

County Commissioners:
Todd McNeill, Chair
Jerry D. Powers, Vice Chair
Russell Killen
Mike Eldreth
Wes Greene

County of Ashe

150 Government Circle, Suite 2500
Jefferson, North Carolina 28640

County Manager
Adam Stumb
Clerk to the Board
Missy Seivers

Ashe County Board of Commissioners

April 7th, 2025

North Carolina Forestry Service

512 N Salisbury Street

Raleigh, NC 27699-1600

Dear North Carolina Forestry Service,

On behalf of the Ashe County Board of Commissioners, we are honored to express our unwavering support for the North Carolina Forestry Service and its outstanding contributions to the well-being of our county and neighboring communities following Hurricane Helene, ice storms and forest fires.

Nestled in the Blue Ridge Mountains, Ashe County cherishes its rich natural heritage and shares a profound connection to the forest resources that define the landscape of North Carolina. Our forests serve as a source of pride and prosperity, providing essential ecological, economic, and cultural value to our residents and beyond.

The North Carolina Forestry Service has been instrumental in safeguarding and enhancing these vital resources. In Watauga County, your tireless efforts in **fire prevention and suppression** have played a critical role in protecting homes, businesses, and the invaluable natural resources that sustain our community. Wildfire mitigation not only ensures the safety of residents but also preserves the beauty and health of our forests for generations to come.

Your commitment to **forest health** has been exemplary, as you work diligently to combat pests and diseases that threaten the vitality of our woodlands. These efforts are integral in maintaining the ecological balance and resilience of our forests.

We deeply appreciate the promotion of **sustainable forestry practices**, which benefit both our environment and our local economy. By fostering responsible stewardship, the North Carolina Forestry Service supports a balanced approach to forest management that secures economic opportunities while preserving environmental integrity.

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Programs like the **Forest Stewardship Program** empower landowners to manage their forests responsibly, ensuring that private lands contribute to the sustainability of North Carolina's forest resources. Similarly, the **Forest Development Program** plays a vital role in encouraging timber production and active forest management, bolstering the economic contributions of our forestry sector.

Ashe County stands in strong support of the North Carolina Forestry Service and its continued efforts to protect and manage our state's forests. Your invaluable work sustains the health, safety, and prosperity of our communities, and for that, we are deeply grateful.

We reaffirm our commitment to working collaboratively with the North Carolina Forestry Service to advance our shared mission of protecting and nurturing our forests. Together, we can ensure that these precious resources remain a source of strength and inspiration for all North Carolinians.

Thank you for your dedication and service.

Sincerely,

Todd McNeill, Chair, Ashe County Board of Commissioners

Missy Seivers, Clerk to the Board



POST HURRICANE HELENE NCFS NEEDS TIMBER DAMAGE SUMMARY – FRAMING THE ISSUES



NC Forest Service Needs:

To address the issues identified after Hurricane Helene, NCFS is requesting the following from the North Carolina Legislature.

Non-Recurring Needs:

- 1) (\$10,000,000) Funding to replace and upgrade firefighting equipment.**
 - a. The average age of the next 20 Firefighting Bulldozers, that need replacement, is 33-years.
 - b. Many of our transport units and specialized wildland firefighting equipment are Federal Excess Property. Many date from the 1970's or earlier.
 - c. Specialized equipment is needed to recover from Helene and prepare for the wildfires to come. These include equipment such as masticators, skid steers with mulching heads, and tracked wildland fire engines.
- 2) (\$5,000,000) Funding to contract with private, other state, and federal equipment, aviation, fire crews, and other firefighting resources for the spring and fall 2025 fire seasons.**
 - a. These resources will likely be needed to contain and control any wildfire that becomes established in Helene damaged areas.
 - b. These resources are trained and qualified and are available to assist at a moment's notice. New FTEs, brought on after July 1, 2025, from recurring funds, will not likely be hired and trained in time to offer support for fires that occur in 2025
- 3) (\$622,000) NCFS Linville River Nursery funding to recover from TS Helene's direct impacts.**
 - a. Replace seed, tools, equipment and supplies lost during Helene flooding
 - b. This nursery provides many of the seedlings to the Christmas tree industry as well as for reforestation projects in Western NC.
- 4) (\$4,500,000) NCFS Aviation Firefighting Helicopter Replacement**
 - a. The NC Forest Service Division of the Department of Agriculture currently operates two Type 3 firefighting helicopters
 - b. One of the Type 3 helicopters (H-8) has been in service for more than 23 years and the annual costs to maintain airworthiness have been steadily increasing to the point of no longer being cost effective.

