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Data indicates Helene impacts linger

Will Hofmann
Asheville Citizen Times
USA TODAY NETWORK

ASHEVILLE - While the peak tourism season is not yet over, travel industry data from the summer and early fall released by the Buncombe County Tourism Development Authority indicated Asheville's tourism industry was still lagging almost a year after Tropical Storm Helene.

In July and August, lodging sales — one of the best metrics to indicate the

tourism industry's performance — declined over 20%, according to BCTDA data released Oct. 29. July 2025 sales were nearly \$49 million compared to over \$61 million in 2024. August 2025 sales were \$46 million, compared to over \$57 million in 2024.

July is typically the second busiest month for the travel industry in Western North Carolina and is behind only October, which draws tourists to the region to watch foliage change colors in early fall, often leading to seasonal windfalls for both local businesses and hoteliers.

Tropical Storm Helene's impacts on WNC, however, have lingered.

While Buncombe County's seasonally adjusted unemployment rate reached 3.2% in August — well below the 6.8% unemployment rate the county started out with in 2025, but still 1 percentage point above 2024 levels — the county's hospitality market has yet to recover from the storm. As of August, the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics estimated 26,400 were employed in the Asheville Metropolitan Statistical Area's leisure and hospitality industry, 9.6% below

2024 levels.

"Unfortunately, what we're showing month over month is a continual drag in terms of hospitality," said President and CEO of Explore Asheville and the BCTDA Vic Isley during the authority's Oct. 29 meeting. Despite the lag, many of the BCTDA's hospitality partners are reporting "stronger booking demand and more confidence in booking pace through the end of 2025" in the Asheville market, Isley said.

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Caleb Moses wears a wetsuit during an April 2024 release of native slippershell and spike mussels into Abrams Creek, where they had been previously extirpated. PROVIDED BY GUS ENGMAN

Early mussel restoration efforts showing promise

Word from the Smokies
Holly Kays
Special to the Asheville Citizen Times
USA TODAY NETWORK

Flowing over nutrient-rich limestone rock that fueled a diverse assemblage of species, Abrams Creek was once one of the most productive streams in Great Smoky Mountains National Park. That changed in 1957, when wildlife managers intent on expanding opportunities for anglers stocked it with non-native rainbow trout—after applying the fish pesticide rotenone to the entire lower portion of the creek, hoping to protect the trout from competition. Chilhowee Dam was completed later that year, cutting the creek off from downstream fish populations.

Though rainbow trout do still occur above Abrams Falls, overall the stocking effort was a failure—the water downstream of the falls proved too warm to meet their needs—and over the decades following their release perspectives on wildlife management began to change. By the mid-1980s, the National Park Service was actively supporting



An array of mussels collected from Abrams Creek shows some of the five species that managed to persist following the rotenone treatment, either by tolerating its effects or by recolonizing the area from populations in Abrams Creek tributaries. PROVIDED BY CALEB MOSES

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Trump targets filibuster to end shutdown

Zachary Schermele, Rebecca Morin, Joey Garrison, Bart Jansen and Zac Anderson
USA TODAY

WASHINGTON – As the shutdown drags on, President Donald Trump is urging Senate Republicans to go around Democrats to break an impasse with growing ramifications, with millions of Americans poised to lose federal food assistance.

Trump called for an end to the Senate's filibuster rule in an Oct. 30 social media post, saying it's time to deploy the "nuclear option." The filibuster requires 60 votes to pass most Senate legislation, instead of a simple 51-vote majority. That has allowed Democrats to block a GOP government funding bill as they demand any legislation to reopen the government include an extension of federal health care subsidies.

"It is now time for the Republicans to play their 'TRUMP CARD,' and go for what is called the Nuclear Option – Get rid of the Filibuster, and get rid of it, NOW!" Trump wrote.

Spokespeople for Senate Majority Leader John Thune and his chief deputy, Senate Majority Whip John Barrasso, said the lawmakers continue to support the filibuster.

"Leader Thune's position on the importance of the legislative filibuster is unchanged," Thune's office said in a statement.

Barrasso spokeswoman Kate Noyes also said the senator's "support of the filibuster is unchanged."

The ongoing support for the filibuster is a rare rebuke to Trump from GOP congressional leaders, who have argued the rule is important to prevent Democrats from passing legislation without GOP support if they regain the majority.

The shutdown has lasted for 31 days, and though the consequences are becoming more drastic by the day, the lights still aren't likely to turn back on over the weekend.

