a July flash flood in Buchanan County. Here, a scene from the Pilgrim's Knob community. Photo by Lakin Keene.

Winter is coming, and some of Jeff Cooper's neighbors are living in campers.

One, he said, is in a tent.

Three months have passed since a [flash flood tore through parts of Buchanan County](#), destroying almost three dozen homes and damaging scores more. Three months since the media blitz, three months since out-of-town politicians toured the devastation and brought promises of help.

As Cooper – a county supervisor – drives through Pilgrim's Knob and Whitewood and Jewell Valley and sees the scars of the flooding still evident on the land and the houses, and as he hears from constituents who still don't have a home and don't know what to do, he feels powerless to fix things.

"Morale's down in the little area over here, going into the wintertime, strapped for cash, not seeing much movement," said Cooper, who's serving his first term on the county board.

Eastern Buchanan County and western Tazewell County were hit with up to 6 inches of rain in just a few hours the night of July 12, sending water and mud up out of Dismal Creek and its tributaries and down the steep hillsides that bracket them. Houses built on the narrow strips of flat land along the creek were inundated. Bridges and cars were swept away.

Southwest Virginia floods

Read all of Cardinal News' coverage of flooding in Southwest Virginia [here](#).

Volunteers arrived almost immediately, setting up mobile showers and feeding stations and starting the dirty work of mucking out houses to keep mold at bay. Some left after a few weeks as other natural disasters beckoned; others have pledged to stay until the rebuilding is done. A fundraising effort led by United Way of Southwest Virginia has brought in about \$700,000 to buy building supplies and other necessities.

That's almost certainly not going to be enough, but right now, it's the only help that's available to many residents. The Federal Emergency Management Agency [denied a request](#) to provide financial aid to homeowners. Discussions are underway about providing state relief money, but if it comes it would be months away. Homeowners who had insurance mostly saw their claims denied or diminished.

Cooper is grateful for the help that has poured in. But he fears that after the initial wave of publicity, his community has been forgotten by the general public, and by some of the same government officials who visited in those early days.

He said people who have been through disasters before warned him that things would get harder three or four months into the recovery.

“We’ve hit that wall now,” he said. “I’m sure people are very unhappy with me. It’s frustrating, but that’s how it is.”

He believes that his neighbors have only to look across the county to see what lies ahead for them. In August 2021, a [similar flash flood struck the Guesses Fork area of Hurley](#), about 30 miles away. The scope of the damage was similar to what happened in Whitewood; [more than a year later, the rebuilding there is still underway](#).

In Hurley, too, FEMA refused to provide financial help for homeowners. More than \$11 million in state aid has been earmarked but not yet disbursed. Streams remain clogged with debris thanks to lack of funding and stringent permitting requirements.

Buchanan County, which has watched its population and tax base dwindle alongside the decline of the coal business, doesn’t have the resources to tackle the problems on its own, especially not after this one-two punch, Cooper said.

“Morale is largely down over in this area, on relying on government of any kind, even myself,” he said. “This has given me an eye-opener of what politics and government is really like. This is a true disaster in your area, and your hands are tied on helping a lot of these guys out, and you see up close and personal the slowness of things happening.”

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The Pilgrim's Knob community was one of several areas damaged by a July flash flood. Photo by Lakin Keene.

Less money, higher costs make rebuilding a challenge

Local officials are trying to make that \$700,000 in donations stretch as far as possible, hoping that more money will come in but expecting that the need will be greater still.

More than 300 requests for help have come in from residents, said Travis Staton, president and CEO of United Way of Southwest Virginia, which has managed the relief fund. Some were relatively simple: Families needed money to buy groceries, or to have debris hauled away.

Others required more than just cash. Some homes were severely damaged but could be repaired; those cases were turned over to teams of volunteers, with building supplies purchased from the donated funds. Of the 33 properties in that category, three had been finished by last week and another 17 were in progress, Staton said.

And then there were the families who lost everything. United Way is handling 22 requests for help from homeowners whose houses were destroyed.

Members of the long-term recovery group who coordinated relief efforts after the Hurley flood are now working on the Whitewood response; they know from experience that those 22 will be the hardest cases.

Eighteen homeowners in Hurley were approved for new houses through the relief fund. Just one has been completed so far, according to United Way's [flood recovery dashboard](#).

It's a matter of money and manpower, Staton said.

They've asked for more help from Mennonite Disaster Services, which started building houses in Hurley this summer and has just about finished its first one. The group intends to step up, said spokesman

Daive Kanegey, but probably can't do much in Whitewood until its work in Hurley is done – and it has at least five houses to go there. As it is, he's having trouble finding enough volunteers to complete that work, he said.

