

THE
**Final
Straw**
A WEEKLY ANARCHIST SHOW



The Final Straw is a weekly anarchist and anti-authoritarian radio show bringing you voices and ideas from struggle around the world.

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Post-Helene Recovery and Mutual Aid with ROAR (Rural Organizing and Resilience)

**October 13, 2024
The Final Straw Radio**

J (cont'd): are going, but it's stressful, and the folks around here are vulnerable, and they're already having a hard time, and it's all too easy to blame people besides yourself who don't look like you when you're having a hard time.

TFSR: And when Mr. Appalachia JD Vance decides to talk about who belongs in Appalachia, not everyone is blue-eyed and white skinned like him and I. There's a lot of diversity in Appalachia. I would not speak for everyone.

J: For sure. We're going to be working a lot more on messaging around that and trying to dispel some of the falsehoods that are being spread right now.

TFSR: Janet, thank you so much for having the conversation and the work that you're doing. And hope to get to share space with you soon.

J: Cool. Thanks, Bursts, nice to see you. Bye.

We caught up with Janet from ROAR (Rural Organizing and Resilience) Western North Carolina to discuss mutual aid networks and recovery efforts after Hurricane Helene.

For more information on ROAR, and to support their ongoing recovery efforts, check out their website:

<https://ruralorganizing.wordpress.com/>

Instagram: **@_ROAR_WNC**

Venmo: **@roar_wnc**

Patreon: **<https://www.patreon.com/roarwnc>**

J (cont'd): generator. Because peoples' generators often sit around for years at a time, and so they're working on that that is an incredibly useful offering. That thing should absolutely be in your network if you're trying to create a network of support.

I mentioned Poder Emma already. Building connections between different groups is so important. I talked about Holler Harm Reduction. I want to say their name again because I have no idea where we would be this week if it wasn't for them. Really, really indispensable support there. I'm sure that I will be after this be like, "Ah, what about those people?"

Firestorm is also an awesome resource helping people figure out what's going on on the ground. And I can check in on their page. Having updated communications, where you're like, "This is what's happening on the ground. Here's what's being offered." Honestly, Blue Ridge Public Radio has been quite helpful, their updates are helpful. As someone who people are looking to update the rest of the continent, which is part of my job right now. It's been helpful for me to glean that information from other sources. And Firestorm has obviously been really useful for that.

TFSR: Well, cool. If you think of any other groups in the next few hours and you want to send me a link, that's great. Where can people learn more about ROAR and possibly send donations?

J: We have a website ruralorganizing.wordpress.com. We're on Instagram at @_ROAR_WNC. We also have Patreon if you want to help the work through the winter. We have Venmo and PayPal, although, gosh, sometimes those are difficult services to work with, but we're working it out. That's the main way you can keep up with us.

I've been trying to do regular updates for us on social media. It's not always fun, but I'm doing it. I'm hoping that once things have died down a little bit, we could actually start to really compile a resource for sharing with people about what's gone down and help.

I want to emphasize this now that the racist division that is being spread by right-wing pundits and mercenary politicians who are trying to use this for the election cycle is really challenging. It's making our work harder. Our people feel less safe going out into the field to make deliveries we're having. We're getting sidetracked by long discussions when we need to be get on the road. It is to be expected that this is how things

Janet: I'm Janet, and I use she/her pronouns. I live and work in Madison County in western North Carolina. I live about an hour from Asheville, honestly, but the place where my classroom and clinic is is about 30 minutes from Asheville, for people who are considering the geography here. I'm from the foothills of this area, and my mom's family are from Spruce Pine, and my dad's family are from the foothill. So my whole family, on both sides, are within the flood zone.

I am personally connected as well as being living here now. I have lived in Madison County, I bought land with some friends about 20 years ago, and have lived here full time since 2008. The reason I here to talk to you is that I organize with Rural Organizing and Resilience, and we are working on regional, local disaster relief in the face of hurricane Helene.

TFSR: Thanks a lot for taking the time to be here for this. You mentioned ROAR. Could you talk a little bit about the history of ROAR and other formations you want to mention that you work with in Madison County?

J: Yes. As far as the history of ROAR goes, some of the relevant information that I think is actually pretty important to the level to which we've been able to be quickly responding to the current situation is that a few of us founded ROAR back in winter of 2016-2017.