Recurring Needs:

- 1) Salary Adjustment funding to address NCFS recruitment and retention.**
 - a. NCFS has averaged nearly 100 vacancies over the last 5 years.
 - b. Most employees that leave cite low pay and poor work life ratio, due to emergency response requirements, as primary factors when choosing to leave.
 - c. Recruiting and retaining highly qualified firefighters and incident management team members is essential to fighting fires in a safe and cost-effective manner while protecting values at risk and keeping fires as small as possible
- 2) (\$900,000) Increase NCFS Aviation operating funding.**
 - a. Increases in the cost of maintaining our fleet of 22 aircraft have resulted in an annual shortfall.
 - b. Examples include insurance, fuel, fire suppressants, and contracted services



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- 3) **(\$1,500,000) Appropriated NCFS Overtime and On-Call compensation.**
 - a. On average (FY19-FY23) the cost to NCFS, for on-call and emergency callback is \$432,608 (appropriated) and \$225,045 (Receipts).
 - b. During the state fiscal year 2022-2023, NCFS permanent employees worked 157,586 hours and earned 92,477 hours of compensatory time related to wildfire suppression in the state.
 - c. With an average hourly pay rate of \$23 for our firefighters, and if funds were available to pay out the fire compensatory time, the cost would be \$2,126,971. Currently On-Call is funded out of our lapse salaries generated by vacant positions
- 4) **(\$3,500,000) Funding to replace and upgrade our fleet of firefighting equipment.**
 - a. Current estimates for equipment that meets replacement criteria is \$29,000,000 (2024 dollars).
 - b. Increased annual funding is needed, in addition to the non-recurring request, to replace aging equipment such as bull dozers, truck tractors, trailers, and fire engines.
- 5) **Recurring (\$1,906,000) and (\$767,000) non-recurring Funding and 22 FTEs to create a Wildfire / Fuels Management Crew.**
 - a. In the mountains of Western NC, manpower also known as hand crews are critical in responding to and controlling wildfires, to assist on prescribed burns, and implement fuel reduction treatments to protect the public.
 - b. NCFS is requesting new positions and an operating budget to develop a Fire and Fuels Hand crew program to assist in all aspects of wildfire and fuel reduction treatments to protect critical infrastructure, homes, and the public in the TS Helene impacted areas.
- 6) **Recurring (\$346,000) and non-recurring (\$300,000) Funding and 4 FTEs to Forest Fire Equipment Operators in Western North Carolina.**
 - a. FFEO's are critical in responding to and controlling wildfires, to assist on prescribed burns, and to implement fuel reduction treatments to protect the public through operation of heavy equipment.
 - b. NCFS is requesting new positions and operating budget to add to our equipment operating capabilities and needs to assist in all aspects of wildfire and fuel reduction treatments to protect critical infrastructure, homes, and the public in the TS Helene impacted areas.
- 7) **(\$370,000) Recurring Funding and FTE for the NCFS Wildfire Weather and Fuels Intelligence Program.**
 - a. Accurate and timely monitoring and modeling can help firefighters predict how intense fires will burn and how difficult they will be to contain and control.
 - b. Appropriated funding would allow the program to stabilize and react to the dynamic wildfire environment in our mountain communities, as well as statewide.
 - c. Current grant funding is not able to fully support the program, let alone fund needs due to the impact of Hurricane Helene.
- 8) **(\$922,000 recurring and \$702,000 non-recurring) 11 FTEs to better address the expanded needs of Forest Landowners and the public in Western NC.**
 - a. 7 counties in Western NC are currently only staffed with one county forest ranger. Adding assistant county forest rangers will allow NCFS to respond to increased emergency response and forest management needs in these counties.
 - b. Law Enforcement, Safety Officer and BRIDGE Project Leader positions will be able to support the NCFS needs across Western NC and Statewide.