Money is the other sticking point. Roughly \$300,000 less has been raised for the Whitewood recovery than for Hurley; since the scale of the damage in the two places is comparable, that means less money is available per house in Whitewood, Staton said.

Nor are those dollars going as far as they did in Hurley, thanks to inflation. A rebuilding project that might have cost \$9,000 or \$10,000 last fall is now \$12,000 to \$14,000, said Butch Meredith, who heads up volunteer crews from the Baptist General Association of Virginia.

“That's hard to absorb when you have 15 projects,” he said. “It's stretching our donated funds to the max.”

Right now, they're not able to rebuild every house. While a state survey determined that 33 structures were destroyed, rental homes are not eligible for financial help from the United Way fund, said Denise McGeorge, who oversees the flood response for the Buchanan County Department of Social Services. As more money comes in, those parameters might expand, she said.

Despite the challenges, Meredith and others said the pace of recovery – at least for properties that are salvageable – has actually been faster than in Hurley because the responders had a framework in place this time.

“It's like reinventing the wheel – you don't have to,” he said. “This whole group that's worked on this thing started from scratch in Hurley, and so it was a big learning curve. And this time, they already had most of the details and stuff worked out for future involvement if necessary. And bingo, it happened.”

He saw it firsthand: His group didn't start their rebuilding work in Hurley until Nov. 1, two full months after the flood. In Whitewood, it took them less than 15 days to get started.

They had just driven their last nail in Hurley when the flood hit Whitewood.

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A state survey found that 33 structures were destroyed by a flash flood that hit eastern Buchanan County and western Tazewell County in July. Photo by Lakin Keene.

Lessons from the August 2021 flood in Hurley

Hurley provided some tough lessons to residents, too.

Staton thinks people around Whitewood who have watched the recovery unfold on the other side of the county are clear-eyed about the help that's available – or, more to the point, that's not available.

Some Hurley homeowners were reluctant at first to accept financial help from the United Way fund because they feared it would hurt their chances at getting money from FEMA, he said. Waiting for that money, which never came, delayed their rebuilding by months.

After watching their neighbors wait and wait, only to be disappointed, few people in Whitewood expected that FEMA would come to their aid.

“They didn’t see it in Hurley, so I think they are just ready to not wait, and to try and get their lives back on track,” Staton said. “I do think the community is more knowledgeable about what the road is ahead and how difficult it is, and when someone offers assistance, take it.”

Cooper said he was careful to not give his constituents false hope about FEMA, and he warned them that even if the federal money were to come through, they’d probably only get a few thousand dollars apiece.

“We’ve learned a lot from Hurley, and I’ve used Hurley as an example,” he said. “Our local people can see what’s happened in Hurley. They can see that it’s still the same. So they’re like, ‘Well, if they’re not getting it then we’re not going to get it, either.’”

He’s been frustrated by what he sees as lack of action by the state as well. He said he’s kept tabs on the recovery in eastern Kentucky, which was hit by deadly flash floods several weeks after the downpour in Whitewood, and he believes it’s further along than what he sees at home. He credits Kentucky’s governor, Democrat Andy Beshear, with the progress.

Cooper said he’s a Republican and he “votes red.” But he said he’s upset that [Gov. Glenn Youngkin and other officials visited Whitewood](#) right after the flood but haven’t been back to check on things since then.

“Early on when this thing was brand new, we had a lot of people come here and visit,” he said. “A lot of our higher officials – our governor, senators, people like that – rushed in really quick to visit: ‘Hey, we’re here to help you.’ It kind of lifted the spirits of the folks quite a bit, and mine.

“It’s slowed to a crawl now. Not seeing much help from those guys at all. They’ve kind of vanished. They came in and said a lot of good things, and you never see them again. And that kind of killed the morale for these people around here.”

He’d like to see Youngkin “step up” – maybe call a special session of the General Assembly to figure

out a way to get more financial help to Buchanan County. He thinks a word from the governor could spur action on getting the creeks cleaned out and the rest of the flood-damaged roads repaired.

Gov. Glenn Youngkin speaks in Buchanan County just days after the July flood. Photo by Megan Schnabel.

In a conversation last week with Cardinal News, Youngkin said he understands why residents are frustrated, and he acknowledged that progress probably has seemed slow to them. But he said he's seen "extraordinary engagement" from the state, both in Hurley and in Whitewood, since he took office in January.