So post-election, and the white supremacist vibes were ramping up really hard that year. It was really intense. There was a lot of open white supremacist organizing happening in the mountains, and so we actually formed ROAR originally as more focused on anti-racist action and trying to create systems of safety here in the county and in western North Carolina in the mountains.

That was the original point. But it's been one disaster after another following that year, and we still have an anti-racist focus but we shifted a lot of our work into doing more mutual aid work especially once 2020 hit and the pandemic got rolling and a lot of people were out of work out here, very little safety net for people.

We set up a distribution center then and did food deliveries, water deliveries, resource deliveries, medication deliveries that whole year almost. And some of the people delivering for us now delivered back then as well. That was big and also helped us understand how to run a distribution site from moving through that.

J (cont'd): We also have a firewood distribution set up. One of the main needs of this area, a lot of people use wood heat, which is more reliable sometimes, but you need to be able-bodied to be able to collect firewood, unless you're buying firewood. We have a group of folks who collect firewood, process it, and deliver it, and that's been a pretty solid distribution activity and resource that we've been supplying this county with for a few years now.

We've been able to get some grants to buy equipment and stuff, which are coming in really handy now. Because now we're able to actually collect firewood that's down by the road. And we're collecting firewood for this winter which is probably going to be a hard one for a lot of people around here.

I guess I should also say that we are connected to Holler Harm Reduction, and that's been a really important resource. They help serve the community who need safe use supplies around here and a lot of good contacts out in the county, but also they have a space, and they're a nonprofit. And really I don't know where we would be this week if it hadn't been for the support of Holler Harm Reduction. I do want to say that as well, they've been indispensable.

And we're also connected to the Asheville Tool Library. They've been so helpful. I'll stop here because I know we need to get more into the details in a bit, but these years of already organizing and already having distribution networks has been so helpful for responding quickly to this situation.

TFSR: And I'd like to hear more shout outs at the end too. Just to go off script for a second with the question... So ROAR and, in Buncombe County, the Blue Ridge ABC chapter, and then also in wider western North Carolina, and then expanded out from there, Appalachian Medical Solidarity, which I think which I think was started at the same time the time.

These are a few formations that developed out of people with skills reacting to the general world that was connected to Trump's election and that timeframe, right? The fact that they've continued is really awesome.

While you can point to a political critique that's present in groups like this that have been around for this period of time, I wonder if you can speak about the wider participation from community members who don't consider themselves radical, or radical leftists or whatever.

J (cont'd): And that can be a strength because I'm hoping that keeps people from being preyed upon by disaster capitalists and real estate speculators who are already here doing the thing that they do, which is snap up land. I'm hoping that protectionist vibe is going to protect those people and help them not sell their land.

But also it can sometimes mean not always sharing with outsiders, when maybe we should also be accepting other people into the community right now because we're less hard hit than other places.

So, assessing what are the issues most likely to happen where you are. In some places that'll be wildfires. In some places that's going to be one hurricane after another in more of a flat zone. The ongoing stress of the extraction industries, especially fuel extraction. The fact that the whole Gulf is the sacrifice zone and understanding that pressure accelerating everything.

I've been pretty inspired by some of our community down around Bulbancha (New Orleans), and their disaster preparedness. The folks at Another Gulf is Possible are doing a lot of awesome work, and they're figuring out a lot of communication stuff because their communications go down regularly. The Bulbancha Liberation Radio is making these mobile Starlink units that are solar-powered, and they can drive them around and get radio and phone service to people and that is huge. If people were going to build autonomous hubs, we should have that capacity. We could have gone and set up at Ingles [a grocery store] and saved people so much stress. I definitely encourage anybody raising money or putting together resilience networks right now to invest in some communications apparatus for sure.

TFSR: As you said, situations and preparedness are going to look a lot different in different geographies, and technologies are always shifting and developing. Being prepared and learning what's available, I guess. You've listed a few groups already, but are there any other groups that you want to shout out?

