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Repairs

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Folks in Bear Rock Estates won't forget the night the hurricane-saturated mountainside tore loose, sending a torrent of mud, trees and rocks hurtling more than 1,000 feet down.

The landslide happened Sept. 8, 2004, as Hurricane Francis pummeled the mountains with rain. But it has only been the last few months that a sense of normalcy has returned with the completion of repairs here.

The 1,200-foot landslide is among about 130 sites across Henderson County repaired with \$2.3 million in federal and state money. With the exception the Bear Rock slide and two smaller slides in Bat Cave and Edneyville, the projects restored stream banks damaged during the 2004 hurricanes.

The U.S. Natural Resources Natural Conservation Service administered all repair projects following Hurricane Floyd, which caused billions of dollars of damage in Eastern North Carolina in 1999.

But when Hurricanes Frances and Ivan struck the mountains in 2004, the agency allowed Henderson and other counties to contract with engineering firms to repair storm damage.

"NRCS had a few years to reflect, if this happens again, how can we do it better," said Dan Rosenburg, Henderson County district conservationist for the agency. "We decided to put more control on the counties."

Rosenburg credited counties with getting the job done. He presented the Henderson County Board of Commissioners last week with a certificate for leadership in administering the Emergency Watershed Protection Program. Assistant County Manager Justin Hembree oversaw the repair projects.

"They were done well, professionally and on time," Rosenburg told county leaders.

The federal program provided 75 percent of the repair money with North Carolina providing the remainder.

While the high profile landslides got a lot of attention, most projects went



Bear Rock Road in the Crab Creek community has been repaired after being damaged due to a landslide back in 2004. (MIKE DIRKS/TIMES-NEWS)

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to restore ripped out stream banks, preventing tons of soil from washing into streams and rivers. In addition to replanted trees to hold stream banks, some sites required "serious engineering measures," such as hardened structures to deflect flood waters away from banks, Rosenberg said.

The objective was to restore stream banks and hillsides to pre-hurricane conditions as much as possible.

In Bear Rock Mountain Estates, the program spent about \$394,000 to repair a slide that was a smaller version of the deadly one that wiped out part of Peek's Creek Community in Macon County during Hurricane Ivan.

The Bear Rock Mountain slide occurred in a private development and tore out parts of two private roads. It was eligible for federal and state money because the yawning chasm left after the slide continued to threaten homes until it was stabilized.

The slide happened when topsoil on the steep slopes gave way where Bear Rock Road climbs the flank of Pinnacle Mountain. The road was closed for more than a year, forcing residents in the upper part of the development to drive miles out of their way on Pinnacle Mountain Road to get to town.

Contract crews built a retaining wall to stabilize where bear Rock Road crosses the top of the slide. Now steel guardrails protect motorists crossing new blacktop where once the pavement was cracked and falling into the ravine. Culverts divert water along the side of the debris field, now sewn with new grass.

About 150 vertical feet below, the slide ripped out of part of Upper Loop Road, a gravel road between the homes of Dale Nash and Karen and Steve Gardner. That area has also been repaired with new hardened culverts and rock berms designed to slow the speed of water coming down the mountain.

Contract crews did the initial work in October but had to return recently to replace culverts with larger ones, Karen Gardner said. The Gardners can now drive down Upper Loop a short distance to the pavement, instead of a longer, rougher gravel road they and their neighbor were forced to use soon after the slide.

Mrs. Gardner said neighbors are still waiting for their homeowners association to pave part of their road that had been scheduled for blacktop a couple of weeks before the hurricane. But she said she and her husband, a cabinet designer, are happy with the repairs.

"It has been a big improvement for us, made life a lot easier," she said Tuesday.

She said she feels the repairs have made the slide safer, and she no longer worries about it.

"I used to (worry) every time it rained," she said. "I feel that is pretty stable up there now."

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