Below: Hurricane Florence prepares to strike the North Carolina coast

Right, top: A letter carrier attempts to deliver through debris

Right, below: A rescue crew wades through flooded waters.

Hurricane Florence and other wild weather



n mid-September, Hurricane
Florence, the first major hurricane
of the 2018 season, made landfall
in North Carolina and caused severe
flooding throughout the state. While it
previously had been classified as a Category 4 hurricane, by the time it made
landfall on Sept. 13, it had slowed to a
Category 1. The slower storm dumped
heavy rain as it moved inland over the
next four days.

This heavy rain, combined with a large storm surge, caused widespread flooding along a nearly 100-mile stretch of the North Carolina coast, from Wilmington in the southern portion of the state to New Bern, midway up the seaboard. When the storm moved inland, the rain caused major rivers to spill over their banks.

"Storm surge was the problem here in New Bern," **Craig Schadewald**, president of Branch 780, said. "It was up like 13 feet."

Many major roads and highways in the area experienced some flooding, with large stretches of I-40, I-95, and U.S. Route 70 remaining impassable for days after the storm had moved on. Several localities were effectively cut off by floodwaters. Portions of the state received record-breaking rainfall, with more than 30 inches measured in some locations.

"We had carriers who were evacuated by helicopter, by the Cajun Navy, and two by an Army vehicle," **Amber Blank**, president of Wilmington Branch 464, said. (The Cajun Navy is a group of civilians who use their personal boats to aid in water rescues.)

Blank said that several letter carriers had lost their homes to the flooding, while many more were forced from their apartments. She took in a family of five. "The roof of their apartment caved in and they didn't have anywhere to go," she explained. "I said, 'Come here, to my house.'"

In New Bern, one member had to be rescued by boat and a handful of members were displaced from their homes. "They've lost a lot of their possessions," Schadewald said. As of early October, at least 51 deaths had been attributed to the storm, and damage estimates exceeded \$38 billion. Blank communicated with members of her branch through text messages and postings to the branch's Facebook group to alert them to closings. Region 9 National Business Agent Kenny Gibbs made sure that communications between management and carriers remained constant, checking in daily with branch presidents.

"The Postal Service tried to get all of the letter carriers to call the toll-free number so they could account for everyone," Gibbs explained. "The Postal Service would report how many people they had accounted for. It was an ongoing process to make sure every single person was accounted for."

Gibbs said that at least 1,500 to 1,800 city letter carriers had experienced direct property damage from flooding or wind from the storm. Even while dealing with their personal hardships, carriers had more challenges once the Postal Service resumed delivering the mail.

In Wilmington, the mail was held while carriers were on administrative leave. "We were closed for six days," Blank said. "That's the longest I've ever seen the post office closed in this city."

"We had several carriers who wanted to come to work, but couldn't because the roads were flooded," she added. "They were safe, but they couldn't get out."

On the first day back, the workforce was limited and many letter carriers were relocated for several reasons, including flooding at the main Wilmington post office, where asbestos tiles in the floor created a health hazard. Management allowed some carriers who couldn't make it to their offices



because of impassable roads to work at another office temporarily. Employee Assistance Program (EAP) personnel were brought in to assist anyone overcome by the emotional toll. Also, carriers from the Baltimore and Washington, DC, areas came down to Wilmington to help deliver the mail.

"It was nice that they could come away from their families and their routes to come and help us," Blank said. "I'm very appreciative of that."

Carriers have had a difficult time navigating the roads. "A couple of areas on my route look like war zones," Schadewald said. "Everyone's refrigerators, stoves, ductwork, furniture, beds, everything is out on the curb. Not to mention the yard debris, downed trees and power lines. And the utility or tree service trucks are blocking where you're trying to deliver mail. We're having to do a lot of dismounting."

And then there's the smell. "The rivers and flooded areas have backed up the sewers," he said. "And they're just now [two weeks after the storm] picking up the household garbage. The smell of that and the brackish water around us doesn't help."

Since coming back, the carriers have worked straight through, including Sundays. "Everyone is doing mandated seven days a week," Blank said. "But we're all caught up."

During the storm, postal vehicles were stored on the loading docks in some places to protect them. But a larger vehicle challenge was fuel, which was in short supply in the area even before the storm. In Wilmington, postal inspectors escorted four tankers of fuel and remained to protect the carriers and the mail, as looting and gunfire were reported in the area.