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Major cities are poised to choose new leaders

Fernando Cervantes Jr.
USA TODAY

Although 2025 is not a midterm or presidential election year, important races are still being held, including mayoral contests in major cities across the United States.

Some feature candidates who were relatively unknown to the general public only months before, as in New York City. Others have incumbents facing off against up-and-coming challengers from the same party, as in Minneapolis.

Atlanta, Boston, Cleveland, Detroit, Minneapolis, New York City and Seattle, with a combined population of about 11.8 million, have the largest mayoral races on Nov. 4.

Democrat Andre Dickens is seeking reelection as mayor of Atlanta.

The incumbent and former City Council member is facing three challengers: Helmut Domagalski, an LGBTQ+ advocate and founder of a local nonprofit; Kalema Jackson, a former Atlanta police officer; and Eddie Andrew Meredith, a community organizer.

Democratic Mayor Michelle Wu is running basically unopposed for reelection in Boston. Her only challenger, Josh Kraft, the son of New England Patriots owner Robert Kraft, dropped out in September after coming in a distant second in the mayoral primary, almost 50 points behind Wu.

Cleveland's Democratic Mayor Justin Bibb is running for a second term against Republican Laverne Gore.

No primary election was held to whittle the field to two, as Bibb and Gore were the only candidates who

filed enough signatures from registered voters before the June 11 deadline, according to WKYC.

In Detroit, Democrats Mary Sheffield and Solomon Kinloch Jr. are vying to succeed Mayor Mike Duggan, who is running for governor of Michigan in 2026. Sheffield is president of the Detroit City Council; Kinloch is senior pastor of Triumph Church.

The city has a nonpartisan primary, where the top two candidates advance to the general election. Sheffield won comfortably with about 50% of the vote, while Kinloch took about 17%.

Minneapolis' incumbent Democratic Mayor Jacob Frey is seeking a third term but faces a challenge from the left in the form of democratic socialist Omar Fateh.

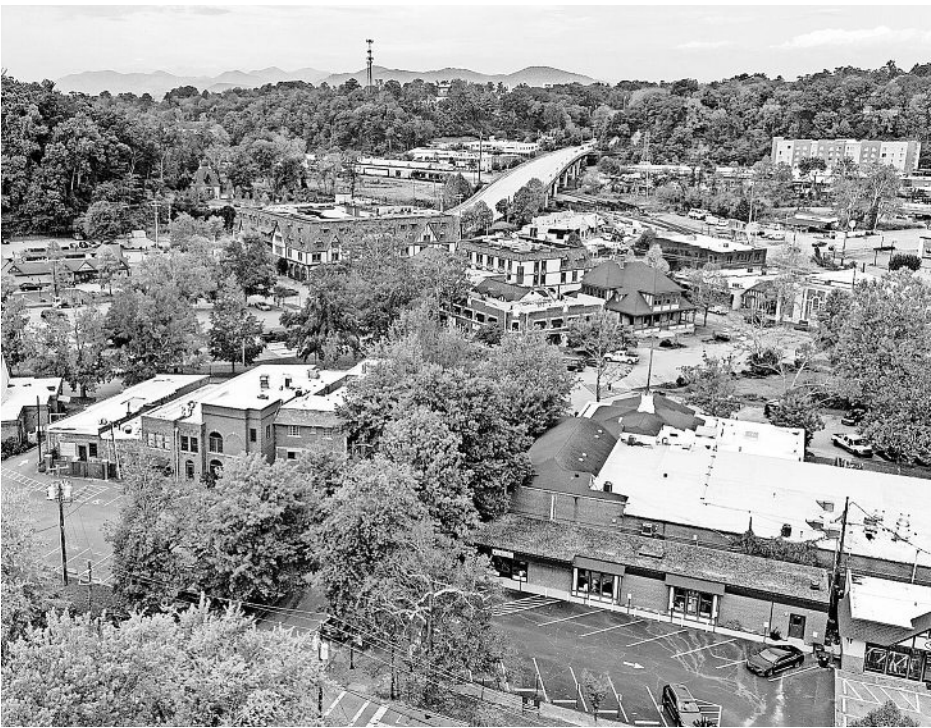
Both members of the Democratic-Farmer-Labor Party competed to obtain the party's endorsement. Fateh won the nod at the party's convention in July, but it was pulled back after Frey complained of technical difficulties during the vote.