J: I hope I don't leave anyone out. I mentioned National Tool Library, but I want to say they provided a service, and they're still providing it. I think is so amazing. They set up engine repair tents, and they did that in Marshall, I think they did it Nancy, but they actually set up hubs where people will work on your chainsaw, work on your small engine repair and help you get your chainsaw ready so you can work on your land, or your

J (cont'd): Definitely trying to do outreach and work with other groups and meet needs. We're pretty good at fundraising, so we do a lot of fundraising for other groups, which means that we helped restore the historic Black school in Mars Hill, we gave some money towards that. We helped save a historic Black cemetery that there was a property dispute over.

When you can make some cash, spread it around. That's really helpful for a lot of groups that are less high profile. That's what we're doing right now too because we've been able to raise money rather quickly, so we're redistributing it to the groups that are not able to do that, including undocumented folks.

In fact, when I hear people talk about the government giving all the money to undocumented people, I'm like, "Are you serious? Like, no one is helping these people." This is where we have to come in and try and get some resources to these communities.

I always say one group that we work with and help out, who are doing a really amazing distribution site is Poder Emma, which is in Emma, an interesting little rural enclave next to Asheville. They're doing amazing work. They're doing a similar distribution thing, but with definitely serving the Latine community. Building up relationships over time, where you share resources and you show that you're willing to sacrifice for other, for all kinds of people, and give and donate, especially if you're good at getting money, which some people are better than others.

Even doing this interview is not for everybody. I would say doing all the network building, building trust, trying to identify your region's specific strengths and weaknesses. Me being like, "Okay, people will get out here with chainsaws and clear the roads before we even talk about it." I can probably get a lot of people who don't use wood heat to collect firewood and bring it to me. These kinds of resources of the strength being wood heat, leaning into that, leaning into people's skills with processing firewood, all those kinds of things.

What are the weaknesses here? Weaknesses are we're all very isolated. Even when we live next to each other, it might be hard to get there. Making safety plans for keeping your community intact and checking on each other. We definitely saw some things fall through. Like I didn't practice the radios. And also, every topography has its own issues. And the strength of this place is self-sufficiency, community care, all those kinds of things that are really entrenched in the culture here. But the weaknesses can also be not trusting outsiders sometimes.

TFSR (cont'd): Did you put down a flag and say, "This is our ideology, come to us"? Or you made it about the activity, but also kept it within a certain zone of "we're not going to work with Nazis."

J: That's a good question. One thing that's true in these rural Appalachian communities is people feel very judged by outsiders, and they see people who haven't lived here for a very long time as outsiders. Some of us are from nearby, but most of us are not. There's a couple people from right here, but most of us are not. We knew going into this that we had to be cautious not to use language that would make people feel shamed or judged, while at the same time being like we were anti-racist.

And honestly, in the beginning, we were called Rural Organizing Against Racism, and using that name alone meant people thought [we] hated them and didn't want to talk to them. So the shift to Rural Organizing And Resilience, while still doing a lot of anti-racist work, has been really helpful because it's allowed us to emphasize shared values, like community care. People here are very self-sufficient. There's a big emphasis on self-sufficiency. There's also emphasis on helping your neighbors and caring for each other.

Mutual aid is part of the culture here because this is a place where people have been very poor and definitely neglected. These are not people who do not have access to most of the kinds of services or any safety net as it exists in the world, which there's not a lot of that anyway at this point.

There's a pride in caring for self here and for caring for community, and there's an ethic for that. And generally western North Carolina is a little funny. It's not as Trump-y as a lot of the state, it's not as hostile feeling as a lot of places where I'm from, the foothills. And even between those two places, it's pretty different. We still try to have anti-racist messaging in our front and center, but we don't talk about politics. We definitely don't talk about electoral politics. We use some talking points that anarchists would recognize, but we don't actually use the A-word openly out in the world, and everyone in our group is not an anarchist.

And there's all kinds of folks, I'm not going to name all the affiliations. There's many kinds of people that are part of the group, and what we try to do is emphasize the shared values of community care and autonomy and self-sufficiency, which is really loud out here. That is the culture of this place. Now,

J (cont'd): unfortunately, those sentiments can be sidelined and pushed into more divisive places by the people who are interested in that, if you're not careful. We try to feed and nourish those sentiments that are about us taking care of each other.

TFSR: And a wider sense of definition of each other that doesn't play into the tropes of "Well, these are outsiders. They're people are from south of the border, or whatever. They're from a city."

