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Weather monitoring observation equipment at Mount Le Conte is maintained by the National Weather Service's COOP program. PROVIDED BY DEREK EISENTROUT/MORRISTOWN, TENN., NWS WEATHER FORECASTING OFFICE

Rich history of weather monitoring at national park



Word from the Smokies
Jennifer Fulford

Every day at several locations around Great Smoky Mountains National Park, information about on site environmental conditions is being added to a growing cache of observational data about the park — offering insights to the region's past, present, and future.

Environmental monitoring in the park started decades ago and evolved from early efforts around the country to understand geography and weather. Thomas Jefferson began the Survey of the Coast in 1807, and the Weather Bureau — the precursor to the National Weather Service (NWS) — came into existence in 1870. Though mostly behind the scenes, environmental monitoring has become an ongoing and ordinary part of American life and a day-to-day occurrence in the Smokies.

"The site at the park headquarters actually predates the park by a bit," said Derek Eisentrout of NWS, referring to the origins of the area's oldest original weather observation point in Tennessee. "The site was started in 1921 and was located at an apple orchard."

Eisentrout works in the NWS office at Morristown, Tennessee, and coordinates its Cooperative Observers Program, better known as COOP. Most of the park's COOP stations, four of five, are situated in Tennessee. Besides the first one near headquarters, sites include Mount Le Conte (established in 1987), Newfound Gap (1991), and Cades Cove (1999). A COOP site in North Carolina at Oconaluftee (1958) is maintained by the Greenville-Spartanburg NWS forecasting office in South Carolina. Another site outside the park boundary in North Carolina collects data from the Deep Creek area.

COOP observations from the park include daily minimum and maximum temperatures, precipitation levels, snowfall totals, and snow depth. The information is collected by observers, who are among an estimated 8,700 at sites across the country and are mostly volunteers.

"From 1991 to 2011, the rangers from Oconaluftee would drive to Newfound Gap each morning, take the readings, and radio them to the dispatch office at Sugarlands Visitor Center, who would then relay the information to us," said Eisentrout. The park eventually assigned staff at Newfound Gap the daily observation collection.

The legacy and coverage of the COOP program is a point of pride for NWS because observers perform an



Positioned on Mount Le Conte, a National Weather Service weather station is one of five locations around Great Smoky Mountains National Park where important environmental conditions are monitored. Mount Le Conte holds the Tennessee state records for 24-hour snowfall and snow depth.

PROVIDED BY WILDCAT/BERT, COURTESY OF LECONTE LODGE L.P. & STOKELY HOSPITALITY ENTERPRISES

essential role in meteorology. As NWS puts it, COOP is "truly the Nation's weather and climate observing network of, by, and for the people."

"The data from COOP is the backbone of the nation's climatology," Eisentrout said. "Folks are always interested in finding out what the 'normal' is for an area, as well as the 'records.' COOP provides that."

Thanks in part to COOP data, park visitors can easily find "normals" for locations in and around the park from NOAA, which uses recorded observations to calculate 30-year averages. For instance, the normal maximum temperature at Mount Le Conte in February is 35.2°F and the normal minimum temperature is 19.5°F. As for record-breakers, Mount Le Conte holds the Tennessee records for 24-hour snowfall, 30 inches, and snow depth, 63 inches, both from a winter

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Advocates worry funding cut may hurt health care access in WNC

Jacob Biba
Asheville Citizen Times | USA TODAY NETWORK

ASHEVILLE — A massive reduction in funding for a federal program that helps people enroll in health plans has advocates concerned that Western North Carolina residents, many still recovering in the wake of Tropical Storm Helene, won't get the support they need when it comes to accessing health care coverage.

The cuts to the Affordable Care Act's federal navigator program, announced Feb. 14 by the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services, will reduce last year's \$98 million budget to just \$10 million annually.

"Obviously, a 90% cut to our federal funding will impact the level of support we're able to efficiently provide to communities who need it, like Western North Carolinians recovering from Helene," said Nicholas Riggs, director of the North Carolina Navigator Consortium, which is led by Legal Aid of North Carolina and receives federal funding through the program.

CMS justified the cuts in a Feb. 14 press release, claiming funding levels don't "represent a reasonable return on investment" and that reducing the program's budget will save \$360 million over the next four years.

Navigators, the agency said, aren't enrolling enough people in health plans through the federal marketplace, an argument President Donald Trump made during his first term in office when his administration slashed the program's budget to \$10 million.

