N.C. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE AND CONSUMER SERVICES

NORTH CAROLINA FOREST SERVICE

YOUNG OFFENDERS FOREST CONSERVATION PROGRAM (B.R.I.D.G.E.)
***B**UILDING - **R**EHABILITATING - **I**NSTRUCTING - **D**EVELOPING - **G**ROWING - **E**MPLOYING*

ANNUAL LEGISLATIVE REPORT ON B.R.I.D.G.E.

October 1, 2020

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 2020.

Contents

STATUTORY REQUIREMENT 3
B.R.I.D.G.E. Young Offenders – priority and reporting 3
OVERVIEW OF THE YOUNG OFFENDERS FOREST CONSERVATION PROGRAM (B.R.I.D.G.E.) 3
SUMMARY OF B.R.I.D.G.E. DATA 4
The number of young offenders eligible 4
The number of young offenders participating in B.R.I.D.G.E. 5
Summary of activities 5
PROJECT EXAMPLES 6
Emergency response efforts 6
Impacts from COVID-19 6
Work projects 7
CONTACT INFORMATION 9

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 October 1 of each year beginning October 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 lower costs and recidivism rates because of the B.R.I.D.G.E. Program. A B.R.I.D.G.E. crewman earns 12.5 cents per hour in comparison to an emergency pickup firefighter at $11.48 per hour. A five-person B.R.I.D.G.E. crew costs the state $5.00 per eight-hour shift compared to $459.20 for a five-person crew of emergency pickup firefighters. This is a daily savings of $454.20. The Western North Carolina RSMeans average pay rate for a general laborer contractor is $12.68 per hour, which equals a savings of 99% if a B.R.I.D.G.E. crewman is used. Finally, a 2008 unofficial study of recidivism showed that only 7.3% of B.R.I.D.G.E. inmates 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

The number of young offenders eligible

Table 1. Inmates available by facility in N.C. Department of Public Safety custody eligible for participation in B.R.I.D.G.E.

Facility	Number of Inmates
Caldwell Correctional Center	6
Craggy Correctional Center	10
Foothills Correctional Institution	22
Marion Correctional Institution	1
All other State Correctional facilities	1,098
Number of eligible young offenders eligible for B.R.I.D.G.E. within Division of Adult Correction custody between July 1, 2019 and June 30, 2020	1,137

Data source: N.C. Department of Public Safety, Office of Research & Planning

Crewman eligibility is determined according to standards provided by the B.R.I.D.G.E. program that include male, age 18 to 32; minimum custody level; no sexual offenders or serious assaults in predatory nature or resulting in injury; no escape attempts in the past 12 months; acceptable to both NCFS and DAC; and, infraction free for 30 days before assignment. Rule waivers may be requested on a case by case basis.

The number of young offenders participating in B.R.I.D.G.E.

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

142 crewmen participated for various durations.

Daily average participation was **39 crewmen**.

Average duration of participation was **133 days per crewman**.

Summary of activities

43,595 total work hours

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 first aid, wildland fire fighting, carpentry and construction, forklift and UTV operation, mowing equipment, chainsaw, 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

Thoroughly trained and readily available B.R.I.D.G.E. crews assisted in wildland fire suppression. Although fall season fire suppression activities were light, 13 crews were strategically placed on work projects during the days of high fire danger. These wildland fire suppression activities totaled 6,320 man-hours.

In February, crews responded to disaster recovery activities for Lincoln County Emergency Management after a flooding event. Crews constructed a 60' access footbridge for emergency response purposes.

Impacts from COVID-19

Crewmen worked their last day March 20 due to the severity of COVID-19 restrictions. Those released from prison since March 20 and to present, due to parole or COVID-19 early release, fell short of completing the training and assignments which have proven to provide job skills needed for potential gainful employment.

The B.R.I.D.G.E. carpentry instructor was permitted to continue educational curriculum at Foothills Correctional Institution. Crewmen completed weekly assignment packets that consisted of tooling identification, blueprint reading, safety procedures, etc. Initially it worked well, but as remote learning reached its potential, crewmen begin to lose interest due to the lack of hands-on application and interaction.