J: But that being said, a lot of the volunteers who've been coming to drive supplies out to other places are locals, all kinds of people. There's obviously people who are tapping into our distribution network that might normally be doing more of a church-type charity, but are coming and helping us and spreading stuff around. I have seen a lot more community participation this time than in the past.

TFSR: Cool, it seems to have had such a huge impact on the whole region that for people not to pull together would be ridiculous.

J: Right. Yes, we have to make it through the next phases.

TFSR: I wonder if you could talk a little bit about your experience of the storm in the immediate grassroots response with those existing infrastructure and relationships that folks already had that create the response to need and shape your response.

J: I'm so interested in talking about this because I've learned a lot from this about what the holes are in our networks and capacity to respond.

What I didn't say at the beginning of this is that I live at the top of a mountain off the grid. I have Starlink. We didn't have much wind event. We didn't have flooding, and so we were less impacted than many people. So on Thursday night all of our little ROAR close group checks in on our Signal threads and check in on everybody. We talk about our plan for the next day and we plan to talk later. Then in the morning we check in again, wind is picking up, everyone checks in, and then we go to bed.

That day everyone's a little stressed [call breaking up] But the next day, there's radio silence. We could get out. We were getting information from the outside world because we had because we had service and hadn't lost power because we're on

J (cont'd): Housing is also going to be a priority, and there's other groups working on that. I'm thinking more about main maintenance of survival needs over the winter, firewood, and so in those counties that were the hardest hit - it's housing.

TFSR: It seems like if there are folks in communities that are outside of the immediately impacted area of the storm, that collecting goods as a part of a hub if you've got the space to store it, and then waiting for those perennial needs like diapers or fuel or whatever else (maybe don't store a bunch of fuel) is not a bad idea. And then someone can drive it in every once in a while, but then in the in the meantime, sending funds that are liquid and turns into goods as needed.

J: That's been really helpful because we have been getting a lot of donations. It's been wonderful, of supplies, but also of cash. When no one's bringing me fire extinguishers to send home with these propane heaters and stuff like that, I can run to Lowe's and get a bunch of fire extinguishers. It's been really helpful to do that and to have that capacity to be flexible in the needs.

TFSR: You've already mentioned some things that have been helpful for you all, like extending your networks over time. I know that you were doing multilingual dinners and get-togethers generally that are socializing as well as filling the immediate need. A slightly more upscaled and more rural version of Food Not Bombs in some ways, right? There's not a lot of houseless folks in a lot of parts of Madison County because there's no place to be. And then the wood exchange or giveaways and deliveries of wood and medications and such.

Do you have any other tips for preparation for folks of the possible or inevitable climate catastrophes and failure of infrastructure that's accelerating around us? It seems like having these networks is already a good first step because then you're building off of something.

J: I think establishing networks is a good idea, establishing relationships, learning to trust the people that you work with, learning to work through conflict, communicate with each other, have different opinions. All these things are really important. Learning how to speak to each other kindly as you talk about things that are stressful. Because when you're under acute stress like we have in the past week, it's easy to get bitchy and snap at people. If you haven't already figured out how to tone that down, not be reactive, it's not going to go as well.

J (cont'd): really limit how much money they gave those people because they were thought they were lying that they live together. They would only let one or two people use each address.

So I've seen that already, and that is also the case here. There will be one address with multiple structures on it. And because property tax is so insane out here, people can't afford to buy a place, you put another little unit on your land-

TFSR: ...or because elder or childcare being a responsibility for families.

J: For sure. Where collective care is happening in those multi-generation families, you have child care, you have elder care, all of that in one place. You're not going to put your old folks up somewhere else, send your children off. The kinds of like kinship structures that can be really helpful for all kinds of people, including immigrant communities also are going to have a hard time getting through some of this FEMA stuff. Because same thing, many people in one household.

But anyway, the resources are going to be limited that are coming from governmental structures, and so we are seeing a need to maybe have a larger warehouse space. It's what we're looking for, a larger space because people want to give us so many supplies. They really want to give us supplies, and that's wonderful. And also we have such limited space, and we don't know how long we're going to get to be in one where we are right now. And so we have to really be picky about what we're accepting, knowing full well that in a month, people are going to need all these diapers and everything that we don't have room for right now. We're hoping to get a bigger space.