See HEALTH CARE, Page 3A

Senate passes border legislation without tax cuts

Riley Beggin
USA TODAY

WASHINGTON — Senate Republicans advanced their version of President Donald Trump's agenda in a marathon session that ran into early Friday morning — a border security and defense package that will likely become a "Plan B" for the narrowly divided Congress.

Senate Democrats forced Republicans to vote on — and defeat — dozens of add-ons designed to put them in uncomfortable positions with voters, such as an amendment to prevent tax cuts for people earning more than \$1 billion, even though the bill does not include tax policy, or to reject controversial moves by Trump or Elon Musk's Department of Government Efficiency.

The framework passed 52-48 at about 5 a.m. Only GOP Sen. Rand Paul of Kentucky voted with Democrats against it, citing increased federal spending.

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"The president prefers one big, beautiful bill — so do I," Senate Budget Chair Lindsey Graham told reporters. "But you always need a Plan B around here." CHIP SOMODEVILLA/GETTY IMAGES



MOUNTAINS



Great Smoky Mountains National Park is home to several environmental observation points, including this one monitoring weather at Newfound Gap. PROVIDED BY DEREK EISENTROUT/MORRISTOWN, TENN., NWS WEATHER FORECASTING OFFICE

Fulford

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storm in March 1993.

Observational data help NWS verify forecasts, ground-truth radar, and contribute to assessing a region's climate, which has a specific meaning in meteorology. Whereas weather is a snapshot of current conditions, climate is a longer record over a specific period. Climatology refers to aggregated climate data from a specific place and timeframe, such as the Smokies over 30 years, assessing what's normal and also what's variable.

Eisentrou and Christopher Horne, who oversees NWS monitoring on the North Carolina side of the park, ensure the park's COOP data are submitted properly for use by Weather.gov forecasters, businesses, researchers, and others, including the public. Eisentrou and Horne, who have both been COOP operational program leads since 2011, schedule at least one visit a year to each site within their scope to check equipment and touch base with observers. For Horne, there's not much to his trip on the North Carolina side, where part of the equipment stays in the employee breakroom at the Oconaluftee maintenance office; for Eisentrou, one site in Tennessee requires months of planning for his yearly visit.

"Our Mount Le Conte site can only be reached by hiking, as it is located at the lodge atop the mountain," Eisentrou said. "I usually head up there in early September, so that means I need to start prepping for the trip in the summer. All the supplies I will need at the lodge are carried up beforehand by llamas that ferry supplies to the lodge. Since my tools and supplies travel on a space-available basis, I try to drop everything off by mid-July. I've been doing this annual hike and visit since 2000."

Weather records for Mount Le Conte go beyond the 1950s, well before the site was officially folded into the COOP system in 1987. Such far-reaching weather records aren't unusual, given that weather observing has been an age-old American pastime and a hobby for many historical figures, including Jefferson, George Washington and Benjamin Franklin.

Besides supporting forecasters, observations help researchers flesh out answers to scientific and practical questions. NWS has analyzed historical temperature data gathered in the park over a ten-year period and compared it to conditions at the Knoxville airport to assess seasonal differences and temperature variations, which reveal interesting characteristics of each location. Why care? Because this information can inform impacts and outcomes from various weather phenomena.

"These data are invaluable in learning more about the floods, droughts, heat, and cold waves affecting us all," NWS states on its COOP web page.

Weather isn't the only environmental variable monitored in the Smokies. Observations of wind, dewpoint, relative humidity, streamflow, and air quality are routinely performed within park boundaries. More than 40 collection sites dot the park's landscape.

It's worth mentioning that much of the information gathered in the park can be found online. Datasets, pictures, old handwritten records, and modern interpretive tools are available across the web. There's so much that even the most focused researchers might find themselves going down a data rabbit hole. Similarly, knowledge sharing crosscuts a broad swath of organizations, including NOAA, interagency groups, and collaborative networks too numerous to name.

Though data about the park's environment is plentiful, a personal connection also can be found — such as in the friendly morning blog post about weather from the winter caretaker at LeConte Lodge and from a quiet mountain view captured by an NWS webcam. Appealing to both novice and expert, an incredible treasure of environmental information — perhaps the park's most-hidden gem — awaits the next visitor.

Jennifer Fulford is lead editor for the 29,000-member Smokies Life, a non-profit dedicated to supporting the scientific, historical, and interpretive activities of Great Smoky Mountains National Park by providing educational products and services such as this column. Learn more at SmokiesLife.org or reach the author at Jennifer@SmokiesLife.org.

