

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

REDUCING WILDFIRE RISK AND RESTORING PUBLIC ACCESS IN STORM-DAMAGED AREAS

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The National Park Service is implementing a hazardous fuel debris removal project in areas of significant storm damage that have been identified through wildfire-risk modeling as presenting elevated wildfire risk to nearby communities, homes, and resources. Different treatment methods, including mechanical fuel reduction, will target downed debris from Hurricane Helene, not standing healthy or even distressed trees unless strictly necessary for operations. The project is intended to reduce the risk of damaging wildfire and address public safety concerns while supporting the protection of natural and cultural resources and advancing broader restoration objectives along the parkway.

Parkway staff held informational public meetings from May 5-7, 2026, in communities across impacted areas.

The following FAQs help clarify some of the common questions received by parkway staff since the May public meetings.

How was wildfire risk determined?

- NPS staff considered the entire parkway and looked at the regional context to determine the areas that posed the greatest risk to life and property. Staff used fuel loading and behavior models, vegetation models, structure location information, and satellite imagery pre- and post-Helene. Remotely sensed findings were then confirmed through examination of aerial imagery and on-the-ground field verification of conditions. These efforts were conducted by parkway leadership and Resource Management Divisions and coordinated with the DOI Wildland Fire Service, USDA Forest Service, North Carolina Forest Service, Virginia Department of Forestry, NPS Washington Support Office, and consultants.
- NPS staff incorporated science-based tools to evaluate wildfire risk, primarily the Interagency Fuel Treatment Decision Support System (IFTDSS), designed to make fuel treatment planning and analysis more efficient and effective. IFTDSS provides access to data and models through one simple user interface. It is available to all interested users, regardless of agency or organizational affiliation. IFTDSS hosts a complete set of reference data available for the entire US, including LANDFIRE fuels information, SILVIS Wildland Urban Interface, and Agency Ownership, as well as a modern map interface that allows users to create or upload their own data.

Why has the wildfire risk increased with storm damage and how does risk change over time?

- Hurricane Helene left behind large amounts of downed trees across many areas of the Blue Ridge Parkway. Each tree that is now on the ground, with its dead limbs and branches, becomes available fuel for a wildland fire.
- As this material dries out, the fuel becomes more easily burned in wildfires. In the first couple of fire seasons after the storm, the downed and damaged trees are less likely to burn because they are still filled with water and sap. As time goes on and these fine, medium, and heavy fuels dry out, the likelihood of problematic and higher intensity wildfires increases.
- Many of the areas (e.g., streams and creeks) that would offer refugia for wildlife in a wildfire are also filled with fuels and may carry fire into these normally protected habitats. The dead and down fuel also create barriers to firefighter access, which can limit the region's firefighters' ability to safely and quickly control wildfires. This increases the risk to human life and homes.
- The National Park Service uses the best available science to inform management actions, though there are many variables based on site location, drought, and climate trends, especially given the scale and magnitude of the storm event. These variables affect how quickly different fuel types will dry, how fires will behave under future weather conditions, and how debris-filled stream corridors may influence fire movement.
- Droughts in the southern Appalachians are relatively common and part of the region's natural climate cycle, but their frequency and severity are expected to increase under current climate change predictions. During the normal seasonal periods of elevated fire danger (early spring and late fall) in the Blue Ridge Mountains over the next several years, downed forest fuels are expected to become available during a spreading wildfire, contributing to increased flame lengths, overall fire intensity, and resistance to fire control.

What actions are the National Park Service taking—independently and with partner agencies—to ensure wildland fire risk is effectively reduced?

- The National Park Service is actively sharing data and strategies with local, state, and federal wildland fire fighting agencies. Together with these wildland fire partners, NPS staff are working to identify areas that pose the highest risk to communities and where the installation of regional control lines would increase effective interagency response to future wildland fires.
- Though downed debris on adjacent lands also poses increased wildfire risk, it is outside the scope of NPS control. Other agencies and localities are implementing complementary actions under their jurisdiction, from creating defensible space around structures to similar debris removal efforts.
- DOI and cooperating state and federal firefighting agencies are closely monitoring the fire environment to ensure that appropriate preparedness and response capabilities are on duty during periods of elevated fire danger.
- The National Park Service prohibits lighting and maintaining of fires except as provided for in designated areas and/or receptacles under conditions noted in the Blue Ridge Parkway Compendium. In addition, the parkway Superintendent may issue burn bans within park areas during periods of high fire danger, per 36CFR 2.13 and the Compendium.

What is mechanical fuel reduction, and why is this a part of NPS efforts to reduce wildfire risk?