But I think that anybody doing this support should be keeping in mind the long-term and that who knows when people are going to be able to go back to work and have income around here. Madison County, which was hit not as bad, people have a lot of canned food put up. They have their deer meat and their freezers and stuff. If they didn't lose it, some of them probably lost it when they lost power.

But in Yancey and Mitchell people lost whole houses. They lost everything. In those spots, I don't even know what's going to happen. Hopefully the push to have folks that have Airbnbs to help support people by letting them stay there is going to help because there's a lot of vacation rentals out here.

J (cont'd): solar. And our Starlink can be a little spotty because it's a pretty deep holler up there, but it's still better than nothing and it's not tied to the electrical grid. So we didn't know how anyone was doing. None of us could communicate with each other. None of us knew how each other were doing for at least a day, in some cases, two days.

That Saturday we took care of stuff at the house. The next day, we tried to get into downtown Marshall - it was closed off at that point - and to assess the flooding and take some pictures, to send people and to try to get some messages, see who we could get ahold of. Fortunately a lot of the damage out here was trees down in the roads, and there are so many people who are chainsaw competent, and so the citizens of Madison County cleared the roads up.

And I know that from what I heard, it was easier to get around here than it was Asheville for several days because of people not only removing the trees, but collecting firewood from it. Because that's how it is. This is a subsistence-type lifestyle that so many people are used to here, where they collect the resource as it falls. It's a literal windfall. The tree is there. You collect the wood. We didn't even have to use a chainsaw, except to get out of our driveway, get to town, we're still the only people we can hear from.

At a certain point, people start leaving their abodes and going to check on each other physically in cars. The topography of this place is important to remember because we're so separate from each other, even when we're close because it's the mountains and valleys create a topography that's difficult to navigate here. And I should say that ROAR, or a lot of us have the Baofeng radios, and they did not work in this situation. They did not help.

TFSR: I've heard *Margaret Killjoy* talk about this on other podcasts, about the amount of moisture in the air, messing with the radio waves/the topography or because, I'm sure y'all practice, but Baofengs are really complicated. I'm not practiced with them and I have two and I could definitely.. but..

J: I don't you know. It's a good question. I had assumed it was mostly topography, but I'm not sure. We have friends at *Bvlbancha Liberation Radio* radio down in New Orleans, and they talked about how they're able to set up [the mobile Starlinks] there and get around and get everybody's service. But here, that's not an option because it really has to have almost

J (cont'd): visual, to be in sight. So this not being able to communicate with people was alarming.

We all checked on each other and our neighbors for a couple days and but still...this was true outside of the larger region too. It was really interesting to be at this top of the mountain, off grid, but be the only person with communication capacity. We saw right away that we needed to start giving updates to the outside world. My partner and I, Dave. We were fielding health and safety checks from strangers being like, "Please, can you go see someone on this road?" People that we do know who wanted us to check on everyone they knew around here. It was like being inundated with questions. And it made me see how reliant we are on constant contact with people.

By Monday here in Madison County, we had had a meeting scheduled for that following Wednesday that was a regular meeting. And we were like, "All right, we got to move it up." We met on Monday with ROAR, and then any affiliate friends and people who were interested in working on the response effort.

By Tuesday, we had a hub set up. And we were receiving donations, putting out communications, dividing up the jobs. Of course, mutual aid Disaster Relief has a lot of different hubs around and there are people who are organizing communication between the hubs. Their existing network and our existing connections and capacity for working together and already having had experience with this thing has been really helpful.

Also, we have people with medic trainings. We have people who are comfortable using ATVs because we were having to do health and safety checks on ATVs, get medications delivered to people off road in certain parts of Yancey County, specifically.

Madison was much less hard hit. It was not hit as hard at all as Yancy. Yancey got 30 inches of rain in one day or something. Those immediate needs, we were able to get to pretty quickly because we already had the relationships, and we already had methods of communication and getting things done, and people willing to do that work, obviously. But I can't really overemphasize how important it is to already be working on community care and networks of distribution and support before something hits the fan.

TFSR: Yeah, it's good to have ideas of what is possible or what is likely to happen, so that you're prepared for it.

TFSR (cont'd): laying down gravel, restoring electrical infrastructure or removing damaged electrical infrastructure.

Island is a good staging ground, especially if you've got access to the other side because it's a big, flat area that's separate from the right, and there's a water filtration plant, an electrical generation plant, at least that was upriver of there a quarter mile or something less than that. That's a good staging ground for them to be at.

