



In what is believed to be the first time Taylor County has ever been visited by a sitting U.S. president, local officials hosted President Joe Biden, Senator Rick Scott, the U.S. Secretary of Agriculture and Deputy FEMA Administrator last Thursday on a tour of some of the hardest-hit areas along the Taylor County coast, which sustained more than \$50 million in damages according to preliminary estimates. Biden issued a "Presidential Disaster Declaration" increasing the federal government's share of disaster relief from 75% to 100%, saving Taylor County and the state of Florida millions of dollars.

Waterway clean-up to begin next week Hurricane Helene debris pickup is now underway

Contractors paid for by the Florida Department of Transportation (FDOT) began picking up and hauling storm debris just days after Hurricane Helene hammered Taylor County with 100-plus mph winds.

Ceres Environmental Services, Inc. has been working around the clock to help clear the road to

recovery by removing vegetative debris, destroyed homes and other hurricane debris in Taylor County using 42 huge, tandem self-loading debris trucks outfitted with custom-built knuckle-boom loaders.

Ceres trucks -- operating under a contract with the FDOT, who will be reimbursed by FEMA,

began clearing piles of demolished residences and other structures in the coastal areas of the county on Friday, Oct. 4, according to County Administrator LaWanda Pemberton, who credited the swift response to the county's close working relationship with

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Inland outages repaired after Helene damage TCEC is rebuilding its coastal infrastructure

Tri-County Electric Cooperative (TCEC) is working non-stop to complete the process of rebuilding its infrastructure destroyed by the high winds and record storm surge caused by Hurricane Helene.

Tri-County officials announced over the weekend they had restored power to all meters in Madison, Jefferson, Dixie and Lafayette counties.

Then, on Monday, they added that all meters

that "can safely receive electricity" had been restored, including in Taylor County.

"We continue working with members individually to assist them through their repair process and reenergize their meters when ready," said TCEC Community Relations Director Kaitlynn Culpepper.

On Monday morning, TCEC began rebuilding its infrastructure serving Dekle Beach, Cedar Island

and Ezell Beach.

"The main road to these beach communities will be closed to through traffic and debris pick-up," Culpepper said. "Due to the large equipment, bucket trucks and personnel, only residential traffic into these areas will be allowed for 2-3 days as construction is completed and as we move further into those areas. A schedule of rebuild locations and road closures

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Some 42 debris removal trucks -- contracted with through the FDOT -- are busy working all around the county hauling away downed trees and the splintered remains of homes at Dekle Beach (above) and other coastal areas destroyed by Hurricane Helene.

Officials still taking applications for assistance

30+ housing trailers distributed here so far

More than 30 emergency housing trailers have been either delivered or picked up by those displaced by Hurricane Helene, and more are expected to go out each day.

According to local estimates, some 250 to 300 homes in Taylor County were either destroyed or rendered uninhabitable by the storm, which ravaged Taylor County with winds

topping 100 mph and 15 to 17 feet of storm surge.

Providing an update Monday evening to county commissioners, Taylor County Sheriff's Office (TCSO) Division of

Emergency Management Director John Louk said they had provided 34 housing trailers to local residents in need so far.

"We received 29 more today at our holding

facility," Louk said.

"I have a team from [the Florida Division of Emergency Management (FDEM)] that's here to help us," he said. "They receive the applications. They go

over the applications, and if there are any questions about qualifications, we do have the building inspectors who will go out and take

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Just 10 days after Hurricane Helene destroyed parts of Taylor County, the northbound lane of Highway 19 through Perry was clogged by millions of residents fleeing Central Florida's Gulf Coast in a mass evacuation ahead of the arrival of Hurricane Milton -- which "has the potential to be one of the most destructive hurricanes on record for west-central Florida" according to the National Hurricane Center. Terms such as "historic," "catastrophic" and "unprecedented" have been used for Milton, which strengthened to a massive Category 5 storm with 180 mph winds on Monday before weakening to a Category 4 with 150 mph winds Tuesday. The storm was projected to hit as a Cat 3 Wednesday evening south of the Tampa-St. Pete area.

Local traffic backs up as thousands flee Milton

Fresh off the devastation left behind by Hurricane Helene, local emergency officials are keeping a wary (and weary) eye on Hurricane Milton, which is projected to hit the west

coast of Florida near Tampa late Wednesday or the early-morning hours of Thursday.

Milton, which strengthened to a major Category 5 hurricane on Monday, is forecast to

weaken to a Category 3 or 4 before making landfall.

Traffic on Highway 19 through Taylor County was bumper-to-bumper Monday night and Tuesday as millions of residents from

the Tampa area and South Florida evacuate north.

