

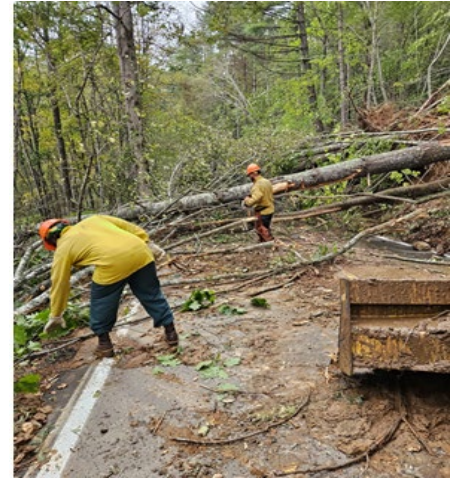


# N.C. Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services

## N.C. Forest Service



Young Offenders Forest Conservation Program (B.R.I.D.G.E.)  
*Building - Rehabilitating - Instructing - Developing - Growing - Employing*



## Annual Legislative Report on B.R.I.D.G.E.

Oct. 1, 2025

Steve Troxler, Commissioner  
Greg Hicks, Assistant Commissioner/State Forester  
Kevin Harvell, Deputy State Forester

Pursuant to G.S. 106-915, the North Carolina Forest Service, a division of the North Carolina Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services, respectfully submits this annual report on the Young Offenders Forest Conservation Program (B.R.I.D.G.E.) for FY 2024-25.

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## **Statutory requirement**

### **B.R.I.D.G.E. Young Offenders – priority and reporting**

SECTION 11.1. (b) The North Carolina Forest Service (NCFS) shall submit an annual report on the Young Offenders Forest Conservation Program (B.R.I.D.G.E.) no later than Oct. 1 of each year beginning Oct. 1, 2012, to the Fiscal Research Division, the Chairs of the House Appropriations Subcommittee on Natural and Economic Resources and the Senate Appropriations Committee on Natural and Economic Resources, the Chairs of the House Appropriations Subcommittee on Justice and Public Safety and the Senate Appropriations Committee on Justice and Public Safety, the Joint Legislative Commission on Governmental Operations and the Joint Legislative Oversight Committee on Justice and Public Safety. The report shall include the following information for the prior fiscal year:

- (1) The number of offenders within the custody of the N.C. Department of Adult Corrections (NCDAC) eligible for B.R.I.D.G.E.
- (2) The number of offenders participating in B.R.I.D.G.E.
- (3) The average daily participation in B.R.I.D.G.E.
- (4) The average duration of participation in B.R.I.D.G.E.
- (5) Summary of activities of B.R.I.D.G.E. participants.

## **Overview of the Young Offenders Forest Conservation Program (B.R.I.D.G.E.)**

The B.R.I.D.G.E. Program is a cooperative effort between the NCFS and the NCDAC. The program was created in response to the horrific 1985 wildfire season in which a single wildfire in Burke County destroyed approximately 5,000 acres and 27 homes. The 1986 N.C. General Assembly funded the program to provide trained and readily available crews for dispatching to wildfire suppression primarily in western North Carolina counties.

Wildfire suppression and mitigation are the primary goal of B.R.I.D.G.E., however, crewmen and North Carolina benefit from this unique program in additional ways. Crewmen are given opportunities to learn a variety of vocational skills and develop strong work ethic to become productive members of society upon parole. Crewmen can earn National Wildfire Coordinating Group (NWCG) certificates in wildland firefighting and forklift operator licenses. The state has noticed a significant return on its investment from the B.R.I.D.G.E. program. Crews assist in work projects such as trail maintenance and construction, painting and sandblasting, forest management, forest health, natural disaster assistance, aiding the NCFS Nursery Program and providing direct services to residents by completing various work projects for state,

county and local government agencies in addition to schools and nonprofit organizations.

North Carolina benefits from the immense reduction in firefighting and project costs when utilizing B.R.I.D.G.E. crewmen. A B.R.I.D.G.E. crewman’s hourly wage is \$0.625, an emergency pickup firefighter’s hourly wage is \$16.00, and according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, the hourly wage for a construction trades helpers is \$20.74. The daily cost comparison of a five-person B.R.I.D.G.E. crew at \$25 to an emergency pickup firefighter crew at \$640, results in daily savings of \$615. A construction trades helper crew daily savings is over \$800.

A total of 45 offender positions are obtained from Caldwell Correctional Center and Foothills Correctional Institution.

**Data summary of B.R.I.D.G.E.**

**Eligible offenders**

**Eligible offenders available for participation in NCDAC**

Facility	Number of offenders
Caldwell Correctional Center	12
Foothills Correctional Institution	16
Other state correctional facilities	633
Total eligible offenders within DAC custody between July 1, 2024 and June 30, 2025	661

Data source: NCDAC Office of Research and Planning

Crewman eligibility is determined according to standards provided by the B.R.I.D.G.E. program that include male; ages 18 to 36; minimum custody level; no sexual offenders or serious assaults predatory in nature or resulting in injury; no escape attempts in the past 12 months; 30 days infraction-free; and, acceptable to both NCFS and NCDAC. Rule waivers may be requested on a per case basis.

## Offenders participating in B.R.I.D.G.E.

Data source: NCFS database

- Participated for various durations: 122 crewmen.
- Daily average participation: 23 crewmen.
- Average duration of participation: 142 days per crewman.

### Summary of activities

54,073 total work hours in FY 2024-25.

**Wildfire control** – including fire control skills, direct fire suppression, pre-fire suppression firebreaks, helicopter strike team (helitack) and hazard reduction prescribed burns.

**Construction repair and maintenance** – including carpentry, masonry, landscaping, basic electrical and plumbing, painting and equipment maintenance.

