



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, 2024

Steve Troxler, Commissioner
Greg Hicks, Assistant Commissioner
David Lane, 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 fiscal year 2024.

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
Data summary of B.R.I.D.G.E.	4
Eligible offenders	4
Eligible inmates available for participation by NCDPS	4
Offenders participating in B.R.I.D.G.E.	5
Summary of activities.....	5
Project examples and hours	6
Significant forest fire suppression efforts	6
Natural disaster project.....	6
Work project example	6
Project types.....	7
Agencies assisted.....	7
Counties assisted.....	8
Contact information	8

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 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 N.C. Forest Service (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 dispatch on wildfire suppression primarily to the counties of western North Carolina.

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.

The state has also benefited from an immense reduction in project costs when utilizing B.R.I.D.G.E. crewmen. A B.R.I.D.G.E. crewman earns \$0.625/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 \$25.00 while an emergency pickup firefighter's cost is \$621.20, resulting in daily savings of \$596.20. The western North Carolina average pay rate for a general laborer contractor is \$15.39 per hour.

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.

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

Eligible offenders

Eligible inmates available for participation in NCDPS

Facility	Number of inmates
Caldwell Correctional Center	11
Foothills Correctional Institution	9
Other state correctional facilities	810
Total eligible offenders within DAC custody between July 1, 2023, and June 30, 2024	830

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: 75 crewmen.
- Daily average participation: 19 crewmen.
- Average duration of participation: 170 days per crewman.

Summary of activities

43,526 total work hours in FY23-24.

Wildfire control – including fire control skills, direct fire suppression, pre-fire suppression firebreaks, 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, 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

B.R.I.D.G.E. crews contributed more than 17,000 man-hours on seasonal wildfire incidents. These large acreage wildfires are typically multiple day with more than 100 acres and/or include threatened structures. Efforts of initial attack B.R.I.D.G.E crews were essential on incidents such as Popular Drive, East Fork, Elk Creek Complex, Mineral Springs Mountain, Longbottom, Henry River, Triplett, Mulberry, Alum Knob, Kerr Road, Sauratown Mountain and Bonnie Brae fires.

Natural disaster project

On January 10, 2024, excessive rain caused flash flooding in Lincoln County. This resulted in a submerged road leaving residents stranded. Lincoln County Emergency Management requested B.R.I.D.G.E. crewmen to construct a 60-foot bridge for accessibility.

Work project example

As part of the Hemlock Restoration Initiative (HRI), B.R.I.D.G.E. crews assisted in the chemical treatment of more than 12,000 hemlocks between October 2023 and June 2024. This work was conducted on state lands belonging to multiple agencies: NCFS, N.C. Division of Parks and Recreation, N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission (NCWRC) and the N.C. Department of Agriculture & Consumer Services (NCD&CS) Research Stations Division. B.R.I.D.G.E. crews also provided more than 1,260 working hours at the Western North Carolina (WNC) Agricultural Center. Projects included painting, ground maintenance, preparing the arena area for livestock shows by assembling and disassembling corral panels and preparations for the 2023 WNC Mountain State Fair.

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	2,244
Construction/repair/maintenance projects	9,745
Fire control projects/disaster relief	20,804
Nursery and tree improvement projects	5,066
Other projects	280
Training projects	5,387
Total	43,526

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

Agencies assisted

B.R.I.D.G.E. crews assisted 116 agencies and organizations during the 2023-2024 fiscal year such as the WNC Agricultural Center, NCWRC, NCDA&CS Plant Industry Division, Southern Appalachian Highlands Conservancy, volunteer fire departments, nonprofit organizations and city and county governments.

Agency type assisted	Hours
Civic/nonprofit groups	4,404
Federal government	248
Local government	3,091
N.C. Forest Service	28,472
Other state agencies	7,311
Schools	
Total	43,526

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	32	Gaston	470	Polk	59
Ashe	592	Graham	56	Randolph	92
Avery	5,183	Haywood	232	Rutherford	584
Buncombe	4,267	Henderson	2,589	Stokes	175
Burke	9,211	Iredell	428	Surry	152
Cabarrus	33	Jackson	1,798	Swain	112
Caldwell	1,416	Lincoln	144	Transylvania	1,381
Catawba	1,638	Macon	268	Watauga	376
Cherokee	765	Madison	832	Wilkes	2,648
Clay	117	Mcdowell	1,659	Yancey	184
Cleveland	88	Mitchell	564	Multi-county	4,595
Davidson	36	Mitchell/Rutherford	750	Total hours	43,526

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:

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

Kenneth Burns
N.C. 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