"I just want to assure everybody that we have been fully engaged," he said. "It's not apparent every day, because so much of it is behind-the-scenes work in order to facilitate things. But getting the support out as quickly as we can has been a high priority."

Months of planning have gone into setting up a system to disburse \$11.4 million in state aid to residents of Hurley, and Youngkin said that framework can be used in Whitewood as well – once the funding is in place.

"I look forward to working with our Southwest delegation to make sure that incremental funds are included in this next year's budget in order to provide the same kind of state support where it's needed," he said.

The state money for Hurley, which was included in the state budget, has yet to be disbursed, but a public meeting to explain the process is scheduled for Wednesday, and applications for aid can be filed starting next week. The money will start reaching residents "well before Christmas," Youngkin said.

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Flood damage in the Pilgrim's Knob section of Buchanan County in July. Photo by Lakin Keene.

A harsh reality: Years of recovery lie ahead

For all his frustration with state officials, Cooper acknowledges that he's also been disheartened by his own inability to do more.

He travels around the region for his job in the oil and gas business, and he said he's seen his share of washed-out roads and bridges. He's used to being able to just fix problems, and it's made him feel helpless to have to go through bureaucratic channels to get things done for constituents.

He said he's tried to find workarounds, like partnering with a local nonprofit to help a couple of families replace their driveways and bridges.

But he said he knows of several people who decided they're not up to the rebuilding task because of their health or their finances, and they've moved away. The same happened in Hurley.

He understands, he said. But it's still hard to watch the county's population continue to decline. It's now just a shade under 20,000 people; in the late 1970s, it was over 38,000.

Terry Keen, whose mother lost everything in her basement to the flood water – including her oil furnace and all of the food she'd put up for winter – has spent the last three months working to keep her in her home. He got her signed up for financial assistance right after the storm, but when weeks passed and she hadn't heard anything, he took matters into his own hands and bought her a new heat pump and water heater.

“She's 81, and she's cold all the time,” he said. “So we needed something for heat – we knew the cold weather is coming.”

He and his family have spent countless hours working on her house, cleaning and repairing. He knows that many residents had it worse – his own house was spared, and his mother's was still livable even with the basement damage. But his mother worked hard her whole life, and she's on a fixed income, he said; she shouldn't fall through the cracks.

“We have her in pretty decent shape again,” he said. “Her house is back fairly good right now, but it's been frustrating. ... I want my mom to have the things that she deserves.”

Keen said he's grateful for all of the donations and the volunteers that arrived in the days after the storm. He was amazed by how quickly power and water were restored, he said. But he said this week that he's still waiting to learn whether he will be reimbursed from the relief fund for the \$8,000 he's spent on his mother's house.

“I don't want to sound ungrateful for anything that anybody's done for us,” he said. “They really did an amazing job, and really did it fairly quick. I was very pleased with that. But it seems like after the first two weeks here, things have just sort of stalled.”

Staton knows that it's no comfort to people who are waiting for help to hear that they need to be patient. But the painful truth is that recovering from a disaster of this size with limited resources is a challenge.

“For these types of disasters, folks just really don’t understand how long it takes,” he said. “You’re talking 24 to 36 months when you have something of this magnitude.”

Help continues to come in. SunCoke Energy, which operates a coke plant in Whitewood, is donating equipment and workers to fix up the Pilgrim’s Knob community center and will be helping with demolition, grading and other work across the area, Meredith said.

The U.S. Small Business Administration has set up a temporary office at the Whitewood Volunteer Fire Department, where residents can apply for low-interest loans to help pay for rebuilding.

Virginia Department of Transportation crews continue to fix roads around Whitewood; they’ve finished not quite half of the work that needs to be done, including repairing 40 slides and hauling away about 26,000 cubic yards of debris, spokeswoman Michelle Earl said.

They’ve been concentrating on high-traffic routes like Dismal River Road, she said, and they’ll continue to work into the winter as weather allows.

Weather remains a driving force for all of the recovery efforts, said McGeorge, whose team is handling hundreds of flood-related cases between the Hurley and Whitewood disasters.

“It’s early fall right now, but we’re having some really strong weather patterns right now where we’ve had some freezing temperatures,” she said. “That’s the realization, that winter is on our heels.”