**Support emergency management** – aid during search and rescue missions, construct footbridges for accessibility, assist with training requests, perform chainsaw work and removal of downed trees in response to disasters such as ice/snowstorms, hurricanes and flooding.

**Nursery and tree improvement** – complete projects such as seed collection, Fraser fir reproduction, hemlock woolly adelgid treatment, tree planting, lifting seedlings, chainsaw work and timber stand improvement.

**Education** – crewmen receive training in wildland firefighting, helitack, Type 4 Engine operation, chainsaw, first aid, carpentry and construction, forklift and UTV operation, mowing equipment, chipper and other small equipment operations.

**Community service** – trail/grounds construction and maintenance, NCDOT litter sweep in designated area, landscape and groundskeeping.

## **Project examples and hours**

### **Significant wildfire suppression efforts**

Tropical Storm Helene's aftermath led to a historic spring wildfire season in western North Carolina. The 17 significant wildfires continued for multiple weeks, burned more than 16,000 acres, threatened 1,464 homes and structures and destroyed 18 homes. B.R.I.D.G.E. crews were essential for initial attack on incidents such the Black Cove Complex, Table Rock, North Fork and Bee Rock Creek fires, working more than 19,600 man hours.

### **Natural disaster project**

Record breaking rainfall, strong winds and tornadoes from Tropical Storm Helene devastated the Appalachian region on Friday, Sept. 27, 2024. Utilities, roads and buildings were severely impacted or destroyed.

B.R.I.D.G.E. staff immediately began clearing downed trees from local roadways while awaiting directions from NCFS Operations. Local Emergency Management requested road clearing assistance after communications were reestablished. NCDAC released B.R.I.D.G.E. crewmen for work on Saturday, Sept. 28, and crews continued to clear downed trees for emergency and public access.

Over the next few days, staff transported and utilized the B.R.I.D.G.E. excavator and UTV to assist search and rescue crews with recovery missions on Garren Creek in Buncombe County. The B.R.I.D.G.E. Type 6 Engine and 1,500 gallon drop tank were used at NCDAC Foothills Correctional Institution to continue daily operations. Staff were also deployed to assist the N.C. Emergency Management Regional Coordination Center West IMT for two months.

Emergency Management requested B.R.I.D.G.E. crews for the next several months. In collaboration with the N.C. National Guard, crews cut out and cleared roads of downed trees for emergency vehicle access to stranded individuals and to communication tower sites to restore radio communications. Working together, they unloaded, organized and warehoused life-sustaining commodities at points of distribution (POD) locations.

Crewmen recovered emergency services gear for Reynolds and Garren Creek fire departments. More than 75 footbridges were constructed by crews which provided access to stranded residents with potential life-threatening medical

emergencies. Crews used B.R.I.D.G.E.'s heavy equipment during hazard tree removal to clear roads and trails to facilitate reopening for public use at several state parks and state forests. They also restored the Linville River Nursery greenhouse for daily operations. B.R.I.D.G.E. crews and equipment were utilized to remove mud and debris from the Old Fort Public Works Warehouse to facilitate operations. Crews also cleared former logging roads in Henderson County to regain entry to a community that was inaccessible.

More than 7,000 crewmen hours were devoted to disaster relief efforts.

### Work project example

Although Tropical Storm Helene projects and a busy spring wildfire season were priority, B.R.I.D.G.E. crews assisted in the chemical treatment of more than 1,750 hemlocks as part of the Hemlock Restoration Initiative (HRI) effort belonging to multiple agencies. Crews also assisted numerous volunteer fire departments with maintenance and hose testing.

### Project types

B.R.I.D.G.E. crews use their classroom and field training for a variety of work projects including natural disaster assistance, forest management, trail maintenance and construction.

Crew work project types	Hours
Community service projects	3,084
Construction/repair/maintenance projects	10,311
Fire control projects/disaster relief	30,981
Nursery and tree improvement projects	4,199
Other projects	280
Training projects	5,218
<b>Total</b>	<b>54,073</b>

Data source: NCFS B.R.I.D.G.E.

## Agencies assisted

B.R.I.D.G.E. crews assisted 134 agencies and organizations during the 2024-2025 fiscal year such as N.C. Emergency Management, U.S. Forest Service, N.C. Department of Public Safety, N.C. State Parks, N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission, WNC Agricultural Center, volunteer fire departments, nonprofit organizations and city and county governments.

Agency type assisted	Hours
Civic/nonprofit groups	6,452
Federal government	1,056
Local government	2,489
N.C. Forest Service	36,966
Other state agencies	7,078
Schools	32
<b>Total</b>	<b>54,073</b>

Data source: NCFS B.R.I.D.G.E.

## Counties assisted

B.R.I.D.G.E. crews are subject to work in all North Carolina counties but primarily work within the 32 western counties.

### Project locations and hours

County	Project Hours	County	Project Hours	County	Project Hours
Alexander	20	Gaston	1,008	Polk	961
Alleghany	182	Graham	76	Randolph	24
Ashe	1,216	Haywood	264	Rutherford	358
Avery	5,637	Henderson	1,578	Surry	176
Bladen	104	Iredell	208	Swain	806
Buncombe	6,655	Jackson	1,232	Transylvania	1,877
Burke	14,152	Lincoln	64	Watauga	1,162
Caldwell	2,638	Macon	160	Wilkes	1,760
Catawba	248	Madison	1,060	Yancey	184
Cherokee	1,247	McDowell	4,772	Multi-county	1,315
Clay	531	Mitchell	1,822		
Cleveland	64	Mitchell/Rutherford	512	<b>Total hours</b>	<b>54,073</b>

Data source: NCFS B.R.I.D.G.E.



## Contact information

For further information about the B.R.I.D.G.E. program, please contact:

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