On Oct. 13, Fateh secured the endorsement of U.S. Rep. Ilhan Omar, according to MPR News.

Democratic Assemblyman Zohran Mamdani, independent former Gov. Andrew Cuomo and Republican Curtis Sliwa are vying for the mayorship of New York City.

Mamdani pulled off an electoral upset by defeating Cuomo in the Democratic primary, prompting Cuomo to run as an independent.

Incumbent Mayor Eric Adams dropped his campaign for reelection, but he too will appear on the ballot as an independent.



An aerial view of Asheville's Historic Biltmore Village, Sept. 23.
JOSH BELL/ASHEVILLE CITIZEN TIMES

Impacts

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At the same time, lags in the region's industry came during peak leaf season and the federal government shutdown, which is expected to have broader economic impacts if it carries on over the coming weeks. In a Oct. 29 report from the nonpartisan Congressional Budget Office, the shutdown could have an estimated \$14 billion impact on the economy. The U.S. Travel Association estimates nearly \$4 billion has been lost in the national travel economy since the shutdown began Oct. 1.

The shutdown has impacted services at the National Park Service,

which oversees regionally vital attractions like the Great Smoky Mountains National Park and the Blue Ridge Parkway, though nonprofits and local governments have kept services afloat at those park units while tourists flock to the area to see leaves change. Isley called the additional support a "silver lining" given the broader impacts of the shutdown.

"The gates on the parkway and national parks have not been closed, so they are still accessible to visitors and to us as residents," Isley said.

Will Hofmann is the Growth and Development Reporter for the Asheville Citizen Times, part of the USA Today Network. Got a tip? Email him at WHofmann@citizentimes.com. Consider supporting this type of journalism with a subscription to the Citizen Times.

Restoration

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efforts to restore native fish species that had been extirpated by the rotenone treatment. Of the 67 species native to Abrams Creek, 46 were initially eliminated. Though most managed to return on their own, recolonizing from upstream and tributary populations, ten remained absent. Since then, eight of these species have been restored.

"Now it's time to move on to reintroducing mussels and close the loop on what that aquatic system should probably look like," said Matt Kulp, supervisory fisheries biologist for Great Smoky Mountains National Park.

Mussels are a little-known but integral part of freshwater ecosystems. They stabilize streambeds, process organic matter for use by other organisms, remove harmful toxins from the water, and are an important food source for other species—including the rare hellbender salamander and reintroduced northern river otter. But re-establishing mussels in a disrupted ecosystem like Abrams Creek is a tall order. Their complex reproductive cycle requires a specific set of conditions for success, and because about 70 percent of Southeastern mussel species are protected, obtaining enough individuals for a successful reintroduction can be challenging.

Since 2024, Kulp has been working with University of Tennessee graduate student and former park employee Caleb Moses to start the process. Moses, a native of Madisonville, Tennessee, has been working with fish since high school and spent two seasons on the Smokies' fisheries crew before diving head-first into the world of mussels for his graduate studies.

"Now I don't think I can ever go back to working with fish," Moses said. "Mussels are just incredible."

Their unique life cycle—and their need for a host fish to complete it—is one of the most fascinating things about them. Though some mussels are generalists, most rely on a specific type of fish to nourish and disperse their young. Mussels are stationary, so to mate males release sperm into the open water while females create a brood pouch in which to lay eggs. The eggs are fertilized when the female siphons in water containing sperm.

After the eggs hatch into their larval form, the female mussel uses a fleshy part of her body known as the mantle to mimic the preferred food of the specific fish species her young require for success. When the fish draws near looking for a meal, she shoots her larvae into the fish's mouth. The larvae, called glochidia, attach to the fish's gills or fins, feeding on its blood until they become mature enough to drop off and start the cycle again. In most cases, this parasitic



Though only 20 feet tall, Abrams Falls has the greatest volume of any waterfall in the park. Since the 1980s, the National Park Service has been working to restore aquatic communities below the falls after federal wildlife managers applied a fish poison there in 1957 PROVIDED BY MICHELE SONS

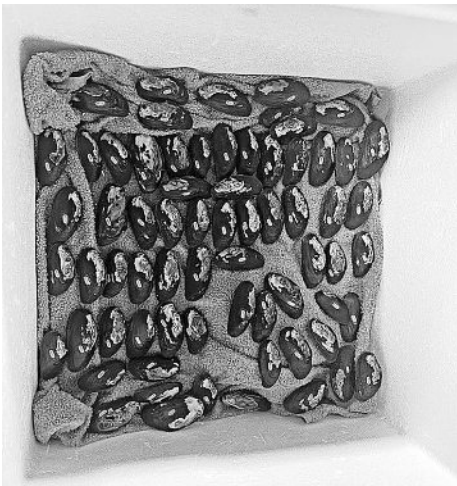
relationship has only a minor effect on the fish host, which heals quickly after the glochidia drop off.

