

Damage from July storm heavy in Cohuttas

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It took only minutes for the Conasauga River to spill its banks after a severe storm slammed the Cohutta Wilderness Area and outlying regions of the Chattahoochee National Forest July 21, a U.S. Forest Service spokesperson said last week.

"There was not only 4 inches of rain in two hours, but the Conasauga rose from 4 feet, which

is its normal depth, to 14 feet in a matter of minutes," confirmed Steve Bekkerus, of the Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forest office. "It was a really isolated microburst type of weather event, basically from the Cottonwood Patch Campground all the way down the Jacks River in a narrow, 5-mile corridor. The damage was isolated, but it is severe."

High winds and excessive rainfall uprooted rows of trees, many of

which wound up in the rivers. The river valleys are "basically funnels," Bekkerus said.

"They're like a big bathtub. They take all that water in, drain it out of a small spot down the river and it flows out the riverbank," he explained. "We had massive blowouts with piles of weakened trees flying down the mountain and going into the river along with a deluge of

DAMAGE CONTINUED ON 3C



Ken Jones, left, and Robert Collins use a crosscut saw to clear fallen trees during a recent volunteer work session along the Benton MacKaye Trail inside the Chattahoochee National Forest.

DAMAGE CONTINUED FROM 1C

debris. When those trees go through, they pretty much wipe everything out."

Trails, campsites wiped out

Several hiking trails in the wilderness area remain closed and the damage is so significant that some of them may never reopen, said Bekkerus.

"Some of the trails are just gone," he confirmed. "The wilderness itself is open for anyone who wants to go there, but trails on the north end are still closed. The Jacks River and Beech Bottom Trails are pretty much wiped out."

Motor vehicle access is prohibited and minimal maintenance is performed in the almost 37,000-acre federally-protected wilderness that spans Murray, Fannin and Gilmer counties.

"The 1964 Wilderness Act designates certain land, which is specified in GPS coordinates and land plats, as wilderness areas. That requires us to manage it that way," said Bekkerus. "No machines or mechanized transport at any level. There's no cellphone coverage or electricity. It's a rugged area left as nature intended it. We let nature



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Flash flooding after a severe July storm caused downed trees to be carried downstream in the Jacks and Cohutta River Basins of the Cohutta Wilderness Area.

"Trail associations like the BMTA have been cleaning the peripheral (area of the storm damage). The real heart of the flood damage and straight-line winds is in the Jacks River and Beech Bottom areas," Allen said. "There are trees stacked like cordwood through there."

An Aug. 11 volunteer work session was the first chance BMTA members had to survey the storm damage.

"We had 42 (BMTA) volunteers, as well as a group of six horsemen from the Back Country Horsemen of North Georgia who took their horses in to some tough areas," Allen noted.

"We had saw teams working to clear trees and we also did some basic trail maintenance. In one 8-hour day, we had four groups clearing trees and summer growth from Watson Gap to the top of Hemptop, which is about a 7-mile section."

The MacKaye trail has been reopened for public use, as have the Hemptop, Conasauga River, Hickory Creek, Tearbritches, Panther Creek, Chestnut Lead, and East Cowpen trails, according to the forest service.

At last notice, the service recommended visitors avoid the following closed trails: Jacks River, Beech Bottom, Rice Camp, Horseshoe Bend, Hickory Ridge, Rough Ridge and Penitentiary Branch.

take its course."

That includes storm damage, he confirmed.

"If there's a tree blocking a trail, we use hand tools to cut a section out. If it's a 1-foot diameter tree, you'd cut a section out of that (wide enough) for hikers to go through. Other than that, we let nature do its thing," Bekkerus said.

The July 21 storm is the latest destructive event to affect the Cohuttas, where winds from Hurricane Maria downed trees last year and the widespread Rough Ridge wildfires burned across the forest land in 2016.

Bekkerus confirmed that existing fire damage likely contributed to further weakening some of the timber that fell last month.

"We have researchers who are doing analysis and studying there and have been doing so since the fire occurred," he added.

Several of the Cohuttas' "dispersed" campsites were also damaged.

"There's a couple of hundred dispersed campsites that aren't developed, but are more like 'camp here, don't camp here' sites. Several along Jacks River were wiped out," Bekkerus said.

Because of the hazards that now exist in the remote wilderness area and those that could still occur, the forest service advises hikers to explore at their own risk.

"People need to be aware that the area has changed and there are things, like trails, which are no longer there," Bekkerus said. "We're asking that folks know to be responsible for their own safety and know what they're getting into before they get there. There are significant hazards, such as falling trees and debris piles. You could break your ankle in a second and there's no search and rescue team for the forest service. (The wilderness) is not a national park. If people get stuck, they'll either have to wait it out or find their way out."

Though maintenance is minimal in the area, skilled volunteers have begun helping clear tree damage in the Cohuttas and other storm-stricken areas of the Chattahoochee forest. The forest service requests that volunteers coordinate their efforts with an established maintenance group such as the Benton MacKaye Trail Association (BMTA).

"This area is one of the most highly used and visited wilderness areas on the East Coast. It's also prone to flash flooding, which we let people know and publicize on our website. At one point, the whole area was timber and was logged, so there were roads and trails. A lot of those roads have been converted to trails that run all the way to Tennessee where they join the Big Rock Wilderness at the state line," Bekkerus noted.

MacKaye trail reopened

Storm damage is not quite as severe along the popular Benton MacKaye Trail, said the BMTA's Georgia maintenance director Barry Allen. The Appalachian Trail's 300-mile sister path extends from Springer Mountain in Georgia through the Great Smoky Mountains in Tennessee and North Carolina, he added.