

# **Wildfire Preparedness in Western North Carolina: A Community-Based Approach**

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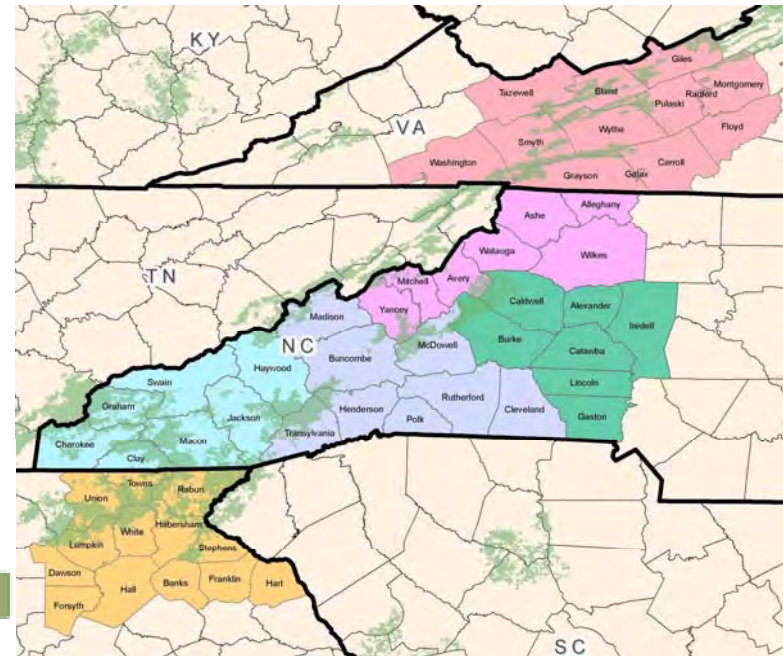
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# Overview

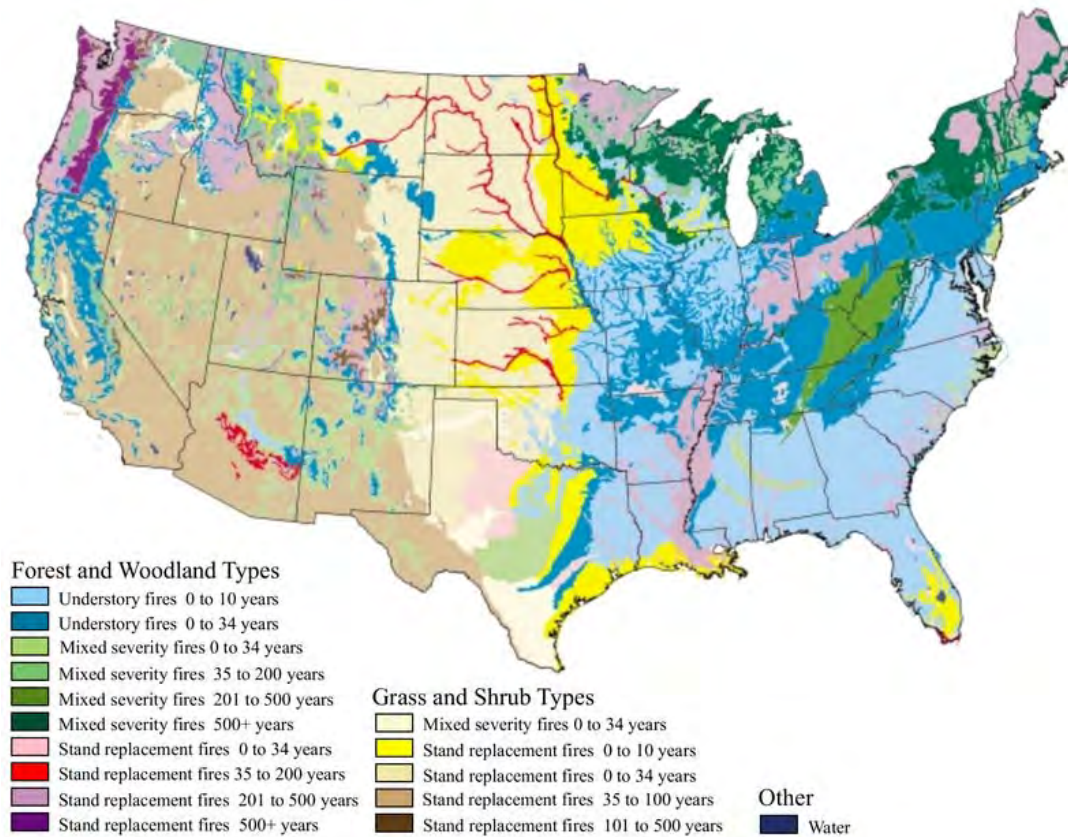
- Project Overview
- Wildfire history and challenges in the Southern Appalachians
- Project Details
- Results and lessons learned