Taylor County is officially under a tropical storm warning, and officials urge residents to be mindful for any changes in Milton's

track as it approaches the Florida coast. Additionally, as with any tropical system making landfall, threats will also include heavy rain and possible tornados.

"We're still watching

it close," Taylor County Sheriff's Office Division of Emergency Management Director John Louk told the Taylor County Commission

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In effort to remain solvent after hurricane Coastal sewer district asks customers to retain service

The volunteer board overseeing the Taylor Coastal Water & Sewer District, which provides utilities to Keaton Beach and surrounding areas, is fighting to stay afloat and financially solvent in the aftermath of Hurricane Helene.

A recent decision to waive the normal \$200 "turn-off" fee, while also increasing the "reconnection" fee from \$300 to \$1,000 -- to encourage customers to continue to pay the minimum monthly base service fee -- has sparked complaints.

An email that went out to all Taylor

Coastal Water & Sewer District (TCWSD) customers over the weekend stated:

"Experiencing Hurricane Helene has been and continues to be a difficult and challenging recovery for everyone.

"During this time, we are asking our customers to continue to support the district by paying the minimum monthly bill of \$97.82 (for 0 to 3,000 gallons of usage) for our water and sewer customers and \$34.28 for our water-only customers.

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More than 12 arrested during storm curfews

Local law enforcement, supported by numerous departments and fellow officers from across the state, have held the line, not only on a county-wide curfew imposed due to Hurricane Helene, but also against would-be looters in the days following the disaster.

More than a dozen arrests have been made involving a charge of "health-safety/violating established

emergency measures" since Helene struck Taylor County late Thursday, Sept. 26.

Many of those cases also included additional charges, such as drug possession and burglary.

Several suspects were taken into custody for violating the "sunset to sunrise" curfew ordered in the days following the hurricane, while others were stopped for being in

areas along the coast that were devastated by the powerful storm.

That was the case with Corine Marie Coxville, 39, of Perry, who was stopped Saturday, Oct. 5, on Yates Creek Road after a trooper observed a vehicle "driving at a slow rate of speed in an area heavily affected by the recent hurricane."

During a search of her

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Cynthia Diana Schranz

Woman arrested for frying pan attack

Cynthia Diana Schranz, 61, allegedly began her day by drinking Red Stag whiskey with her coffee. Then, she ran out of cigarettes.

By the afternoon, she was in handcuffs for attacking a housemate with a frying

pan. She now faces obstruction and aggravated battery charges.

The incident began when deputies were dispatched to a residence in reference to a physical disturbance on Wednesday, Oct. 2, at

approximately 3:33 p.m. While enroute, they were advised of the possibility of a gun being used in the disturbance, Taylor County Sheriff's Office (TCSO) Deputy Carlos Navarro reported.

When they arrived at the

residence, they detained a white female (later identified as Schranz) who was attempting to leave. "At this time, we attempted to call out to the male half of the disturbance, but he refused. It was later determined (he

had a hearing problem...he was found in a room in the back of residence, placed in hand restraints and detained while (we were) performing the investigation," Navarro reported.

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Mud bog canceled due to back-to-back hurricanes

The owners of Iron Horse Mud Ranch in Taylor County have announced they will cancel their annual October "Super Bog" due to back-to-back impacts from major hurricanes.

Iron Horse Mud Ranch had planned to hold the "Super Bog" this week, beginning Oct. 10 and continuing through Oct. 13, including: early entry and a "line party" on Wednesday,

Halloween Party on Thursday, "Bounty Hole" and tugs on Friday, open pits and freestyle competition, as well as kid's tugs and truck tugs on Saturday.

"We're so sorry to announce that we are canceling the October Super Bog," Todd and Kari Larson posted online Monday.

"We took a direct hit from Hurricane Helene, and now our Central and South

Florida family is taking a direct hit from a second hurricane (Hurricane Milton, expected to make landfall Wednesday evening).

"With our patrons still in clean-up mode, and others preparing for Milton, we feel it is best to cancel this event," the Larsons explained.

"We have more info to come. Also to anyone in

serious need of refuge from this upcoming storm, feel free to reach out to us," Kari said.

"Thank you to all of our supporters and our family across the country. Make sure to keep all of Florida in your prayers. Also, a huge shout-out to all of our emergency workers, and especially our local linemen, for working these storms."



The "Super Bog" set for Oct. 10-13 at Iron Horse Mud Ranch has been canceled.

Helene broke 1,063 TCEC power poles

TCEC
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will be shared as necessary."

Meanwhile, TCEC employees and mutual aid personnel are "forging on and addressing problem areas, conducting an inventory of materials, repairing fleet vehicles as needed, demobilizing the Madison base camp, downsizing the base camp in Perry and compiling storm-related documentation, among

other necessary action items after restoration is completed," she said.