- Mechanical fuel reduction refers to the use of machinery and equipment to manage and reduce the amount of combustible vegetation (fuel) in forested areas. Prescribed burning on a large scale is not considered to be an effective tool, nor is it feasible given the proximity to homes and communities in this project. Mechanical fuel removal is considered an effective hazard reduction, and USDA Forest Service and North Carolina Forest Service have utilized this technique to reduce hazardous fuels in storm damaged areas, with more planned for the future.

How does mechanical fuel reduction reduce wildfire risk?

- Mechanical fuel reduction lowers wildfire risk by removing the material that contributes to the wildfire hazard. In the case of Blue Ridge Parkway, the intent is to remove dead and downed fuel and to reduce the depth of surface fuels—both major drivers of fire spread and intensity. Mechanical treatment also improves the likelihood of safe and effective wildfire suppression by reducing excessive fuel loads, creating safer access corridors, and increasing firefighter mobility. Mechanical treatments will contribute to more effective wildfire suppression tactics and strategies and help reduce overall firefighter exposure, which is a critical component of wildfire risk.

When will the fuel reduction project begin?

- Mechanical fuel reduction is expected to begin in the Asheville corridor in early October 2026. For project updates and timelines, visit www.parkplanning.nps.gov/BLRIFuelReduction.

How were areas identified for mechanical fuel reduction?

- Sites were initially selected from within the wildland-urban interface based on the following criteria:
 - Proximity to structures
 - Extent and severity of storm damage
 - Community density
 - Predicted fire behavior during 97th percentile conditions weather and fuel moisture conditions
 - Emergency response operational needs for safe access and control
 - Cultural and natural resources considerations
- Sites were refined based on the potential for resource impacts and operational feasibility, and the initial approach focuses on the narrow Asheville, NC commuter corridor between milepost 380 and milepost 391.
- The strategy is to reduce the risk of damaging wildfire and provide a safer work environment for initial responding firefighters in targeted areas that pose the highest risks to human life and property. This provides an opportunity for NPS staff to work together with neighboring partners to decrease wildfire risk overall.
- To see the most up-to-date maps of treatment units, visit www.parkplanning.nps.gov/BLRIFuelReduction.

How will the National Park Service minimize environmental impacts?

The National Park Service will implement a series of conservation measures and mitigations, including, but not limited to, the following:

- Suspend mechanical fuel reduction work from May 1 through August 15 and aerial operations from April 1 to October 31 to minimize disturbance to species of concern during sensitive periods, such as nesting and breeding migratory birds, the pupping season for tree-dwelling bats, and the kit-rearing season for flying squirrels.
- Maintain vegetated buffers around project work to preserve viewsheds wherever feasible.
- Conduct archeological surveys before ground-disturbing activities, except where debris density prevents safe access; in such cases, archeological surveys will occur following debris removal.
- Require biological monitors to perform bird surveys prior to the start of mechanical fuel treatments and flag any areas requiring avoidance.
- Complete targeted surveys for rare-plants in potential habitats before ground-disturbing activities and flag any areas requiring avoidance.
- Inspect and clean all equipment entering the parkway to reduce the risk of invasive plant species introduction.
- Flag and avoid all known sensitive resources, including rare plant species, active bird nests, and archeological sites. If new discoveries are made during the project, work will be paused and experts consulted to ensure proper protection and compliance with federal laws.
- Deploy trained resource monitors during all ground-disturbing activities to document conditions, ensure compliance with avoidance measures, and identify previously unrecorded resources.
- Use existing NPS roadways, shoulders, and pull-offs for staging and access whenever possible to minimize disturbance.
- Retain undamaged live trees and non-hazard standing dead trees unless their removal is strictly necessary for access or safety.
- Apply strict erosion and sediment controls to prevent runoff into streams and wetlands, and avoid wetland areas whenever possible.
- Restore all disturbed areas to their original pre-project condition after work is complete to match adjacent grades, vegetation, and visual character.
- Monitor for invasive species following treatment and use native plants for revegetation in areas requiring restoration.

How will the fuel reduction project affect visitors travelling the parkway?

- Visitors and gateway community residents will continue to have access to the parkway and its destinations throughout this project. Full closures to the parkway are not expected; only brief, single-lane closures may occur as needed to support safe operations. Single-lane closures will be scheduled to minimize impacts on visitors travelling the parkway.
- Some project areas intersect with trails, including, but not limited to, the Mountains-to-Sea Trail and/or the Overmountain Victory National Historic Trail. Selected trail areas will be temporarily closed during project operations and reopened when treatment and restoration conclude.
- The removal of hazardous debris and fuel, once completed, will restore full access to recreational opportunities, though some off-trail areas may remain obstructed due to fallen debris.

Are mechanical treatments the same as clearcutting or commercial logging?