# Appalachian Fire Adapted Communities Coalition

- Composed of six organizations across three states
- Focused on working with local communities to promote wildfire risk reduction



# North Carolina: Fire Adapted Ecosystems on Fire Adapted Continent



# Wildfire History in the Southern Appalachians

- *Pre-colonial (Pre-1600s)* Fire generally frequent and low-intensity
  - Native Americans
  - Lightning
  - Contiguous land area
- *1600s-late 1800s* Colonization by Europeans
  - Drastic reduction of fire on the landscape
  - Rampant resource exploitation



Figure 1. DeLisle's 1718 map with the words "Grande Savane" in the Carolina Piedmont (Cumming 1962).





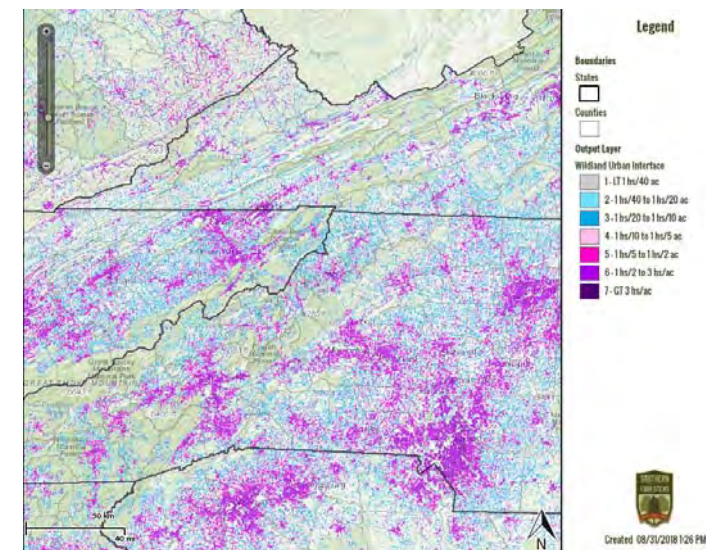
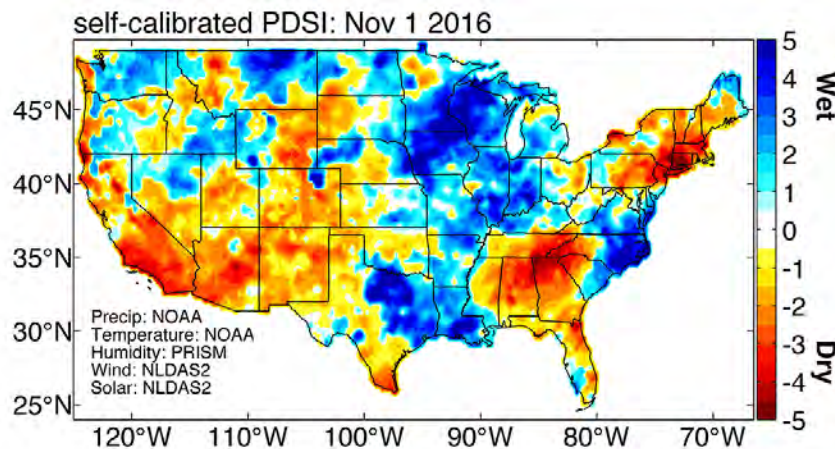
# Wildfire History in the Southern Appalachians

- *Turn of the century* Adoption of intense wildfire suppression policies
  - Deadly wildfires
  - Progressive-era concepts of fire
  - Early forestry's roots in German practices
  - Fear of confusing the public
- *Modern era* Growing realization fire is a crucial and natural part of the landscape
  - Reintroduction of fire challenging
  - Many complications in dealing with wildfires