According to Culpepper, TCEC recorded 1,063 broken poles from Helene, the highest number of poles the TCEC system has ever lost due to a hurricane. For comparison, TCEC had 93 broken poles after Hurricane Debby and 600 broken poles after Hurricane Idalia.

TCEC officials are turning their attention to Hurricane Milton and its

possible impacts to its customers.

"The current forecast leaves our service territory on the outskirts of the storm," Culpepper said Monday. "However, strong winds and rain are likely Wednesday and Thursday. After the damage to our system and communities from Hurricane Helene, scattered outages due to Hurricane Milton are likely. Hanging tree limbs, damaged trees and excessive amounts of loose

debris can be blown into our infrastructure, causing additional damage and outages.

"Crews will work to restore power as long as it is safe to do so and as quickly as possible in the aftermath. We retained some of the mutual aid personnel to assist with rebuilding infrastructure in the coastal areas we serve. We will be able to utilize these crews to assist with restoration if needed later this week.

"To verify we have

record of an outage, please refer to our outage map at outage.tcec.com or give us a call at (850) 973-2285," Culpepper said.

If your outage is not found on the map, it should be reported by calling (800) 999-2285, texting "TCEC" to (800) 999-2285 or logging into your account online at www.tcec.com or on the TCEC FL mobile app.

"Meters without power that have been identified as needing additional

homeowner-side repairs or those locations that may choose not to reconnect their service are located on the 'Planned Outage' Map," Culpepper said. "This is a function of our outage map at outage.tcec.com. By selecting 'Planned,' a map of only the locations without power due to necessary repairs will be displayed."

For updates and restoration information visit <https://tcec.com/power-restoration-updates>.

Start of waterway cleanup delayed due to Hurricane Milton

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state officials.

To date, debris pickup along non-county-maintained roadways has not yet been approved by FDOT, but Pemberton said she is continuing to work

with Taylor County state representatives to ensure those roadways are added to the scope of work.

Pemberton successfully lobbied the state after both Hurricane Idalia last year and Hurricane Debby in August to include non-county-maintained roads

in the post-storm debris pickup.

Canal clean-up by AshBritt Environmental, a national turnkey rapid-response disaster recovery and special environmental services contractor, was scheduled to begin on Monday, but has been

delayed at least one week due to Hurricane Milton (see related story on front page).

According to Pemberton, the waterway cleanup will start in Keaton Beach and Steinhatchee and then move to other coastal communities from there.

Synergy Disaster

Recovery is currently looking to hire full-time debris monitors to oversee debris removal in Taylor and surrounding counties. Workers will earn \$20 per hour, plus overtime to work seven days per week, 12 hours per day. Email hiring@eismanrusso.com

for more information.

In addition to private debris pickup, Pemberton said crews with FDOT and the Florida Department of Corrections have been working to clear debris from county, city and school district properties in the county.

Local points of distribution, resource centers closed

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Monday evening. "We're remaining vigilant."

As of press time Tuesday, there were no planned

closures of local schools or governmental offices due to Milton. However, the threat of Milton has closed the local points of distribution (PODs) and Multi-Agency Resource Centers in Taylor

County providing relief and services to those impacted by Helene.

Louk also noted that the state incident management team that had been in place helping local officials left

Monday to return home to prepare for the coming hurricane, with some of the team members now bracing for a direct hit by Milton after helping people here after Helene.

"An increase in vertical wind shear will likely cause some weakening before the hurricane reaches Florida, but there is high confidence that Milton will remain an extremely dangerous

hurricane when it reaches the state," forecasters said. "Milton has the potential to be one of the most destructive hurricanes on record for west-central Florida."

Loss of customers threatens future of beach utilities

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while service is temporarily disabled and being repaired.

"Your monthly payment is the only income this District uses to operate. We do not receive any County or State tax revenues or funding for our day-to-day operations. Your dollars keep our doors open and allow us to provide necessary services.

"If you choose to discontinue your account, we will implement a Hurricane Helene waiver of the normal \$200 turn off fees. However, if and when service is desired, and can be provided, a \$1,000 reconnection fee will be required."

Contacted this week, Senter provided more information on the difficult decisions faced by the small coastal utility.

The TCWSD currently has 575 total accounts – including 552 with water and sewer, and 23 "water only" customers.

"We just received an assessment of our sewer infrastructure stating that 99% of our equipment has failed or is in poor condition," Senter said.

While they were unable to access every station due to debris and failed road access, during a recent post-storm survey of the district's water and sewer utilities, Florida Rural Water staff determined that 68% of the structures at the beaches were "missing, gone or uninhabitable."

"This was slightly higher

than our estimate of 50% when the TCWSD Board made the decision to request customers continue to make monthly minimum payments without service, waive the turn-off fee and increase the reconnection fee," TCWSD's Lynette Senter said.