The public has been glad to see the carriers return. Blank recalls, "The very first day I was out, I had numerous customers say, 'Hey, the mail is running. Things are getting back to normal. It's good to see you guys."

Schadewald had similar experiences in New Bern. "I was delivering on Sunday and a couple of customers were out there. One of them came up to me and said, 'I know my days are getting mixed up, is today Saturday or Sunday?' I told them, 'It's Sunday and we're out here delivering.' She said, 'God bless you.' "

"Day by day, it's getting a little better each day," he said. "It's going to take a long time for this area to fully recover."

California wildfires

The 2018 California wildfire season has been historic. According to the state's Department of Forestry and Fire Protection (Cal Fire), the Mendocino Complex fire that began in July was the largest in state history, covering roughly 460,000 acres. The Carr fire, which also started in July, was the state's seventh deadliest.

This season follows on the heels of a devastating 2017: last October's Tubbs Fire, the third deadliest in the state's history; and the Nuns, Thomas, Atlas and Redwood Valley blazes all were



among the 20 most destructive in terms of structures destroyed. (For more on last year's fires, see the February issue of The Postal Record.)

Jerry Anderson is president of Branch 183 in Santa Rosa, a city ravaged by last year's Tubbs Fire. This year, the Mendocino Complex affected one of his offices, Lakeport, about 60 miles north. When he first saw the wisps of smoke, he remembers thinking, "Oh, not again."

However, "The carriers did not experience the devastation that Santa Rosa encountered; their biggest fear was which way the wind was blowing," he said.

"Fortunately, the winds shifted the fire to the forest and away from the cities surrounding Clear Lake," Anderson said. Topography also helped, as the lake probably reined in the fire's fury. "[It] may have saved the entire community," he said.

The carriers "wore masks and dealt with the smoke and kept a close eye on which way the fires were burning. There are three ways into Lakeport and

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two of them were inaccessible," he added. "There were no structures lost where the carriers could deliver and no letter carriers lost homes," he added.

Unfortunately, that wasn't the case in Redding, which was affected by the Carr Fire. "One letter carrier lost his home," said **Brian Bump**, president of the Sacramento Branch 133. It was "quite fortunate, considering the size of those fires up there," that more weren't affected.

There were daily teleconferences on how to handle the disruptions and some carriers needed to wear masks. "It was pretty smoky up there for quite some time," Bump noted.

The U.S. Forest Service declared the Mendocino Complex contained on Sept. 19; Cal Fire declared Carr contained on Aug. 30.

Storms in the Pacific

The Pacific region saw its share of wet-weather chaos, too, especially

in September. Before it pummeled the Philippines and China, Typhoon Mangkhut unleashed its wrath on Guam and the Mariana Islands on Sept. 10 and 11. "Almost

all the island residences were without electricity," a

situation that lasted for weeks in some cases, **Timothy Chargualaf**, president of Guam's Agana Branch 4093, said.

The carriers were called in to work on the afternoon of Sept. 11. "Many of us left our families, who were cleaning up the debris around the house, so we can deliver as much mail as we could," he added. "I saw some families whose homes were destroyed. Some roads were inaccessible due to downed power lines.

Above: Typhoon Mangkhut knocked down trees and flooded Guam. Below: The Mendocino Complex fire was the largest in California history.

"Some carriers were activated by the Guam Army National Guard to help restore the island. As the rest of the carriers worked, we would see some of the USPS employees directing traffic or removing debris along the roads," Chargualaf recalled.

After all of that, "the typhoon season is far from over for us," he said on Oct. 1.

Hawaii, too, experienced heavy weather in September, though not to the extent of Guam. Hurricane Olivia made landfall there as a tropical storm. "We experienced mainly flash flooding and some wind damage across the islands of Maui, Molokai and Oahu," said Christopher Brenchley, meteorologist-in-charge at the Hawaii office of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.

Hurricane Michael

Shortly before going to press, Hurricane Michael struck the Florida Panhandle with Category 4-level winds of 155 miles per hour. The storm caused tremendous damage, destroying houses and knocking out landlines and cell towers, making communication difficult. Region 9's national business agent office has been attempting to reach the carriers in Panama City Branch 3367 and Apalachicola Branch 3663 to make sure everyone is all right. PR