# Wildfire Challenges in the Southern Appalachians

- Legacy of active fire suppression complicated by many factors
  - Expanding wildland-urban interface and increased populations, often moving from urban areas
  - Limited land use regulations
  - Climate change





# Wildfire Challenges in the Southern Appalachians

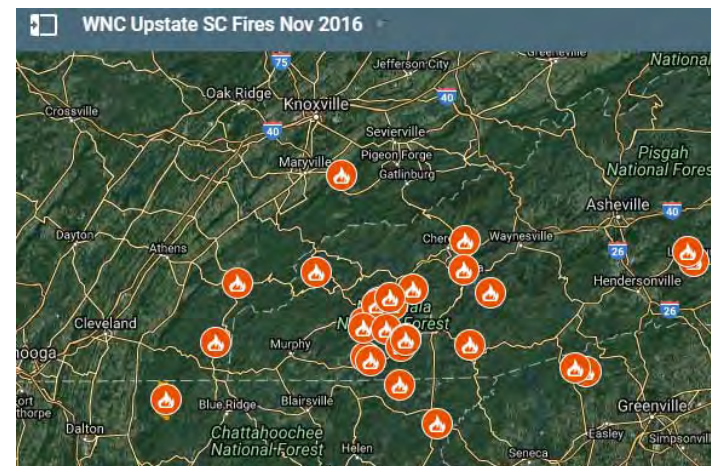
- Legacy of active fire suppression complicated by many factors
  - Wealth disparities
  - Rugged terrain creates further complications





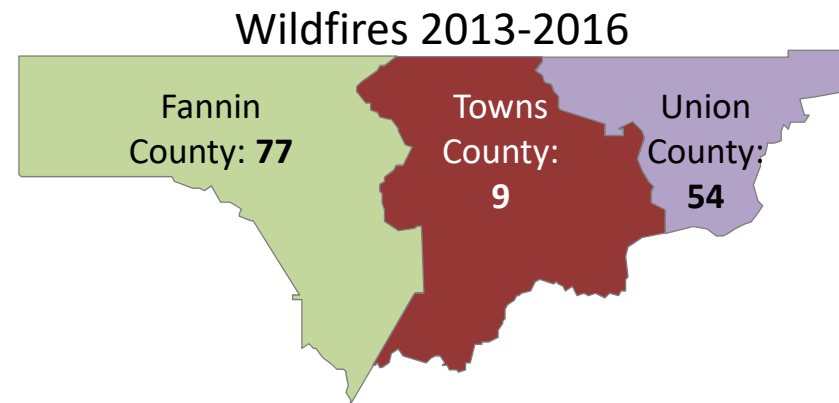
# 2016 Wildfires: A Wakeup Call

- Historic drought in the summer and fall created ideal wildfire conditions
- Many large wildfires burned across the Southeast throughout the fall
- The Chimney Tops Two Fire, which impacted Gatlinburg, TN killed multiple people and caused millions of dollars in damages
  - Similar fire behavior observed on NC side of Great Smoky Mountains National Park but did not impact structures