"Most of our species, especially in the Southeast, have very specific fish hosts that they attract by making a lure, and it's different depending on which type of species they're trying to target," Moses said. "So the wavyrayed lampmussel, for example, will make a fish-shaped lure. And it's amazing. It looks exactly like a little bit of fish swimming under the water."

Because mussels can't reproduce without their host fish, the fish poison applied to Abrams Creek also wiped out its mussels, though, as with the fish, some managed to survive or recolonize, Moses said. Five mussel species were resilient. Now that the National Park Service has restored nearly all of the extirpated fish species, reintroduced mussels would, in theory, be poised to thrive.

To start the process, Moses first had to determine which mussel species lived in the creek prior to 1957—a challenging task. The park had record of only one pre-1957 species survey on the creek, completed in 1914, and that effort documented only one mussel species. To augment this thin historical record, Moses considered findings from nearby archeological sites, especially on Citico Creek and the Little Tennessee River, where indigenous people had deposited used mussel shells. He also used information from "sister tributaries" to Abrams Creek—waterways that would have historically been connected by the Little Tennessee River and likely contained similar species.

"We pulled from a variety of resources to try and make this as robust as possible," Moses said.



Tagged slippershell mussels are transported to Abrams Creek for release PROVIDED BY CALEB MOSES

Using this research, Moses compiled a list of 12 species deemed to have "high potential" for success in Abrams Creek. Once Moses' thesis is finalized later this year, Kulp and his colleagues at the National Park Service will review the list and develop a long-term plan for restoring mussel diversity to Abrams Creek. In the meantime, Moses is in the midst of what has so far been the successful release of two native mussel species: the spike mussel and the slippershell.

In April 2024, Moses released 60 spike mussels and 32 slippershells, contained in underwater cages so he could easily monitor their progress. Unfortunately, the cages drew the attention of vandals, who cut them open and left them up on the bank. He tried again, but the same thing happened, with about half of the released mussels lost in the process.

Now the researchers are no longer

using cages but have instead affixed location-tracking tags to the remaining mussels so they can easily monitor their progress. So far, the news is good.

"The individuals that we recovered have been super healthy," Moses said. "You can see how well they're doing by testing their muscle strength, and all the individuals recovered—of both species—are doing very well at this point."

The mussels' long-term success hinges on three conditions being met: healthy habitat, healthy demographics, and healthy genetics. Initial monitoring indicates that they're satisfied with their habitat, but meeting the other two conditions will require additional releases and scientific analysis.

"If these species perform well, we can expand," said Kulp. "We would probably need to bring in more individuals, but I want to guide those decisions with an understanding of the population's genetic characteristics."

When reintroducing a previously extirpated population, there's always a risk that the released animals will be too similar genetically, leading to issues with inbreeding and population health down the road. But modern tools allow scientists like Kulp to analyze the genes of individuals slated for release, ensuring healthy genetics in the reproducing population.

With 141 native mussels, Tennessee is unique for its immense diversity of these species. Neighboring North Carolina has 53 native mussel species, and 11 species have been recorded in Great Smoky Mountains National Park. Both Kulp and Moses hope to bring even more of this diversity to Abrams Creek in the coming years.

But it's a complicated process. One of the reasons that the spike mussel and slippershell were chosen for the first restoration project is that neither species is considered threatened or endangered, making it easier to procure individuals for reintroduction and reducing the timeframe for securing permissions to complete the project. Mussels face a long and growing list of threats—including sedimentation, disease, toxins—and most of the species on Moses' list are protected in some manner. Restoration efforts on Abrams Creek have been ongoing since the mid-1980s, and they're likely to continue for decades yet to come.

"I think what's really neat about Caleb's work is it will provide a road map for recovery," said Kulp. "Long after I'm gone, whoever is here working will have a game plan, or at least a road map, to which species could be reintroduced."

Holly Kays is the lead writer 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 hollyk@smokieslife.org.