



NORTH CAROLINA DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE AND CONSUMER SERVICES



NORTH CAROLINA 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, 2021

Steve Troxler, Commissioner
Scott Bissette, Assistant Commissioner
David Lane, State Forester

Pursuant to SESSION LAW 2012-142 HOUSE BILL 950 PART XI, SECTION 11.1. (b), 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 fiscal year 2021.

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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 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 Public Safety (DPS) Division of Adult Corrections (DAC) 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 North Carolina Forest Service (NCFS) and the North Carolina Department of Public Safety (NCDPS) – Division of Adult Correction (DAC). The program was created in response to the horrific 1985 fire season in which a single fire in Burke County destroyed approximately 5,000 acres and 27 homes. The 1986 North Carolina General Assembly funded the program to provide trained and readily available crews for dispatch on wildfire suppression primarily to the counties of Western North Carolina.

Wildfire suppression is the primary goal of B.R.I.D.G.E., however, crewmen and the state benefit from this unique program in additional ways. Crewmen are given opportunities to learn a variety of vocational skills and develop strong work ethic so they may become productive members of society upon parole. Crewmen can earn National Wildfire Coordinating Group certificates in wildland firefighting, forklift operator licenses, and certificates in light construction offered through Western Piedmont Community College. The state has realized a significant return on its investment from the B.R.I.D.G.E. Program. Crews assist in work projects including trail maintenance and construction, painting and sandblasting, forest management,

natural disaster assistance, aiding the NCFS nursery program as well as providing direct services to residents by completing various work projects for state, county and local government agencies in addition to schools and nonprofit organizations.

The state has also benefited from an immense reduction in project costs when utilizing the B.R.I.D.G.E. program crewmen. A B.R.I.D.G.E. crewman earns just \$0.125/hour compared to an emergency pickup firefighter at \$12.05/hour. The cost comparison of a daily five-person crew from B.R.I.D.G.E. is just \$5.00 while an emergency pickup firefighter’s cost is \$482.00, resulting in a daily savings of \$477.00.

The Western North Carolina RSMeans average pay rate for a general laborer contractor is \$15.18 per hour, which equals a savings of 99% when B.R.I.D.G.E. crewmen are used. In addition, a 2008 unofficial study of recidivism showed that only 7.3% of inmates in the B.R.I.D.G.E. program returned to prison compared to the state average of 37.5%.

A total of 73 inmate positions are obtained from Caldwell Correctional Center, Craggy Correctional Center, Foothills Correctional Institution and Marion Correctional Institution.

SUMMARY OF B.R.I.D.G.E. DATA

Eligible offenders

Eligible inmates available for participation by NCDPS

Facility	Number of Inmates
Caldwell Correctional Center	5
Craggy Correctional Center	3
Foothills Correctional Institution	6
Marion Correctional Institution	0
Other State Correctional facilities	798
Total eligible offenders within DAC custody between July 1, 2020 and June 30, 2021	812

Data source: NCDPS, Office of Research & Planning

Crewman eligibility is determined according to standards provided by the B.R.I.D.G.E. program that include: male; ages 18 to 32; 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 DAC. Rule waivers may be requested on a per case basis.

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

Data source: NCDPS statistics youthful offenders' eligibility and enrollment report

- Participated for various durations: 12 crewmen
- Daily average participation: 8 crewmen
- Average duration of participation: 5 days per crewman

Summary of activities

452 total work hours in FY21

Fire control – including fire control skills, direct fire suppression, pre-fire suppression firebreaks, helitack and prescribed hazard reduction burns

Construction repair and maintenance – including carpentry, basic electrical and plumbing, painting and equipment maintenance

Support emergency management – aid during search and rescue missions, construct footbridges, 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, tree planting, lifting seedlings, chainsaw work and timber stand improvement

Education – crewmen receive training in wildland firefighting, helitack, type IV 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

Emergency response efforts

While crewmen remained under COVID-19 restrictions through June 20, 2021, B.R.I.D.G.E. staff were restricted to working for NCFS and NCDA&CS. Project leaders combined to create three four-man firefighting crews. Wildland firefighting between fall 2020 and spring 2021 accounted for more than 4,900 working hours.

Project leaders also responded to disaster recovery activities in fall 2020 following flooding by constructing several access footbridges for Emergency Management which accounted for approximately 166 working hours.

Impacts from COVID-19

Due to COVID-19, NCDPS restricted crewmen from work beginning March 21, 2020 through June 20, 2021. This resulted in the loss of up to 73 trained and readily available crewman. In comparison to FY 2019, man-hours were reduced by 68,113 hours, and 150 fewer agencies were served.

Limited resources resulted in longer and more costly fire suppression periods, and work requests were not fulfilled or contracted.

The loss of B.R.I.D.G.E. crewman significantly impacted the Linville River Nursery's budget and ability to complete lifting/packing white pine and re-seeding Fraser fir annual operations. Assistance from more than 120 NCFS staff resulted in more than 4,200 work hours, which using the low-end Technician I hourly wage equated to \$72,590. Staff in travel status utilized MTF rooms totaling \$1,424 and meal reimbursements totaling more than \$3,100. The combined cost was more than \$77,000, whereas utilizing B.R.I.D.G.E. crewmen would have only cost \$534, thus resulting in a cost increase of more than \$76,500.

Work projects

B.R.I.D.G.E. staff completed work requests while crewman remained under COVID-19 restrictions. Staff accomplished projects such as refurbishing the deck at Morganton Forestry Center; building a fire demonstration sand table for the N.C. State Fair; completion of building and ground maintenance at Region 3 headquarters and several district offices; installing an access boat ramp for the U.S. Forest Service; constructing foot bridges for Emergency Management; lifting/packing white pine seedlings at the Linville River Nursery; and, creating informational signs, maintaining walking trails and removing hazard trees at Holmes Educational State Forest, Dupont State Recreational Forest, Rendezvous Mountain Educational State Forest and Tuttle Educational State Forest.

NCDPS lifted COVID-19 restrictions June 21, 2021, permitting crewmen eight workdays in FY21. In less than two weeks, crewmen successfully completed fire-ready classroom training, fulfilled work requests for foot bridges, landscaped at the Western N.C. Agricultural Center and completed several community job requests.

Crew Work Project Types	Hours
Community Service Projects	104
Construction/Repair/Maintenance Projects	48
Fire Control Projects / Disaster Relief	160
Nursery and Tree Improvement Projects	
Other Projects	
Training Projects	140
Total	452

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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