Asheville announces last day to put storm debris in the right-of-way

Sarah Honosky
Asheville Citizen Times
USA TODAY NETWORK

ASHEVILLE - The final day to place storm debris in the right-of-way for collection is March 1, according to a city news release. After this deadline, contractors will conduct a final sweep to collect remaining storm debris, with a final pass expected to be complete on April 1.

Crews will not collect any debris placed in the right-of-way after the final pass.

While right-of-way collection is coming to an end, contractors will continue debris removal efforts through the Private Property Debris Removal program and within local waterways.

Tropical Storm Helene generated an estimated 3 million cubic yards of storm debris within city limits. In the early days after the storm, the city activated state contracts to engage a debris contractor and monitoring firm, which began right-of-way debris removal Oct. 10. It collected nearly 20,000 cubic yards of debris in the first 17 days of operation.

It later transitioned management to the Federal Emergency Management Agency and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, whose contractors are collecting storm debris from city, private and N.C. Department of Transportation maintained roads within city limits.

As of Feb. 13, 385,113 cubic yards have been collected, according to the city's Helene recovery dashboard.



Debris piles up along Biltmore Plaza in Historic Biltmore Village on Jan. 31. JOSH BELL/ASHEVILLE CITIZEN TIMES

What to know about right-of-way collection

Do not bag debris. If you must bag loose debris due to potential for it to scatter, the bag must be clear or transparent.

Debris should be separated at the curb by category:

- Construction, demolition and bulky items: Building materials, dry-wall, lumber, carpet, furniture, plumbing.

- Appliances: Refrigerator, washer/dryer, air conditioner, stove, water heater, dishwasher. Do not leave the doors unsealed or unsecured. Place refrigerators with door facing ground to prevent door opening.

- Electronics: TV, computer, stereo, phone, DVD players.

- Vegetative debris: Tree branches, leaves, logs, plants, stumps, trees.

- Mud/dirt: Mud and silt deposited onto property by floodwaters.

Sarah Honosky is the city government reporter for the Asheville Citizen Times. shonosky@citizentimes.com

Discount Tire reopens after Tropical Storm Helene damage

Staff reports
Asheville Citizen Times

ASHEVILLE — Discount Tire, a leading retailer of tires and wheels, has reopened its Asheville location at 105 Bleachery Blvd. after damage sustained during Tropical Storms Helene and Milton.

Repairs to the neighborhood tire store commenced as early as allowable by local and federal guidelines and ensure the store provides a safe and inviting tire shopping and replacement experience for drivers in Buncombe County. Discount Tire store will resume regular hours of operation: 8 a.m.-6 p.m. Monday-Friday and 8 a.m.-5 p.m. on Saturday.

"As the city continues to rebuild, Discount Tire is ready to be a friendly face and begin helping drivers stay safe on the roads again," said Alex Hurst, Discount Tire store manager. "Since 2011, our store has strived to make the tire service experience as easy as possible, and we look forward to continuing to serve our community."

Discount Tire is now fully operational and ready to assist customers with new tire and wheel purchases, repairs, and additional services including windshield wiper replacement. Including this location, Discount Tire operates 43 stores in North Carolina, with plans for further expansion over the next couple of years. The reopened store is Discount Tire's sole location in Asheville.

Year-round tire safety recommendations from Discount Tire no matter the weather condition include:

- **Check your tread** at Discount Tire with one of our experts in seconds, ensuring your vehicle has enough tread left to provide a safe stopping distance. Drivers can check tread depth at home by sticking a penny upside down in a tread groove — it's time to replace the tire if Lincoln's head is visible.

- **Check your air pressure** at least once a month when the tires are cool — especially before a long trip. For every 10-degree change in ambient temperature, the tire air pressure changes by 1 PSI. Incorrect pressure can lead to poor handling, worse gas mileage, and uneven wear.

- **Rotate your tires every 6,000 miles** or earlier if uneven wear develops.

- **Replace tires that are six years old or older.** Rubber becomes harder and brittle as it ages, so drivers should check the age of their tires on the DOT number stamped on the tire's sidewall.

- **Use Treadwell** to find the best all-season or winter tires suited to your driving needs with the same tool Discount Tire experts use in stores every day.

The phone number for Discount Tire is (828) 318-0949. Customers can schedule an appointment online to save on wait times in store and find more information at discounttire.com/store/nc/asheville/s/1895.

CORRECTIONS

- In a story Feb. 19 on Page 12A about the 95th anniversary of the discovery of Pluto, the number of miles the dwarf planet is from the sun was misstated. The correct number is 3.7 billion miles.

- The Feb. 21 celebrity birthdays listed the incorrect age for actor Kim Coates. He is 67.

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