POST HURRICANE HELENE NCFS NEEDS TIMBER DAMAGE SUMMARY – FRAMING THE ISSUES



9) (\$1,500,000) Increased funding for the Forest Development Program (FDP).

- a. FDP is an NCFS administered cost share program that funds a range of forest management practices including tree planting, prescribed burning and other site preparation. This program is underfunded by \$1.2 to \$2 million annually, based on the number of applications that cannot be funded.
- b. Unfunded forestry cost-share program applications face a significant risk of going unplanted, jeopardizing the State from realizing the numerous societal, economic, and environmental benefits associated with promptly replanted and improved woodlands. Additional funding is also necessary to supplement potential lost FDP forest assessment monies from recent forestry mill closures and revenue from timber loss due to Tropical System Helene.

Helene Timber Damage Summary:

Hurricane Helene made landfall in Florida on September 26, 2024. Impacts in North Carolina started in the early morning hours of September 27. However, moisture from the storm was inundating Western North Carolina for days ahead of the winds arriving. The resulting rainfall (in excess of 30-inches in Yancy County) softened the ground and created conditions for timber to blow down. The wind arrived early in the morning of September 27. Peak wind gusts at Grandfather Mountain were 106 mph. In early October NCFS conducted an aerial survey of timber damage. This survey produced a conservative estimate of 822,000 acres damaged. Satellite imagery that shows changes in forest cover suggests the extent of damage is much greater.

Framing the Issues:

Access for Emergency response – State and locally maintained road systems are opening. However, numerous private roads, logging roads and fire breaks have been completely blocked by downed timber or washed out by flooding. Fire managers in Western North Carolina rely on these to access and contain wildfires. Natural barriers, such as streams, that historically would stop, or slow fire spread cannot be relied upon due to the amount of debris. With these access points & barriers blocked or unusable, firefighters will have to find open routes that are further away from the fire, resulting in larger fires.

Severity of Wildfires / Wildland Urban Interface – The historic amount of blown down and damaged timber has and will impact how wildfires are contained and controlled for decades to come. Combined with damage in and around the Wildland Urban Interface the potential for damaging wildfire is increased. Limited access and unreliable natural barriers will result in larger fires (As we have seen already from the Crooked Creek and North Fork Fires in McDowell County - January 2025). In the short term, leaves and pine tops will ignite easily and burn intensely resulting in extreme fire behavior and rapid wildfire growth. In the long-term, larger timber will start to dry and contribute to fire intensity, smoldering and smoke production resulting in wildfires that take longer to control and produce more smoke. Combining fast moving fires that are harder to access and control with the urban interface can have catastrophic impacts as evidenced by the Gatlinburg Fires in 2016. NCFS has a critical need for manpower and equipment to open these accesses and battle the wildfires that are sure to come.

Insects, Diseases, & Non-Native Pests – Both native and non-native insects and diseases are likely to flourish in the wake of Hurricane Helene. Destructive species such as Pine Beetles, Spongy Moth, Spotted Lantern Fly and Emerald Ash Borer will seek stressed / damaged timber to attack. Often killing these weakened trees. Invasive plants such as Miscanthus will take advantage of openings in the forest, created by the hurricane, to expand and choke out native species. NCFS positions are needed to identify these areas and help provide resources to landowners to control outbreaks.

Forest Management / Timber Value Loss – FIA data suggests that the 822,000 acres of timber damaged is valued in excess of \$214,000,000. Much of this timber is not feasible to salvage for forest products. Preliminary estimates show that some counties, such as Avery, Mitchell and Watauga, have 30% or more of their forestland damaged. North Carolina forest landowners need support and professional guidance to determine what options are available to them. The NCFS Forest Development Program is well established and positioned to provide cost share assistance for these forest landowners. Unfortunately, many of these same counties only have one NCFS position staffing them or they are vacant due to poor recruitment and retention. NCFS has on average 100 vacant positions over the past 5 years.