J: It's a good location, and it makes sense. It's just alarming when you go there. You're like, "Oh, sorry, I wanted to go water my plants."

TFSR: As autumn sets in and this situation reaches into the third week since Helene, what needs do you see recovery and community responding to? And does this dovetail with the ongoing challenge of marginalization of rural working class communities and the work that ROAR has already been engaged with, for instance, the wood distribution?

J: I'm so grateful we already have the wood distribution set up. I highly encourage people to do that if you live somewhere really...giving people firewood is such a great way to build community and have people establish connections with people you might not normally connect with. We're definitely amping up our firewood collection, and hopefully solidifying some multiple levels of response for delivery.

Right now, we're losing our space. We had someone donate a little space, but we've already outgrown it, and also they're ready to get back to normal, and it's pretty wild in their parking lot right now. We're gonna lose this space, but we are looking for a bigger one. Because what's clear is, as I mentioned earlier, that the more government organized donation sites and pickup sites limit how much people can have. They seem to be shutting down. And we're expecting people to have a hard time all winter.

If they make it through their emergency unemployment situation, which is a mess, if they make it through the FEMA hoops and all of that. It's a lot of bureaucracy to navigate. These are multi-generation households out here too, and there often will be a limit per household on aid. And at least that's how it was after Katrina.

New Orleans is amazing because there were so many generations living together in some places. And they would

J (cont'd): resources, liquidate them, move them around, you can move more quickly.

The federal response has taken a while, but I don't think it's out of neglect. I don't have a dog in the fight about blaming this on the administration or whatever. I find it annoying and distracting that that is happening, but it's never surprising to me when a giant bureaucracy takes a minute to do something.

Now, yes, it almost feels like a military occupation on the island, the army is here. The National Guard, that's a part of the state branch because there's different versions of the National Guard. The National Guard was in Yancey County and Mitchell County.

That response depends a lot upon the specific personnel involved. These seem to be very, very young people who don't know how to do many things or have trouble organizing. And from what people I know who went there said, including my family, you had to boss them around and explain to them how to do things, be like, "You need to do this now and then go do this, and then set this up," and then they would do it. But that was the chain of command - locals coming in and being like, "Excuse me, I'm going to tell you how to run this line."

But usually this is such a weird thing to say, but honestly, it was like this in New Orleans because I was also there before and after Katrina, I wasn't there for the actual storm. The National Guard can feel so incompetent that you're almost grateful when the army shows up because they have a chain of a command and they understand how to do things and they're at work, doing their operations.

On the island, they are moving a lot of stuff around. They have a ton of equipment, and it feels more like an engineering project, and that problems are being solved there. I can't speak to what they're doing other places, but the things that actually require a higher level of equipment that we can't afford...I'm grateful to see the people bringing those in and dealing with that. Like we need the backhoes and all of the dirt movers of the world right now, so they are there doing that. And that feels important to me. I don't know how long there will be government attention to this area. That's a big question.

TFSR: When I was imagining a lot of those military that was present, they're probably Army Corps of Engineers, and that they would be, as you said, moving earth, clearing roads, maybe

TFSR (cont'd): But even having the ability to have those conversations in the run-up to a situation like that means that if the situation's different, at least you can pivot to whatever that need is with those people that are in communication still, and then you can all reach out to your connections that makes sense in that context.

I think the water is still in the process of being tested, but I've been hearing different things about the reality of the possible chemical spill from the PVC pipe manufacturing Woodfin on Riverside. For listeners that don't know that's up river of Woodfin in Madison County. It's north of, but downriver of, Asheville because of the way river flows on the French Broad, specifically, or other sources of chemicals that would enter into the water that's now the mud, that's now the dust that's blowing around, that's affecting residents and cleanup efforts.

J: I can speak to that a bit. As you mentioned, there's still a lot of unknowns, and there's a good bit of conspiracy talk around this. It's hard to get answers around the water testing and the soil testing. But [from] some people who have been working with it more and seem somewhat knowledgeable of it, it's clear that the dirt, the sludge on the island, at least in downtown Marshall (which is what I'm more used to people working with) is gross. It smells bad. There's a rainbow color in it. You'll see some rainbows in certain areas, it looks like a fuel. That plastics manufacturer makes PVC and stuff. They had vats of nastiness. And that place was destroyed. We can only presume that they went into the water.

