

When Hurricanes Reach the Mountains: Debris Lessons from Hurricane Helene

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/EINPresswire.com/ -- By Matt Gierden,
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Every hurricane season sharpens the industry's focus on debris planning. Hurricane Helene in 2024 did something more: it forced us to rethink what a hurricane response looks like when the storm keeps going past the coast.

Helene's track into the southern Appalachians produced one of the most complex and technical major disaster debris missions in recent U.S. history. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers-led operation in Buncombe County, North Carolina, which continued through 2025, demanded specialized crews, disciplined documentation, and a level of coordinated public communication that most coastal playbooks don't anticipate. AshBritt served as the USACE contractor on that mission, and the experience made one thing clear for every community with mountainous or heavily forested terrain: the coastal template does not transfer.

Here is what did.



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The trees are a different problem

Tree debris in mountain terrain is a different animal from what crews see after a typical Gulf or Atlantic event. Instead of scattered fallen trees, crews encounter a far higher share of leaners, hangers, and intertwined canopy systems, often several trees tangled together and holding one another under tension. How that stored energy will move once a cut is made is difficult to judge from the ground. Getting it wrong is dangerous.

Access compounds the challenge. Mountain road networks are narrow, winding, and frequently single lane. After a major storm, they are further constrained by washed-out roadbeds, damaged bridges and culverts, landslides, and downed trees. Steep private drives and limited turnaround space can keep standard equipment from reaching a work site at all; some locations are only reachable on foot or with small machines. Add steep slopes and root systems compromised by saturated soil, and every decision about how to stage and sequence work changes.

The planning implication is simple to state and harder to execute: contracts, cost estimates, resource plans, and public messaging need to reflect mountain conditions from the outset, not be adapted to them mid-response.

This is specialist work, and the specialists are scarce

Standard hurricane debris crews are not equipped for highly technical tree operations on unstable slopes. The work calls for certified arborists, climbers, rigging capability, and smaller, more maneuverable equipment that can operate safely in tight access and on steep ground.

In a post-disaster mountain environment, an arborist is assessing dynamic load conditions, identifying failure points in compromised trees, and making rapid decisions about rigging angles and cut sequencing in terrain that is actively shifting. The pool of contractors who hold both the certifications and the disaster operations experience to do this safely and at scale is limited nationally. Surge capacity for this kind of work has to be arranged well before a storm forms, and jurisdictions in mountainous regions should be pre-qualifying specialized tree contractors now.

Public right-of-way and private property are tangled together

On the coast, the line between right-of-way debris work and private property debris removal is usually clear. In the mountains, it often isn't. Terrain, public infrastructure, and private parcels interlock so tightly that a meaningful share of hazardous trees in western North Carolina sat just outside the public right-of-way while still posing a documented, immediate threat to public property, public-use areas, or ingress and egress. That is the eligibility standard under FEMA's Public Assistance program, and every determination had to be made by the government applicant and supported by photo or video evidence of the specific threat, location, and post-storm condition of each tree.

The conditions that trigger both hazardous tree eligibility and full private property debris removal programs, including rights of entry, legal authority, and public-interest determinations, arise far more often in mountain terrain. The coordination framework for handling them should exist before landfall, not be built during response.

Documentation belongs in the field, not the back office

The technical nature of the mission reinforced a lesson the industry keeps relearning: documentation cannot be a reconciliation task completed after the fact. Under current FEMA guidance, the record for each hazardous tree, limb, or stump must establish the immediate threat it posed, supported by location and photo or video evidence. Capturing those photos, GPS tags, and scope notes at the point of work is what keeps every scope tied to a complete, defensible record. That requires operators trained in disciplined documentation as part of the job, not as a separate step.

Safety sets the pace

Tensioned wood, unstable ground, and overhead hazards create an elevated risk profile compared to a typical coastal mission, and safety considerations shaped operational tempo throughout the Helene response. The right answer was not to push harder against the terrain but to adjust to it: enhanced safety protocols, additional crews where needed, and work sequencing adapted to conditions. Disciplined, safety-led execution is what protected people and sustained steady progress at the same time.

Communication is an operational tool

Public messaging directly affected efficiency on the ground. Early in the event, residents often expected full property cleanup while the mission was focused on right-of-way operations and documented public safety threats. As strong, consistent, terrain-specific messaging from local leadership and federal partners took hold, cooperation and access improved with it. Clear, frequent communication functioned as an accelerator.

The lesson is to establish that footing before activation: policy alignment grounded in operational realities, authorization workflows, and resident communication protocols all set in advance.

The takeaway

Western and mountain communities across the Southeast need to plan for hurricanes and tropical storms differently than their coastal neighbors. In these areas, terrain runs the show. Saturated ground, steep slopes, narrow valleys, compromised root systems, and limited access change how water moves, where debris accumulates, and how safely crews can operate.

Helene was a brutal teacher, but its lessons are transferable: plan for realistic timelines and specialized resources, pre-qualify experienced tree contractors, build documentation and private property protocols into operations from the start, maintain clear public communication, and let safety and terrain set the tempo. Planning for the terrain before the storm makes recovery safer, faster, and more effective.

Special recognition goes to the USACE team that led the Buncombe County mission and to the Buncombe County and City of Asheville teams who, together, completed one of the most demanding debris operations the industry has seen.

About the Author

Matt Gierden is a Senior Vice President at AshBritt, Inc. With more than two decades of leadership experience in emergency management and disaster recovery, he has led over 100 disaster recovery operations across 22 states. A Six Sigma Black Belt with FEMA and antiterrorism certifications, he is known for building long-term client relationships and guiding complex, high-stakes missions from activation through closeout.

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