

Damage from Hurricane Floyd ^[1]

Billy Ray Hall, as President of the Rural Economic Development Center, coordinated North Carolina's cleanup and recovery efforts after Hurricane Floyd. In this excerpt from an oral history interview, Hall discusses the scope of the damage in eastern North Carolina. Floyd, he says, was as big a natural disaster as the United States has seen.

Charles Thompson

What are the effects of the flood as you describe them?

Billy Ray Hall

I think anytime you start talking about numbers they are only understandable when you put them in relation to something. For example, if you say you had a hundred dollars worth of damage and you're in a developing nation where you house costs 150 dollars and is made out of natural materials, it's a lot different than in America when you have a hundred dollars worth of damage.

So the first thing to do is let's put perspective. This was a six billion dollar disaster in North Carolina. The entire agriculture output for the state of North Carolina last year was seven billion dollars. So six billion dollars is huge relative to this state's economy, relative to our resource base. And that is big by any stretch of the imagination -- 60,000 homes being damaged, 17,000 are uninhabitable and 7,000 are totally destroyed. So you get really huge numbers to go along with the fifty-one people who are actually... lost their lives. And you begin to get a feel for the size. The second thing to look at is in the agricultural community -- we lost 190 million dollars of cotton in the fields that were flooded. In addition, we lost over 300 million dollars of other crops in the field for a total of 538 million dollars worth of crops that were washed away.

Now, if that wasn't bad enough for the farmer the farm community in eastern North Carolina lost 281 million dollars worth of structures, equipment, like tractors and combines that were flooded and washed out, washed away in some cases, barns that were destroyed. So they lost not just the 581 million dollars in crops, they lost another 281 million dollars in structures and equipment, plus they had the damage to their land -- literally, thirty to fifty million dollars worth of damage to their land. Another sixty-five million dollars worth of damage to their waterways and stuff, where trees were in the creeks and stuff. So, looking at the scale of disaster it just boggles your mind at the scale that was playing itself out.

If you want to take it down to a specific case, FEMA, which is a national flood response agency, has been around for about twenty years. In that twenty years with all the disasters you and I have heard about throughout the last twenty years, they've actually had destroyed properties that they helped acquire with the local resources of about 20,000 units of property -- 21,000 to be exact. In this flood in North Carolina they will assist us in acquiring 11,000 structures, so we're going to acquire in one disaster, in one period of time, more than half the amount of structures that have been acquired. And we remember TV scenes of the Midwest floods and the earthquakes in the west and we think, "Well, wow, they were huge." What I'm telling you is by size this is as big a natural disaster for a state as has been experienced in America. And that plays its way out.

The third perspective to put on these numbers, and this is what a lot of people forget, we in the South and particularly in eastern North Carolina have a lot of poor people. Those poor people by force of circumstance moved to the cheaper land they end up being along the creeks which are the flooded areas, they're in low-income housing and they're sitting there with low wealth. And when this flood came, it struck those people primarily. An example, Princeville is a town of 700 homes -- 2100 people -- all seven hundred were flooded. Seven of them had flood insurance in the whole town. O.K. Now 80 percent of that town is classified as in poverty -- 80 percent of those homes are classified as living in poverty. That's less than around \$20,000 for a family of four. And what that tells you is, that this is a disaster that sucked away a lot of our resource base, a huge impact on our farming and business community, but also devastated an already poor population. And plays it way out all the way down.

So, the third perspective I would put on is, that this disaster was very non-selective in the sense of it being a disaster. On the other hand, because we have moved people around those creeks, primarily minorities and primarily low income, that's who took the brunt of this -- the least stable, the least insured. So, it's been terrible. That's the best way I can describe it. And when you work your way out of there, we need very badly to get probably close to three billion dollars worth of assistance from the federal government to have even a chance of recovering from this six billion dollar disaster. We've got about two billion so far headed our way or targeted for North Carolina. We still have to win it in competition with other states. And we've got about 800 million dollars worth of support out of the state, or a little over 830 million. We will still need another billion, in my mind of this effort, to make it work and then we're still short. I mean you still have a long way to go.

Charles Thompson

That still doesn't make up for the seven billion.

Billy Ray Hall

Well, you want to put it another context, tobacco took its third -- , we were in the crop season and it was roughly eighty or ninety million dollars worth of tobacco still in the field -- it was flooded, destroyed. But that was the second year for the farmer who, three years earlier, was farming at X amount in two years he took a thirty-five percent reduction in quota. This year we're in now, he had disaster strike him and take his tobacco crop, and now he's got a reduction in quota again. So, the farmer is the one, if I had to guess, in a terms of a way of life, farming is the most at risk as a way of life for being lost in major areas of rural North Carolina.

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