

SAFETY AND HEROISM

DOUG ARFMANN, LUKE CLARKE, SPIKE GOUGE, CHUCK MELTON, JACOB SETTERLIND, ELIJAH WINTERS, & KAILEE WINTERS



Wildlife Resources Commission

*Armstrong State Fish Hatchery
staff pictured with rescuee,
Michael Boone.*

Prior to Hurricane Helene, Superintendent Chuck Melton, Assistant Superintendent Spike Gouge, Fish Culturists Doug Arfmann, Luke Clarke, and Kailee Winters, and Conservation Technicians Jacob Setterlind and Elijah Winters spent their days ensuring operations at Armstrong State Fish Hatchery ran smoothly. These seven state employees planned and scheduled fish stockings, cared for the fish, maintained the hatchery's equipment, delivered fish to public mountain trout waters of 11 counties in the northern section of North Carolina's mountain region, and anything else needed to keep the trout healthy.

Before Helene made landfall, hatchery staff were working diligently to maintain the facility after experiencing a great deal of rainfall in the week leading up to the disaster. Typical heavy rain turned into a raging, torrential downpour. The tide of Armstrong Creek swallowed surrounding terrain. The staff fought what would eventually be a losing battle to preserve a state facility and the 600,000 trout it housed.

Floodwaters invaded the facility, stranding the group on three separate islands – the only land around them raised enough to remain uncovered by the creek's now-raging waters. In the height of the storm, the staff's attention jumped to a neighboring home as a violent landslide ripped the house and its occupant from the foundation, tossing them downstream into the flood. When their neighbor was in need, clinging desperately to a piece of his home as a makeshift flotation device, hatchery staff acted quickly.

The staff pulled their neighbor out of the rushing waters and deluge of debris, moving him to safety and likely saving his life. Several hours passed as the staff remained in the isolated area, tending to their neighbor's severe injuries. Finally, a swift water rescue team arrived and airlifted them out of the devastation that was days earlier their beloved workplace.



Chuck Melton, Spike Gouge, Doug Arfmann, Kailee Winters, Luke Clarke, Jacob Setterlind, and Elijah Winters endured a tragedy during Hurricane Helene. Yet, amid their own distress, they acted selflessly to prevent further tragedy through the loss of a life. For their brave actions, the State of North Carolina thanks each staff member.