

A year later, Flo on harrowing

Editor's Note: This is the first of four stories recounting the impacts of last year's flooding in Buchanan County.

DAVID MCGEE

Bristol Herald Courier

Columbus and Victoria Fleming still get nervous when a thunderstorm rumbles through Buchanan County.

During one recent storm, they climbed into their pickup truck and drove until they'd reached the town of Grundy, several miles away. That's how vivid their memories are of catastrophic flooding one year ago which nearly claimed their lives.

Please see **FLOODS**, Page A4

Floods

From A1

No one died and only person was injured during record flooding last July 13, after up to six inches of rain fell in a few hours, causing widespread flooding, damaging more than 100 homes and businesses in eastern and central portions of the county. That includes the single-story home the couple rented along Dismal River Road, in the Whitewood area, a short distance from Twin Valley High School.

"We're just blessed to be alive," Columbus Fleming said when asked to reflect on that night. The National Weather Service issued a flash flood warning about 8:30 p.m., on July 12 for portions of Buchanan County and southern West Virginia as a line of thunderstorms brought torrential rains to the mountainous region. "We thought the rain was past us so we thought it was going to be OK. We went on to bed because we had to get up at 3:30 [a.m.]," Elizabeth Fleming said.

He works as a heavy equipment operator and, at the time, she did medical trans-

port and was scheduled to take two patients to Roanoke the next morning. Instead, a night filled with terror lie ahead. They were awakened about 10:30 p.m. by the loud noise of something striking the outside of their house.

"I got up then returned to bed when something [else] struck the exterior of the home. I thought a tree had hit the house," she said.

Victoria Fleming tried repeatedly to call but cell service is spotty in that area and she was unable contact anyone. Their first instinct was to flee.

"I went to the back door to see how bad the tree damaged the house. We opened the door and — wham — the water just pushed us back," she recalled as the surging water shoved them onto nearby furniture.

"Columbus said, 'Victoria we're in a flood. Run. Run across the road. Do not wait on me,'" her voice trembling.

However opening the front door produced much the same result as flood water again burst in. "We tried to get out but I got to the edge of the steps and I could feel the water was moving me ... I know you [Columbus] grabbed me but I felt something stronger.

I know what was stronger; it was the good Lord," she said.

Water levels were quickly rising both inside and outside their home. "We had been in the water so long, my lower extremities were numb. I couldn't feel my legs. We were so terrified we weren't paying attention to where we were standing then we realized we were in the doorway of the front door. One of my hands was outside of the door and one was on the door frame. I looked out and my legs were just floating on the water. One hand had let go and I told Columbus, 'Make sure you tell my kids I love them and I love you.'

"He said, 'No, no you can't leave me. I didn't give up on you and you can't give up on me.' My one arm was in the door frame and that was all that held me — and the good Lord," Victoria Fleming said.

Eventually the couple made their way back through the house to a bedroom where a small tool box was stored. From it, Victoria retrieved "the smallest hammer you've ever seen." Knowing she "had to do something," Victoria climbed upon some furniture and began beating on the ceiling above, tearing through

the material and the insulation until she could see the exposed rafters. He climbed atop an oversized chair and the couple remained there — clinging to the rafters — for much of the night. They estimate the ordeal lasted six hours.

"I was hanging in the rafters and he reached me the light [a small flashlight attached to a band to be worn around the head]. "I took the light and wrapped it around my arm. I was so worn out and my hand started shaking. I could see all the particles we were breathing," she said. "I followed the light beam to the wall and could see debris where the water was going down. I said, 'Keep praying. Don't you give up. Pray harder. Pray harder.'"

Slowly, the water began to recede. Periodically Columbus would step down, and eventually he stepped into ankle-deep mud.

Daylight brought the realization that many of the other homes along that stretch of Dismal River Road were also heavily damaged.

"When we got out that morning, we thought everybody was dead," he said. "I don't think, as bad as the water was, that swift water

rescue could have gotten to us. It washed vehicles away, it washed buildings away. The good Lord is what kept us alive. That's the reason we're here today. A lot of people wouldn't be here. We're blessed people."

With just the clothes on their backs, they slogged to the nearby post office where they learned that others had similar, harrowing experiences.

They later found his Toyota pickup truck downstream and ruined by the water. Days later, a wrecker driver was able to pull the hulk from the streambed. As he did, a small plastic tool box floated out the back window. Fleming still carries the tool box in his current

truck but hasn't washed the mud from the tools.

Returning to the site of their former home last week, they reflected on that night.

"I believe that if we hadn't opened those doors, the floodwaters would have just pushed the house on down," Columbus Fleming said.

There are no remnants of their house or many others that were damaged beyond repair that night. "We lost every material thing we had but you can buy that back. You can't buy life back," he said. "We lost some sentimental stuff we'll never get back but we're alive."

dmcgee@bristolnews.com —
Twitter: @DMcGeeBHC

TO PLACE AN OBITUARY visit <https://ads.heraldcourier.com/bristol-adportal/obits/index.html> or email to obits@bristolnews.com. Obituaries can be published daily in the Bristol Herald Courier. We edit obituaries to conform to newspaper style. Our obituary office hours are Monday through Friday 8:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Our deadline is 3 p.m. for the next publication date. Our offices are closed on Sundays. To reach us by phone, call 434-978-7294.