If the 50% of the district's customers were to turn-off services, the utility would lose 50% of its estimated monthly revenues and soon would be unable to pay employees or the payment on the loan used to construct the system.

"An estimate to replace the sewer equipment (grinder pump) is close to \$4,000 per customer – not including any additional repairs and parts," Senter added.

The District's estimated monthly operating costs for FY 2024-25 is \$69,023 per month, which includes \$23,753 per month for employees.

"Our only revenues are from the water and sewer services, including the sale of new grinder pumps as customers request them. We receive no tax revenues from the county or the state," Senter said.

"Our monthly loan payment is \$7,492.25 on a \$1,094,314.78 loan. This loan was part of the original water company purchase – Phase I and Phase II of the sewer system," she added.

"These monies were originally borrowed from USDA-RD, but were refinanced in May of 2022 to help reduce the restrictions

that were placed on that money. We did receive some grant funding, but the District had to take out a loan to cover the rest. We have to have the income to cover these payments

"A reduction in our customers would really affect the operation of the District," Senter added.

If all – or even half – of the TCWSD customers turned off their services, the District would have to rely on reserves, which would quickly be depleted.

"The District is required by our rules to maintain a reserve account for operating expenses. Our annual audit reviews that each year, and we have met or exceeded those requirements every year," Senter said.

While the District does have insurance on its buildings, automobiles and the normal liability coverages, it is subject to a 6% hurricane deductible that most Floridians are familiar with.

"We cannot insure our grinder pump equipment, as it is placed on customer's property. We received an insurance payment of approximately \$6,000 from Hurricane Idalia damage, which barely covered repairs to our water plant front door and wastewater plant doors," Senter stated.

While the TCWSD does qualify for some financial assistance from FEMA for any disaster, FEMA only pays up to 75% of "reported, approved losses."

"It is a long, tedious,

confusing process, but we have received some reimbursement for Hermine and Idalia, and will now apply for Helene," Senter said.

"We will be able to apply for assistance from the State of Florida as well and are getting set up to process those claims. However, what many customers may not understand is that the District has to pay these expenses out of pocket and then apply for reimbursement – with no guarantees -- so we are out the money until our claims are hopefully processed, and we are still liable for the remaining 25%," Senter added.

"While the timing of our announcement could possibly have been better, I believe the District did the right thing at the time," Senter said. "We raised the reconnect fee from \$300 to \$1,000, but we waived the \$200 disconnect fee, so the increase was \$500 overall.

"We are facing an enormous task and moved to ensure the survival of the District. We are not trying to punish anyone. We want the District to be there when people need our services again," she said.

"That requires us to have the funds to do that without totally depleting the reserves we have worked very hard to establish," Senter stated. "This policy can and will be revisited in the future."

The TCWSD has a plan to get customers supplied with water and sewer as soon as humanly possible, she

added. "We have reviewed almost all of our water lines and water meters and should be able to start our required testing by early next week.

"We had close to 35 people on the ground here at the District beginning last week and throughout the weekend helping us – from Florida Rural Water, the City of Tallahassee, the City of Bonita Springs and Regional Utilities -- some of those sleeping at the District building," Senter said.

"We also received help from Commissioner Pam Feagle, who contacted the White House, who in turn has been in contact with the National Security Council and the EPA, who are now working with Florida Rural Water to get us some additional assistance," she said, adding the TCWSD Board Chairman Mike Hunter has been making calls for assistance as well.

Senter made one very important request of customers and contractors, asking everyone to "please be very careful working around water meters and what remains of the grinder pumps. We've had water meters pulled out of the ground and lines that that were already fixed, broken again."

In the email to all customers, TCWSD stated, "We are working as fast and as hard as we can to get your water and sewer services restored. Our staff is being assisted by crews from the

City of Tallahassee, Bonita Springs and Florida Rural Water at this time, with more help to come.

"The water service is being checked meter by meter to help prevent any leaks. They are also checking all of our mains and feeder lines, making repairs where necessary.

"Water will be off and on each day to clear lines and check for leaks. Work has begun on the wastewater system with repairs to our lift stations, lines and wastewater plant. Each customer location will be inspected for grinder pump repair or replacement.

"Per Department of Environmental Protection regulations, we cannot provide water to our customers without ensuring that all wastewater is being processed. Customer power will need to be active before we can install and test the equipment.

"Beginning Monday, October 7, 2024, we ask that each customer contact the District so that we can keep track of your decision regarding your property. We are available to all customers and if you have any questions, comments or concerns, please call or text the District cell at 850-295-2950, send us an email at tcwsd@fairpoint.net or when phone service is restored, you can call us at 850-578-3043.

"Thank you again for your patience and the support we have received during this event," the email stated.