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Visitors rescued after bridge collapse near Gila Cliff Dwellings

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SILVER CITY — Three Michigan residents were rescued Tuesday morning after floodwaters caused by rains and warm temperatures Sunday night washed away an 18-foot section of the North Fork bridge near the Gila Cliff Dwellings on Monday.

The three, a man and two women, were rescued by New Mexico Search and Rescue crews along with the Upper Mimbres Fire Department and Gila Regional EMS on Tuesday and are now in the care of the American Red Cross.

The three have been identified as Georgene Fritz, 47, Tasha Burnham, 21, and Darryl Carter, 56, all of Gladwin, Mich.

More than an inch of rain at higher elevations Sunday night into Monday morning caused snow pack at higher elevations to melt, and flash flood waters tore through Gila River drainage areas, destroying the North Fork bridge and flooding surrounding areas.



New Mexico Search and Rescue crews and local fire crews whisk Georgene Fritz across the 18-foot gap of the North Fork Bridge near the Gila Cliff Dwellings Tuesday. The bridge was washed out by flash flood waters caused by rains and warm temperatures Sunday night. (Photo for the Sun-News by Fred Potter)

The National Weather Service

Colorado Basin River Forecast Center Web site — www.cbrfc.noaa.gov — measured flows on the Gila River at 2,800 cubic feet per second at 5:45 a.m. Monday — a sharp jump from 9 p.m. Sunday, when flows were around 177 cubic feet per second.

Brian Fuller, incident commander with New Mexico Search and Rescue, said the three individuals were trapped after an 18-foot section of bridge was washed away by the heavy floodwaters. He said rescue crews rigged a litter on guide wires across the collapsed bridge and brought the three across.

"They were all healthy and fine," he said.

Fuller said the steep river bank and other factors made it unsafe to bring the three across any other way and one, a double amputee, could not have been rescued without the litter system.



From left, Michigan residents Tasha Burnham, Darryl Carter and Fritz talk with New Mexico Search and Rescue Incident Commander Brian Fuller after being rescued Tuesday. Flood waters destroyed the North Fork Bridge on Monday trapping the trio on the north side of the Gila River near the Gila Cliff Dwellings. (Photo for the Sun-News by Fred Potter)

Tim Heidrick, firefighter with the Silver City Fire Department, aided in the Tuesday morning rescue. Heidrick said the three were not in a dire emergency, but were low on food and water and rescue crews had no idea when the roadway may be repaired to allow them to cross.

"It wasn't a dire emergency so we were able to take our time and do it right," he said. "The rescue was good experience for all these entities to work together as a team."

Molly Glazewski, Red Cross volunteer, said the Southwestern Chapter of the American Red Cross is helping the three individuals with lodging for the next couple of nights.

Fritz said Tuesday that she, her daughter and Carter, a family friend, are all in good health and

happy to be saved, but are concerned about their vehicle and living conditions until their vehicle is returned.

"All we got out with is a change of clothes," she said. "Our car is sitting at the Upper Scorpion Campground and they don't know if it will be a week or three months before we get it back. We all feel fine, we are just worried about our stuff and where we are going to stay in the meantime."

Fritz, a Michigan native and 15-year retired firefighter, said the rescue crews that brought her and her daughter and friend to safety did an amazing job.

She said the three were on vacation, traveling across the state and exploring possible places to live. She said the trio had planned to leave the area Sunday, but were unable to because of rain. On Monday, Parks Service officials advised them to evacuate, but before they could not cross because the bridge was washed away.

"We had a ranger on that side with us," she said. "He had come over to give us a jump start. Our battery had died. Before we could get out they radioed back and said the bridge had washed away."

Fritz said the trio was told to evacuate at 9 a.m. Monday, but by around 9:30 a.m. the bridge had collapsed, trapping the three and a ranger on the north side of the river.

She said they were not afraid, knowing they would be rescued and Parks Service officials had managed to get water and some meals ready to eat across the river to the three later Monday when flood waters subsided.

"When the bridge went it took out the water lines as well," she said. "We only had a gallon and a canteen of water."

Fritz said the Red Cross is putting the family up for two nights, but after that they have no place to stay.

"After that we have nothing. We are hoping to find a place to rent or a camp trailer someone can loan us until we get our car back," she said.

Bridget M. Spedalieri, public information officer with the New Mexico Department of Transportation, said the DOT already has crews on site and heavy equipment was already being moved out to the area Tuesday. She said it is hopeful the bridge could be partially open by Friday.

"Right now we are assessing the situation," she said. "If all goes well we may have a single lane open as soon as Friday."

She said it is unclear when the bridge will be fully repaired and open. In the meantime, the Cliff Dwellings remain closed to visitors. She added that a meeting between the DOT and local government officials is slated for sometime Wednesday to discuss the situation.

"It is premature now to determine what this is going to cost," she said. "Once we get into the project we'll know more."

Fritz said, aside from housing, her only concern is getting home to Michigan by spring — in time to pick mushrooms.

Anyone wishing to aid the trio may call the local chapter of the American Red Cross at (575) 534-4621.

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