Full-time NCFS employees, also project leaders, combined to create three firefighting crews that were utilized on multiple spring season fires. The project leaders also constructed a two-mile closure fence for DuPont State Recreational Forest as part of COVID-19 safety measures.

Districts budgets were also burdened from the lack of crewmen. Limited resources resulted in longer and more costly fire suppression periods. Hiring pickup firefighters to fill the crew void resulted in an average daily cost of more than $450 per five-man crew.

Numerous work requests were unable to be completed due to COVID-19 restrictions or otherwise had to be contracted. In comparison to the prior FY2019, work projects were completed for nearly 100 fewer agencies and man-hours decreased by 24,970.

Work projects

B.R.I.D.G.E. crews continued the hemlock restoration operation in multiple Western N.C. counties. This operation not only provided a forest health benefit and a significant cost savings for the state but also gave inmates valuable job training, work ethics and essential life skills through the 828 man-hours contributed. Crews also worked to eradicate Japanese knotweed, an invasive species found on Wilson Creek in Caldwell County.

Crews worked various projects such as construction and installation of handicapped ramps and docks, formed and poured concrete sidewalks, built bat and bird houses, constructed informational signs, erected border fences, accomplished numerous structural painting projects, and completed several building maintenance projects.

While crewmen were under COVID-19 restrictions, staff completed work requests such as refurbishing the Rendezvous Mountain Educational State Forest deck, planting trees for the Linville River Restoration Project, assisting Linville River Nursery with lifting seedlings and transplanting Fraser firs, hazard tree removal at Holmes Educational State Forest, DuPont State Recreational Forest and Rendezvous Mountain Educational State Forest, as well as performing building and ground maintenance at several Region III district offices.

Table 2. B.R.I.D.G.E. crew project types and hours, FY20

Work Project Types	Project Hours
Community Service Projects	1,977
Construction/Repair/Maintenance Projects	20,907
Fire Control Projects / Disaster Relief	9,875
Nursery and Tree Improvement Projects	4,743
Other Projects	312
Training Projects	5,781
Total	**43,595**

During fiscal year 2020, B.R.I.D.G.E. crews assisted 57 different agencies and organizations such as DuPont State Recreational Forest, Mountain Island Educational State Forest, Holmes Educational State Forest, N.C. State Parks, the NCFS Stewardship Program, various emergency management and volunteer fire departments, as well as city and county governments.

Table 3. Types of agencies assisted by B.R.I.D.G.E. participants in FY20

Agency Type	Project Hours
Civic/Nonprofit Groups	4,623
Federal Government	292
Local Government	2,978
N.C. Forest Service	25,984
Other State Agencies	8,838
Schools	880
Total	**43,595**

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

B.R.I.D.G.E. crews are subject to work in all North Carolina counties but primarily work within the 32 counties in Region 3.

Table 4. B.R.I.D.G.E. project locations and hours, FY20

County	Project Hours	County	Project Hours	County	Project Hours
Alexander	678	Haywood	154	Rutherford	246
Ashe	676	Henderson	2,310	Stokes	646
Avery	5,858	Hoke	200	Surry	198
Buncombe	648	Hyde	670	Swain	303
Burke	18,069	Iredell	493	Transylvania	1,119
Burke/Catawba	165	Lincoln	323	Wake	326
Caldwell	985	Madison	757	Wilkes	1,880
Catawba	636	McDowell	1,306	Yadkin	134
Cherokee	206	Mitchell	741	Yancey	270
Cleveland	194	Mitchell/ Rutherford	779	Multicounty	1,080
Gaston	1,379	Polk	166	**Total Hours**	**43,595**

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:

Greg Smith
N.C. Forest Service – Region 3 Mountain Division Director
N.C. Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services
Greg.Smith@ncagr.gov
828-665-8688
14 Gaston Mountain Road, Asheville, NC 28806

Kenneth Burns
North Carolina Forest Service – B.R.I.D.G.E. Director
N.C. Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services
Kenneth.Burns@ncagr.gov
828-544-6601
2161-B Mount Home Church Road, Morganton, NC 28655