Recap: Buchanan recovering, faces delays

Bridge, power station remain symbols of work yet to be done

DAVID MCGEE
BRISTOL HERALD COURIER

Dismal Creek gurgled calmly last week in the afternoon sunshine, meandering alongside the narrow, winding Dismal River Road in Buchanan County.

It was a scene far different from a year ago when a deluge of rainfall over a few hours sent the normally placid stream raging through the valley, washing away homes and vehicles, damaging roadways, bridges, utilities and an electrical substation.

Miraculously, there were no fatalities.

A September 2022 state damage report showed 37 homes were destroyed, 54 had significant damage and a combined total of 134 private residences received some damage.

The Virginia Department of Emergency Management further estimated over \$17 million damage was inflicted on local roads and bridges.

A year later, most of that infrastructure has been repaired or replaced.

The most visible exception is the bridge across Dismal Creek that once linked Dismal River Road with state Route 715, also referred to as Big Branch Road, as it runs alongside Big Branch Creek.

Today, only small portions of the former structure can be seen on one side and a massive road closed



PHOTO COURTESY OF VIRGINIA DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION

One of the complications facing plans to replace the bridge connecting Dismal River Road with Route 715 is the presence of the Big Sandy crayfish, a threatened species. Virginia Department of Transportation workers are pictured during the May survey that found the crayfish.

sign blocks access from Dismal River Road.

"All repairs have been completed with exception of the Route 715 bridge replacement. Currently, preliminary engineering and environmental work are underway for that project," Virginia Department of Transportation Bristol district spokesperson Michelle Earl said.

That environmental work is complicated by an endangered critter.

"The bridge was over Dismal Creek, which is critical habitat for the Big Sandy crayfish that is listed as a federally threatened species," Earl said. "VDOT performed a crayfish survey at the bridge location in late May and identified Big Sandy crayfish during the survey."

The next steps will include formal consultation with U.S. Fish and Wildlife through the Federal Highway Administration and

coordination with Virginia Department of Wildlife Resources, Earl said.

VDOT officials haven't established a formal timetable to replace the bridge.

A partial flood casualty was the Dismal River electrical substation operated by Appalachian Power. While still serving customers, plans are to ultimately retire it, spokesperson Teresa Hall said via email.

"The Dismal River station sustained a lot of damage in the flood and many components of the substation are no longer working. We moved a mobile unit in to this spot so that we can continue to serve customers. Our future plans are to purchase property to build a new station and retire this location," she wrote.

The upper portion of the equipment is working properly, Hall said, but the lower equipment is "permanently damaged."

"The top of the substa-

tion combined with the mobile unit we installed in the station are working together to keep the power to customers," according to Hall.

About 2,000 people were without power in the immediate aftermath of the flooding.

A short distance from the substation, railroad tracks can be seen dangling in the air, just as they did a year ago, after floodwaters washed out a section of trackbed.

The tracks are owned by Norfolk Southern Railway, according to the county, but a request for comment from the railroad didn't receive an immediate response.

Last fall, FEMA approved a major disaster declaration for Buchanan and Tazewell counties due to the devastating flash floods and landslides. The declaration provides federal support through Public Assistance and Hazard Mitigation grant programs to assist in recovery efforts and protect against future disasters, according to a statement from the governor's office.

Putting that into practice, has been a challenge, County Administrator Craig Horn said.

"Getting help for a private individual is very difficult. You have to navigate the federal system - which is even difficult for people working for county government," Horn said Thursday. "We had quite a few people completely lost their homes. We had a local company do a lot of volunteer work to clean the area up. We couldn't do it as local government because it

was private property."

The county did accept debris from the cleanup efforts.

County officials are currently awaiting word on about \$18 million in state funding that is dependent on a budget agreement in Richmond, Horn said.

"There is money for the Whitewood area as soon as the governor signs the budget. I think that will help," he said, adding the county has two social service employees ready to assist applicants. "We think that will go relatively quickly. For government, quick is anywhere from four to nine months.

"Most of our problem has been dealing with FEMA [Federal Emergency Management Agency], which affects our reimbursements for what we did to clean up the area to get debris out of the river, off the banks and out of the road. Some things are just lying there and will cause more problems when the water gets up again," Horn said.

A trek along Dismal River Road reveals some bridges still have extensive tree debris collected beneath them. In addition other parts of the stream are obstructed by trees and logs left there by floodwaters.

"One of the things people don't understand is we would like to remove some of the debris that is in the creeks and river - that we think is going to cause problems the next time we have water again. But the federal government makes it very, very difficult," Horn said. "Between the 30 or 31 different agencies we have

to go through, all the species we have to deal with that are endangered. We have a crawfish that's endangered and a snail darter that's endangered. Thank God we don't have a mussel that's endangered."

Every step, Horn said, takes time.

