

## Nantahala Gorge reopens for national forest users

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Nantahala District River Ranger Nathan Dewhurst removes debris from the Nantahala River. Forest Service photo

The Nantahala River in the Nantahala Gorge is now open to the public for all uses for the first time since landslides on Saturday, Aug. 24, resulted in significant damage and blockages in the area.

A technical team assessed the river for potential hazards from the recent landslides yesterday — Tuesday, Sept. 3, and did not find any areas of concern.

The landslides occurred following a severe deluge that dropped 3.5 inches of rain on the area, causing the closure of U.S. 19/74 while N.C. Department of Transportation cleared debris and repaired damaged portions, reopening the road Monday evening, Aug. 26.

However, there were places in the river where debris — consisting of woody debris dangerous to recreationists — has created a 90 percent blockage, and the water had created diversions around the blockages. The diversions and potential for associated erosion threatened the infrastructure of nearby roads and bridges.



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Once the road opened, the Forest Service sent in a team to assess landslide impacts to the Nantahala River and the scale of the cleanup effort. In places, debris had created 90 percent blockages in the river, with water forming diversions around them. The Forest Service immediately closed the area to commercial paddling operations and then expanded the closure to include all use of Forest Service lands in the Nantahala Gorge.

Contractors were immediately mobilized and began to remove landslide debris from the Nantahala River on Wednesday, after a field review and opinion from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife and U.S. Geological Survey. The debris removal operations in the river were completed by the end of Friday, Aug. 30, three days later.

Contractors worked 12-hour days with as many as nine excavators and nine dump trucks at any given time. Throughout the entire operation, approximately 7,600 tons of soil and rock and approximately 150 loads of woody debris were removed.

Duke Energy released water on Saturday, Aug. 31. Duke had not performed any releases since before the landslides occurred in order to provide a safe environment for Forest Service contractors to perform debris removal operations. They proceeded to release water through the long weekend in order to draw down lake levels and move back toward normal operation. Duke, DOT, Swain County Emergency Management Services and the U.S. Forest Service monitored the water release and did not observe any significant impacts.

On Tuesday, Sept. 3, the U.S. Forest Service conducted some chainsaw work to remove potential strainers, downed trees in the river. This was followed up by a float trip down the river to identify and address any additional concerns. The float team included members of the Forest Service, Nantahala Gorge Association and American Whitewater. During the assessment, the team did not identify any additional obvious hazards.

"The landslide cleanup in the Nantahala Gorge has been a success," said David Perez, Acting Nantahala District Ranger. "I appreciate the public's patience with us as we worked through it. In the end, I couldn't be happier and more grateful for all the support from Duke Energy, Swain County Emergency Management, N.C. Department of Transportation, Nantahala Gorge Association, American Whitewater, US Fish and Wildlife Service, and all the Forest Service employees that worked tirelessly. Thank you all."

Visitors should be aware that the landslides changed the river in some places. Paddlers should use caution.

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