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Seventeen days after Hurricane Helene devastated Western North Carolina, tearing down power lines, destroying water mains, and disabling cell phone towers, the signs of relief were hard to miss.

Trucks formed a caravan along Interstate 40, filled with camouflaged soldiers, large square tanks of water, and essentials from pet food to diapers. In towns, roadside signs -- official versions emblazoned with nonprofit relief logos and wooden makeshift ones scrawled with paint -- advertised free food and water.

And then there were the generators.

The noisy machines powered the trailers where Asheville residents sought showers, weeks after the city's water system failed. They fueled the food trucks delivering hot meals to the thousands without working stoves. They filtered water for communities to drink and flush toilets.

Western North Carolina is far from unique. In the wake of disaster, generators are a staple of relief efforts around the globe. But across the region, a New Orleans-based nonprofit is working to displace as many of these fossil fuel burners as they can, swapping in batteries charged with solar panels instead.

It's the largest response effort the Footprint Project has ever deployed in its short life, and organizers hope the impact will extend far into the future.

"If we can get this sustainable tech in fast, then when the real rebuild happens, there's a whole new conversation that wouldn't have happened if we were just doing the same thing that we did every time," said Will Heegaard, operations director for the organization.

"Responders use what they know works, and our job is to get them stuff that works better than single-use fossil fuels do," he said. "And then, they can start asking for that. It trickles up to a systems change."

The rationale for diesel and gas generators is simple: they're widely available. They're relatively easy to operate. Assuming fuel is available, they can run 24-7, keeping people warm, fed, and connected to their loved ones even when the electric grid is down. Indubitably, they save lives.

But they're not without downsides. The burning of fossil fuels causes not just more just more carbon that exacerbates the climate crisis, but smog and soot-forming air pollutants that can trigger asthma attacks and other respiratory problems.

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