- Mechanical fuel reduction treatments are risk-driven, designed to reduce wildfire hazard by selectively removing flammable vegetation.
- These treatments are not clearcutting, which removes essentially all trees in a stand. Mechanical fuel reduction treatments do not remove standing healthy or even distressed trees, unless strictly necessary for operations. In the case of the Blue Ridge Parkway, mechanical treatments will focus on removing a mixture of fuel types and log sizes to reduce hazardous fuel accumulation, with a focus on small-diameter fuels that contribute most to fire spread and intensity.
- These treatments are not commercial logging, which is commodity-driven to extract timber for profit. The parkway does not conduct commercial logging. If materials removed retain value, any proceeds from the sale of debris would either be used to offset the cost of the contract or be returned to the US Treasury. Recovery of the economic value of timber is not a driver of the project.

Where does the woody debris go?

- Debris will be removed, valued, and then sold or disposed of. Some of that material will provide wood products and lumber to the region for future use per 48CFR 1452.237-71 and NPS Reference Manual 18.
- If any materials removed retain value, proceeds from the sale of debris would either be used to offset the cost of the contract or be returned to the US Treasury. The National Park Service will not profit from woody debris sales from any hazardous fuel removal activity.
- When feasible, the National Park Service may chip and scatter the downed and damaged wood, with limitations, to provide habitat for wildlife and support nutrient cycling.

Why is the National Park Service starting this fuel reduction project now?

- Not all storm-damaged areas were immediately accessible and did not immediately present an increased risk of damaging wildfire. However, over time, this woody debris is subject to drying with exposure to sunlight and wind, especially in situations where the material is elevated and not in contact with moisture in the soil. Drying rates are influenced by a number of variables including site location and tree species. The National Park Service intends to complete these wildland-urban interface hazardous fuels reduction projects before the situation becomes more urgent.
- Hurricane Helene caused significant, unprecedented damage to the parkway and, in some cases, complete devastation of the motor road, slopes, structures, vegetation, and developed areas. Work to restore road access, repair road damage, and stabilize slide areas began in the fall of 2024. Reopening road access has been the Blue Ridge Parkway's first priority. With road recovery projects scheduled for completion in the fall of 2026, the National Park Service can now shift focus to other key priorities, including the reduction of wildfire risk in storm-damaged areas.

Will the hazard fuel reduction treatment stop a wildfire?

- The primary objectives for all Helene-related fuel reduction projects at Blue Ridge Parkway are to protect human life, including firefighters and other first responders in the event of a wildfire, and to reduce risk of damaging wildfires to homes and communities. While a single treated area will likely not prevent or stop a wildfire, strategically placed treatments are likely to slow fire spread and enable firefighters to be more effective and safer during suppression efforts.

How do the hazard fuel reduction projects impact the forest understory?

- In response to the removal of hazardous fuel, many shrubs and trees will resprout from their roots. Some herbaceous and perennial plants will start growing immediately due to lack of competition and increased sunlight availability. Short-term impacts on understory plants may occur due to heavy equipment and removal of large hazardous fuels. In some cases, replanting with native plant species will be done to repopulate treated areas more quickly. Surveys and other measures are being taken to avoid damage to rare plants and minimize soil disturbance during operations.
- Because invasive plant species can spread rapidly in recently disturbed areas, mechanical fuel removal may increase this risk. To reduce these impacts, the National Park Service will monitor and treat disturbed areas for invasive species, inspect all heavy equipment before entering the park to prevent new introductions of non-native plants, limit disturbance when possible, install erosion control mats, mulch, and restore with appropriate seed mixes to limit invasive species establishment.

How can I find more information about the fire risk in my area? What can individual property owners do to support risk reduction?

- If you want to learn what you can do to help reduce fuels on your property or community:
 - The National Fire Protection Association provides guidance through its Firewise USA program, which outlines nationally recognized practices for creating defensible space and reducing structural vulnerability to wildfire: www.nfpa.org/education-and-research/wildfire/firewise-usa.
 - The USDA Forest Service offers location-specific information to assess wildfire hazard and risk through the Wildfire Risk to Communities website: www.wildfirerisk.org.
 - The North Carolina Forest Service and the Virginia Department of Forestry are regional experts providing property owners with tailored recommendations for wildfire risk reduction: www.preventwildfirenc.org and www.dof.virginia.gov. The North Carolina Forest Service's Community Wildfire Protection Plans (CWPPs) program provides additional no-cost support to local communities.

When will the work be near me?

- Project work is expected to begin in the Asheville corridor in early October 2026. Hazardous fuel removal activities will be ongoing for approximately three years following initiation, but exact sequencing of all project areas has not yet been contracted or scheduled. Project updates will be made available on www.parkplanning.nps.gov/BLRIFuelReduction.

How close will you come to my property?

- Setbacks from property lines may be established in certain treatment areas, but no standard setback is established for the project; spatial analysis and refinement of the areas is ongoing. Each treatment area will be evaluated on the ground, and any setbacks will be identified through a combination of mapping and field verification.