POLITICS

First state checks go out to Hurley residents for flood relief, but process may be slowed by application requirements

Gov. Glenn Youngkin says the first \$2 million of the \$11.4 million appropriated has been distributed.



by **Megan Schnabel**

December 21, 2022



Stephanie Stiltner's home in Hurley was damaged but is being rebuilt, unlike several nearby houses. "We have issues here, but my neighbors' houses aren't even standing," she said. "To walk back off that hill and see nothing where stuff had been all your life, it is just -- I don't even have a word for it. Devastating is the best word I've got." Photo by Lakin Keene.

More than \$2 million in state aid has been disbursed to residents of Hurley whose homes were damaged or destroyed in a flash flood more than a year ago, the governor's office announced Wednesday. But a shortage of available contractors and a need for documentation may be hampering efforts to distribute more money.

The money, part of an \$11.4 million state budget appropriation, is intended to help with rebuilding in the Buchanan County community, where dozens of homes were destroyed and scores more were severely damaged by rising water and mudslides in August 2021. One person died.

Few property owners carried flood insurance, and the Federal Emergency Management Agency denied a request to provide them with financial help to rebuild. The rebuilding that has been completed to date has been funded primarily through private donations, with work done by volunteers.

The General Assembly during its 2022 session voted to include \$11.4 million in the state budget for emergency assistance. The fund is managed by the Virginia Department of Housing and Community Development, which spent much of this summer and fall putting together a framework for taking applications and disbursing the money.

Southwest Virginia floods

Read all of Cardinal News' coverage of flooding in Southwest Virginia [here](#).

The application process finally opened in early November. While an initial information session drew a crowd, the Buchanan County Department of Social Services has received fewer applications than expected, said Marci Watson, the department's director.

"We were shocked," she said Wednesday. "We thought we would really be bombarded."

They've since discovered two sticking points, she said.

Property owners who spent their own money to buy supplies or pay contractors must be able to provide documentation of those expenses to be reimbursed, she said. But they didn't know that at the time and might not have saved the paperwork.

And owners who have held off on having work done must submit estimates from contractors in order to receive a payout from the state fund – a process that has been hampered by continuing pandemic-related labor shortages, Watson said.

“They just can’t find contractors to come and get the estimates,” she said. “We’re working on trying to resolve that, but to date we still don’t have a resolution yet.”

Barbara Blankenship Coleman, center front, is the first recipient of compensation for damage to her property during the devastating 2021 Hurley flood. To the left is Marci Watson, executive director of the Buchanan County Department of Social Services, which is administering the distribution of an \$11 million state assistance fund; at right is Denise McGeorge, DSS program coordinator. In the back are Coleman's two sons, Robert Burns Blankenship and Timothy Eugene Blankenship. Courtesy of Buchanan County DSS and The Voice newspaper.

Watson said she believes that there are families that want to apply but are waiting for a contractor or are trying to collect receipts.

Another round of payouts has been approved and will be disbursed to property owners Thursday, she said.

Department of Housing and Community Development spokesperson Alexis Carey said via email that it has received 65 applications. Fifteen have been processed and paid out.

“We are currently working with applicants to complete their applications,” Carey said, but did not respond more specifically to a question about what is being done to help those who are struggling with documentation or contractor availability.

The [guidelines](#) for the flood relief program, which lay out how residents can apply for assistance, say this: “The Program requires the least burdensome documentation possible, while adhering to programmatic, state, and federal guidelines.”

Meanwhile, residents of the Whitewood area, on the other side of Buchanan County, are waiting to see if they will receive similar state aid after flash flooding wiped out parts of their community in July, less than a year after the Hurley disaster. Thirty-three structures were destroyed, and dozens more were damaged. As in Hurley, FEMA declined to provide assistance to individual homeowners, few of whom have received any kind of insurance payout.

To date, about \$800,000 in donations has been collected for Whitewood's rebuilding, according to an [online dashboard](#) maintained by United Way of Southwest Virginia, and volunteer crews have spent months cleaning out and rebuilding homes.

Gov. Glenn Youngkin last week called for an additional \$11 million in emergency funds for Buchanan County flood victims to be added to the two-year state budget. The General Assembly will consider that request when it convenes next month.

Youngkin and others have said they believe that the system established for the Hurley fund will make future payouts faster.

Watson said Whitewood residents who have seen their neighbors in Hurley finally start to receive state aid continue to ask about when that kind of help will come their way.

“Unfortunately the only thing we can tell them is that right now, there’s hope but there’s no confirmation yet,” she said.

Her staff is also giving them practical advice: “From the beginning, we’ve tried to tell everybody to be proactive in saving receipts for any type of work that’s being done – try to save those, take pictures, have documentation. Because if funds do come available, you will need those.

“And that’s information we didn’t have for the Hurley residents.”