



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, 2023

Steve Troxler, Commissioner
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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 2023.

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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 October 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 N.C. Forest Service (NCFS) and the N.C. 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 N.C. 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 to become productive members of society upon parole. Crewmen can earn National Wildfire Coordinating Group 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,

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.

The state has also benefited from an immense reduction in project costs when utilizing 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 \$15.53/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 \$621.20, resulting in daily savings of \$616.20.

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 45 inmate positions are obtained from Caldwell Correctional Center and Foothills Correctional Institution.

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

Eligible Offenders

Eligible Inmates Available for Participation in NCDPS

Facility	Number of Inmates
Caldwell Correctional Center	11
Foothills Correctional Institution	17
Other State Correctional facilities	734
Total eligible offenders within DAC custody between July 1, 2022, and June 30, 2023	762

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 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 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 & NCFS database.

- Participated for various durations: 55 crewmen.
- Daily average participation: 14 crewmen.
- Average duration of participation: 142 days per crewman.

Summary of Activities

32,097 Total Work Hours in FY23

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

B.R.I.D.G.E. crews contributed over 13,700 man-hours on seasonal fire incidents. Efforts by initial attack crews were essential on multiday fires including the Baby Larmin, Bradley Branch and Poplar Branch fires where the NCFS used aircraft during the suppression efforts. Erratic and gusty winds, above average temperatures, low humidity and the lack of available resources resulted in crews responding and assisting in suppression of 93 wildfires throughout western North Carolina on April 1, 2023.

Natural Disaster Project

B.R.I.D.G.E. crews were requested May 18, 2023, by Gaston County Emergency Management, to the town of Cherryville following a severe storm consistent with a microburst of winds upwards of 85 mph leaving damage to multiple homes and businesses. Crews assisted the Gaston County fire departments, volunteers and emergency personnel with debris clearing, utilizing chainsaws and chippers to remove trees and brush from yards, sidewalks and roads.

Work Project Example

B.R.I.D.G.E. crews chemically treated over 12,000 hemlocks as part of the Hemlock Restoration Initiative (HRI). This effort occurred on land belonging to multiple state agencies such as NCFS, N.C. Division of Parks and Recreation, N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission (NCWRC) and NCD&CS Research Stations Division.

In preparation for the 2022 Mountain State Fair, crews provided over 1,000 working hours in support of the Western N.C. Agriculture Center. Crews completed painting projects, ground maintenance and prepared the arena area for livestock shows by assembling/disassembling corral panels.

Crews assisted in the restoration of the Fort Defiance historic home in Caldwell County by modifying over 5,500 cedar shingles in the B.R.I.D.G.E carpentry shop to match the original roofing material used in the 1792 structure.

Project Types

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

Crew Work Project Types	Hours
Community Service Projects	2,086
Construction/Repair/Maintenance Projects	8,051
Fire Control Projects/Disaster Relief	12,704
Nursery and Tree Improvement Projects	4,931
Other Projects	200
Training Projects	4,125
Total	32,097

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

Agencies Assisted

B.R.I.D.G.E. crews assisted 119 agencies and organizations during the 2022-2023 fiscal year such as the N.C. Western Agricultural Center and State Fair Division, NCWRC, NCDA&CS Plant Industry Division, Historical Fort Defiance, Southern Appalachian Highlands Conservancy, emergency management and volunteer fire departments, as well as city and county governments.

Agency Type Assisted	Hours
Civic/Nonprofit Groups	3,327
Federal Government	315
Local Government	2,722
N.C. Forest Service	21,200
Other State Agencies	4,325
Schools	208
Total	32,097

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 counties in Region 3.

Project Locations & Hours

County	Project Hours	County	Project Hours	County	Project Hours
ALEXANDER	8	HAYWOOD	165	RUTHERFORD	132
ASHE	200	HENDERSON	2,380	STOKES	39
AVERY	4,981	IREDELL	254	SURRY	36
BLADEN	8	JACKSON	1,580	SWAIN	39
BUNCOMBE	3,023	LINCOLN	64	TRANSYLVANIA	667
BURKE	9,296	MACON	201	WAKE	84
CALDWELL	2,655	MADISON	600	WAYNE	32
CATAWBA	675	MCDOWELL	798	WILKES	880
CHEROKEE	934	MITCHELL	296	YANCEY	303
DAVIDSON	24	MITCHELL/RUTHERFORD	460	MULTI-COUNTY	354
FORSYTH	177	POLK	154		
GASTON	571	RANDOLPH	27	Total Hours	32,097

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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