On top of that - and I think this gets emphasized less - but this river arts district was flooded full of chemicals and solvents because artists use chemicals and solvents often. We got woodworking stuff. I am not trying to make it equal to the manufacturing of a plastics place. But it all adds up. And even in lesser floods here on the French Broad River, you'll see giant house-size propane tanks floating by, or little RVs, little campers float by.

The place is going to be full of chemicals, even if there hadn't been the one bigger dump that was the plastics manufacturer. There has been some report of mild chemical burns from people who touched the sludge, and that was before people were using the PPE.

Now, people are pretty solid with the PPE, but for a while it wasn't like that, and I know that before they started wetting **J**

(cont'd): down the dirt in downtown Marshall inhaling it was not great. People who inhaled it are having some lung issues because it was really dusty and dry and that stuff is in the air.

I know there's been a lot of efforts to promote the French Broad as a clean river in the past 10 years. And honestly, having lived around here for a long time, I'm always shocked when I see people tubing. But I always thought of it as a little gross because there was a bleachery on it in Swannanoa, all these things. But yes, there is a chemical dump that happened in there. It's also true that the water level was really high. It was diluted a good bit and moved onto the Gulf, which also is terrible.

But I don't want to downplay that there's chemicals in there, but there's a lot of emphasis on one spot when I think that, gosh, who knows how many chemicals from other areas that flooded were in that water, and they're definitely in that dirt, and it will take a while to figure that out, to see what the residual effects of that are.

That is frightening, and I honestly worry more about all of the other animals of the riparian system as well. What about all of the hellbenders and the other salamanders and the fish, special plants that live along the river. I do have that concern around the toxicity of the flood and the toxic spill within the flood, and also it's hard to hold it all at one time. It's hard to think of all of these things and to hold space for that.

I also fear that we could have a pretty big outbreak of a psychogenic illness where people are worried that you produce the symptoms you think you might have. So I try to be careful when I talk about it as well. But I do think the water was full of some nastiness and the dirt around the flood zone is full of nastiness as well.

Now, I don't think it's actually going to be condemned. There were definitely memes or text alerts going around about how downtown Marshall was gonna be condemned. I don't think that's happening, but probably there will be some longer term damage to the environment, maybe more than to the humans walking around there.

TFSR: So no Centralia moment for-

J: I don't think we're gonna have a Centralia moment.

TFSR: The PPE that people upgraded from rubber sole boots, and like Tyvek boots, Tyvek suits. Is it VOC, volatile organic compounds ventilators, when they're doing mucking?

J: Yes, people are doing full on respirators and Tyvek suits. Some people are doing gloves and respirators with better covering clothes, but not necessarily Tyvek. Because there's some people doing the cleanup every day. They can get the sludge every day.

We've had an incredible volunteer response for downtown Marshall, and there's folks coordinating that out of Nanostead, where they help you get your PPE on, and there's a shuttle that takes you downtown to help with the cleanup and bring you back. It's really beautiful. All of that is really wonderful to see, and people have integrated putting on the PPE as part of the process.

TFSR: Can you talk a little bit about what the government responses look like? I've heard people talking in the area about "Oh, there's a lot of soldiers around here." There are conspiracy theories about FEMA taking people's property and whatever.

J: Sure. I'll do my best. The local government response, the county and the city, at least here, they're pretty on it and seem solid. They've set up some pretty big distribution centers. I've heard that both their distribution sites and any that are more federally connected are starting to get skimpy and limit how much they let people take and it seems like they're planning to shut down in not very long. They're around now. I don't see them being here long-term, and that's also from former experience. But I don't know anything about the state, North Carolina state, at all.

I was thinking about this at the different levels, and I'm really not sure about that might be longer term. The federal response took a little while, as always. And something that some of us were talking about with ROAR was that when you have this big bureaucratic machinery, the inertia to get anything done quickly, it's very hard for them to move quickly.

Those of us that are doing more decentralized care, even the giant bureaucratic aid organizations aren't here. Red Cross is not here because it takes a while for anything that's like a big machine to get it moving. But when you're decentralized and you can plan quickly and dispatch resources quickly, collect