"The citizens don't understand. I don't blame them a bit - why it takes this long. And they really don't understand why we can't just re-channel it [waterway]. Why we can't go up through there, like we did in 1977, put a big bulldozer in the river and some excavators in there and get that stuff out of there so the water will stay in the river. But we're restricted from doing that by the federal government.

"There are spots we're just getting to in Hurley [flood] - which happened in 2021. We're just now getting permits done on money we were granted from NRCS [Natural Resources Conservation Service], with permits from the Corps of Engineers, to get into those areas and clean out four different areas," he said.

In response to a question, Horn said homes could be built back in some previously flooded areas along Dismal Creek, so long as the floor was 18 inches above the federally designated flood plain elevation for that area and be engineered to resist the pressures of flood water. He said that can be expensive.

Land deemed to be in the floodway cannot be rebuilt on.

dmcgee@bristolnews.com - Twitter: @DMcGeeBHC

\$500K in, United Way eyes 12 to 18 months to complete Whitewood work

Editor's Note: This is the third of four stories looking at the ongoing impacts of last year's flooding in Buchanan County around the one-year anniversary of the event. Turn to **Page A3** to read the second story, which was published online.

DAVID MCGEE
BRISTOL HERALD COURIER

The United Way of Southwest Virginia was among the first to respond to the 2022 flash flooding disaster in Buchanan County and, to date, has provided almost \$500,000 in assistance.

But its leaders say much work remains to be done.

"They refer to this as 'long-term recovery' and it really is a long-term recovery process," CEO Travis Staton said.

Please see **REBUILDING**, Page A4



DANIEL SANGJIB MIN, TIMES-DISPATCH

This aerial view from last July shows the number of houses damaged by floodwaters along a section of Dismal River Road in July 2022.

Rebuilding

From A1

“Typically, disasters of this magnitude are a 36-month window of recovery, building back, getting people back on track. It takes a long time when you have that many individuals needing help at one time.”

For example, 21 residents of the Whitewood area whose homes were destroyed are seeking assistance. More than \$230,000 has been spent, one case has been completed, while the other 20 are in progress and about \$230,000 remains committed to those families, according to the agency.

The United Way received a total of 294 requests for assistance, has spent more than \$480,000 with another \$350,000 committed. Of that total, 256 were completed and 38 remain in progress.

“We were helping with the Hurley flooding [2021] and were breaking ground for the first house in Hurley a year after the storm and that’s when Whitewood



EMILY BALL, BRISTOL HERALD COURIER

This section of Dismal River Road shows where repairs were needed to get traffic flowing after being damaged by the July 2022 Buchanan County flooding.

flooded. It mirrors Hurley. We had requests for assistance from about 300 families or households and were able to help 200 fairly quickly,” he said.

“Those were things like ice, or flashlights or food. Immediate needs because they didn’t have power, accessibility, shelter. Those kinds of things,” Staton said. “Overall, the case-load for the types of criteria we’re helping with, we classify into three areas — a home with minor damage, a home with major damage

or it’s destroyed. Then there are details like whether it was insured, not insured, under insured, those types of things.

More than 100 structures were classified as destroyed or damaged to some degree, according to a state survey.

“We made a lot of progress early on in Whitewood because we were already on the ground, just over the hill in Hurley. We had a long-term recovery group team in place that graciously agreed to expand their scope to work on both in-

cidents,” Staton said. “The Department of Social Services has been tremendous. Several faith-based groups, nonprofit organizations, Mountain Mission School has been fantastic helping with volunteer coordination, some logistical things.”

As the catastrophe marks its one-year anniversary, flood plain remapping isn’t finalized and many details remain up in the air.

“We’ve got homes we’ve awarded support to, to build back, but we cannot get a building permit. We’ve been making major progress on those families whose house is habitable but needs to get repaired,” he said. “We have the resources and the groups. We just need some more volunteers who can do drywall or plumbing or HVAC. That would help us is some skilled volunteers.” Staton said their goal is to complete all work in the Whitewood area within the next 12 to 18 months.

“There were 21 homes, that requested assistance, that were destroyed in Whitewood. That’s a lot,” he said. “I think we’ve built six homes in Hurley with the

Mennonites. We have two under construction right now and Hurley is just about over the hump. Whitewood is running on a good timeline but we’re waiting on this floodplain mapping so we can get building permits and get those things underway.”

A proposed \$18 million in additional funding to aid recovery efforts is included in the state budget to provide some assistance for Whitewood area res-

idents through the state Department of Housing and Community Development. However, the state still has no finalized budget.

“DHCD has done a great job with what they’re doing,” Staton said. “We hope they get a budget approved soon and there will be some additional funding for the Whitewood area, so some of these families can start putting it back together.”

*dmcgee@bristolnews.com —
Twitter: @DMcGeeBHC*

TO PLACE AN OBITUARY visit
<https://ads.heraldcourier.com/bristol-adportal/obits/index.html> or email to
obits@bristolnews.com. Obituaries can be published daily in the Bristol Herald Courier. We edit obituaries to conform to newspaper style. Our obituary office hours are Monday through Friday 8:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Our deadline is 3 p.m. for the next publication date. Our offices are closed on Sundays. To reach us by phone, call 434-978-7294.