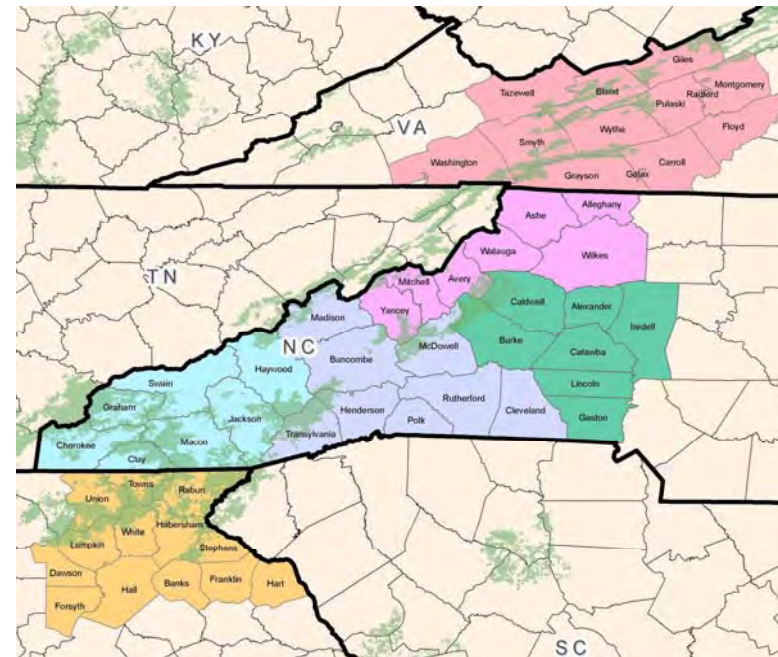
# Towns County Pilot Project

- Chestatee-Chattahoochee RC&D Council's Fire Adapted Communities program in Towns County, GA used as a model for the region
- Coalition of local leaders, agency representatives, and community members promoted Firewise USA program and other wildfire preparedness measures



# Appalachian Fire Adapted Communities Coalition

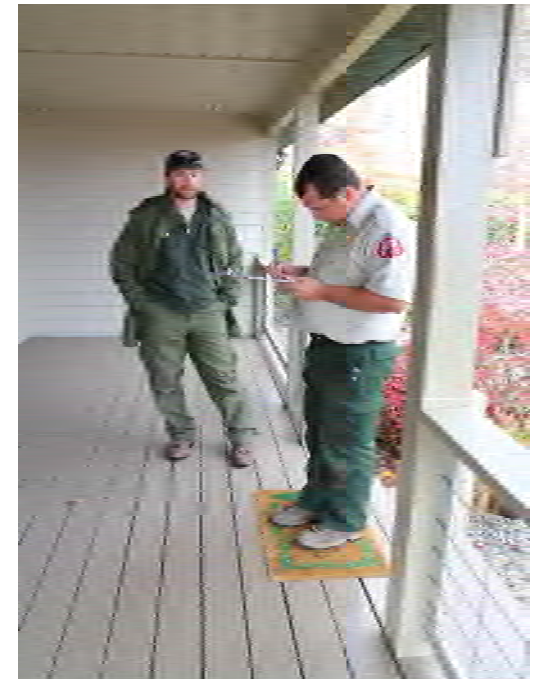
- Project aimed to expand on Towns County' success in other parts of the Southern Appalachians
- Composed of six organizations across three states
- Focused on working with local communities to promote wildfire risk reduction through programs best suited to them



# Firewise USA



- NFPA program that provides communities of 8+ dwelling units pathway to risk reduction
  - Includes a community risk assessment and multi-year plan of work to reduce risk factors
- Provides long-term pathway to action and way for families and communities to apply general risk factor guidelines to their situation





# Wildfire Preparedness Days & Ready, Set Go Program



Ready, Set, Go!

- Helps communities plan emergency preparedness and evacuation procedures
- Especially important in mountain communities where roads are often one-way, gravel, and/or narrow



## Other Outreach

- Facilitating community coalitions similar to the Towns County effort
- Working with local university to develop wildfire risk survey
- Connecting individuals to agencies, grants, and other resources
- Connecting local-specific efforts, such as firewood charities to contacts and resources
- Providing a platform for underutilized organizations, such as local fire departments, to connect with communities

# Clay County, NC



## Clay, County NC

- Initial interest from VFD Chief
- General meeting on wildfire risk and preparedness drew ≈80 people
  - Brasstown, NC has a population of 1,403
- Resulting projects included
  - Communities pursuing Firewise USA designation
  - Individuals connecting with NCFS about programs available to address forest management and wildfire risk
  - Non-profit organizations plugging into wildfire risk reduction efforts
  - Increased awareness and engagement with local VFD



## Lessons Learned

- Working through small non-profits has positives and negatives
  - Community connections
  - Flexibility in operation
  - Limited resources
  - Variation in operation across coalition non-profits

## Lessons Learned

- Partnerships
  - Clarify to avoid perception of duplication of efforts
- Marketing programs to the audience is key
- While fire isn't going anywhere, interest can vary based on other weather events
  - Helps to remind people weather extremes (flooding) are all related to issues exacerbating wildfires

## Next Steps

- Next project term aims to build on successes
  - Focusing on areas where interest is highest
  - Working with existing project, particularly Firewise USA designated communities, to ensure they continue to take action
  - Helping communities form coalitions similar to the Towns County effort

**QUESTIONS?**  
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