



## NC Forest Service Needs FY26 Legislative Short Session



To address Wildfire, Forest Health, and Forest Management statewide needs as well as continuing needs identified after Hurricane Helene, the North Carolina Forest Service (NCFS) is requesting the following from the North Carolina Legislature.

### Recurring Needs:

- 1) (\$13,000,000) NCDA&CS Department Request for Salary Adjustment funding to address 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.
  - d. Section 1.1 of the State Human Resources Manual Pay Administration Policy states, "Salaries around the midpoint are where the state generally strives to align employees...". It would require \$3,465,647 to bring NCFS employees to the midpoint.
  
- 2) (\$1,000,000) 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.
  
- 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.



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- 6) Recurring (\$355,872) 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 Western North Carolina.
  
- 7) (\$371,233) 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) (\$849,218 Recurring and \$588,000 Non-Recurring) 10 FTEs to better address the expanded needs of Forest Landowners, Forest Industry and the Public.**
  - a. 5 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. Markets and Utilization Forester position to support economic development efforts through technical assistance to existing forest industries and providing market-specific resource data, analysis, and insights for the recruitment of new wood manufacturing opportunities.
  - c. Law Enforcement Agent, Safety Officer and BRIDGE Project Leader positions will be able to support emergency response and NCFS needs Statewide.
  
- 9) (\$300,000) Recurring Operating Funds at Dupont State Recreational Forest**
  - a. Dupont State Recreational Forest averages over 1 million visitors per year.
  - b. An increase in operating is needed in all facets of the forest, from trails and roads, signage, buildings and parking.
  - c. In 2016 there were also 10 new positions added to Dupont without any corresponding operating funds.
  
- 10) (\$565,000 Recurring and \$470,000 Non-Recurring) 6 FTEs to staff and better address the expanding needs of the Public and Forest Landowners that visit our State Forests.**
  - a. Headwater State Forest and Dan River Educational State Forest are not currently staffed with any employees and have limited infrastructure. Mountain Island Educational State Forest officially opened to the public in December of 2025 with limited staffing.
  - b. FTEs at Dan River Educational State Forest will provide educational opportunities to two of the top four largest school systems in the state.
  - c. FTEs at Mountain Island Educational State Forest will provide educational opportunities for the 2<sup>nd</sup> largest school system in the state.
  - d. Headwaters State Forest (HSF) opened to the public in 2018 and currently does not have any permanent staff assigned.



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### **11) (1,120,000) Recurring funding to increase Operating Funds within the Tree Improvement Program**

- a. In recent years the cost of nutrients has risen by 173%; chemical costs have increased by 148%; and contractual services have risen by 230%.
- b. Tree Improvement Program to operates at a minimal level and utilizes funds from another receipt-based programs to help cover basic expenses.
- c. Funding will be used to cover operational expenses; improve the capacity to produce Control Mass Pollinated seeds and seedlings; and improve orchard management and collection of seeds.

### **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. While funds from the Helene Recovery act will help address needs in the wake of TS Helene and prepare for the wildfires to come. Additional Equipment in Eastern parts of the state is in need of replacement. These include equipment such as Low Ground Pressure (LGP) Bulldozers, tracked wildland fire engines, and specialized equipment that can work in the swamps and marsh.

#### **2) (\$444,575) 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.

#### **3) (\$12,000,000) 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.



## POST HURRICANE HELENE TIMBER DAMAGE SUMMARY – FRAMING THE ISSUES



### **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.