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CITIZEN TIMES

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When cleaner isn't better

‘Unnatural disturbance’ causes concerns for wildlife advocates

Cory Vaillancourt
Asheville Citizen Times | USA TODAY NETWORK

ASHEVILLE — The next threat to Western North Carolina’s storm-battered wildlife could come from decisions made in the name of recovery, two Asheville-area conservation advocates warn.

Nearly two years after Tropical Storm Helene, efforts to understand damage to streams and forests are colliding with a push to remove fallen timber and weaken environmental safeguards, according to Ben

Prater and Tracy Davids of Defenders of Wildlife, a national conservation organization that works to protect and preserve their habitats. The group’s work includes field research, public education and advocacy for public lands and the Endangered Species Act.

Prater, the organization’s Southeast program director, said those choices and the way they are made by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, which oversees the U.S. Forest Service, could compound the storm’s damage before researchers fully understand what survived and which species need help.

“You can’t say you’re going to conserve species while destroying the very homes they need,” Prater

See CONSERVATION, Page 8A

A hellbender rests on a rocky ground at the Louisville Zoo. PROVIDED BY THE LOUISVILLE ZOO



HELENE 2 YEARS LATER

PART 4 IN A 5-PART SERIES

MAJOR WEAKNESSES

Volunteer Giles Carwin cleans up at Riverview Station in the River Arts District in Asheville, following the devastation of Tropical Storm Helene. JOSH BELL/ASHEVILLE CITIZEN TIMES

Helene reshaped emergency response

Cory Vaillancourt Asheville Citizen Times | USA TODAY NETWORK

ASHEVILLE

Tropical Storm Helene exposed the fragility of the systems Western North Carolina depends on when disaster strikes. • Two years later, emergency agencies, utilities, hospitals, nonprofits and exhausted responders are still managing the last recovery — while preparing for the next one. • “I like to say that it’s a once-in-a-generation gut punch we took, and we’ve been fighting like it’s once in a generation to get it back together,” said Rod Honeycutt, Madison County’s manager. At the county level, Helene exposed a patchwork of strengths and vulnerabilities. Some emergency systems stayed online even as power, fiber and cellular networks failed, while others survived only because of backup systems, mutual-aid agreements and improvised workarounds.

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Control of House hinges on these races

Northeast contests hold hope for Democrats

Emily R. Condon
USA TODAY

With six weeks until the Nov. 3 midterm elections, Democrats are leading in polls. But in a politically polarized country with mostly gerrymandered congressional districts, a handful of contests will determine whether Democrats can actually win control of the House of Representatives.

The toss-up races across the country include traditional swing districts, a former NFL kicker, a congressman back from a four-month mystery disappearance and family drama.

“I would never say something is certain in American politics, but you know the Democrats have a very good chance of winning the [House] majority in November,” said Kyle Kondik, managing editor of Sabato’s Crystal Ball at the University of Virginia. He projected in a Sept. 16 article that at least 210 of the 435 races are safely or leaning Democrat, at least 203 are safely or leaning Republican and only 22 are toss-ups.

President Donald Trump’s low approval rating could give Democrats an edge. “The president’s party nearly always loses seats in the House in the midterm elections, and the size of the loss is correlated with the president’s approval rating,” said David Hopkins, professor of political science at Boston College.

Republicans’ advantages include a major monetary lead, with the MAGA Inc. PAC alone sitting on at least \$400 million, and their recent push to redraw boundaries in their favor in states including Texas and Florida, gains Democrats were able to only partially offset in states such as California.

Recent polling suggests Democrats have a lead of between 7 and 10 percentage points. Given the new congressional maps, political scientists and analysts told USA TODAY they estimate Democrats must win the national popular vote by 3 or 4 points to flip the House.

In New York’s 17th Congressional District, Republican Rep. Mike Lawler faces Democratic Army veteran Cait Conley. Lawler, a moderate, hosted a campaign rally with Trump in May despite representing one of the most Democratic-leaning districts held by a Republican. He also attended the Republican mid-term convention in Dallas, where he distanced himself from Trump in a speech, saying, “The truth is that the president and I don’t always agree, and that’s OK.”

Republican Rep. Tom Kean Jr. took a four-month hiatus from New Jersey’s 7th Congressional District due to, he eventually revealed, hospitalization for depression. He faces Democrat Rebecca Bennett, a Navy veteran, and polling suggests he may lose. Kean

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