



# SOUTH GEORGIA 2026 WILDFIRE RESPONSE

**In anticipation of elevated wildfire risk following Hurricane Helene and ongoing drought conditions, the Georgia Forestry Commission has spent the past several years strengthening wildfire preparedness, prevention, mitigation, detection, and response capabilities across the state. Through strategic planning, operational enhancements, technology investments, workforce development, public outreach, and strong legislative support, GFC has taken aggressive steps to prepare for large and complex wildfire activity like what we are seeing right now in South Georgia.**

## **INTERNAL PREPARATIONS**

- Re-established GFC's Type 3 Incident Management Team in 2023
  - 35 fully qualified members
  - Growing trainee pool
  - Three out-of-state assignments: Alaska, Washington, California
  - Three in-state assignments: Hurricane Helene, Winter Storm Fern, N. GA Fires
- 4,100 miles of forest roads cleared after Hurricane Helene
- Post-Helene Fuel Mitigation: 37,400 acres cleared
- 11,000 miles of pre-suppression firebreaks plowed annually (9,111 in FY26 YTD)
- 1.4M acres of prescribed burning annually to reduce hazardous fuel on the forest floor
  - Leveraged technology (drone and pyroshots) to increase efficiency of prescribed burning
  - Cost-share program with contractors – 4,400 additional acres burned
- FY26 Forest Management Practices:
  - 617,600 acres improved under cost share programs: site prep & tree planting, invasive species control, prescribed fire, timber stand improvement, herbicide release, mowing, mulching, etc.
  - 178,000 acres in Emergency Forest Restoration Program
  - UCF conducted two Wildfire Risk Reduction Qualification courses, training ISA Certified Arborists on the reduction of wildfire risk to homes, property, and natural areas.
  - 1,300 cogongrass treatments
- Two full-time positions dedicated to wildfire prevention efforts
- 145 counties now using Community Wildfire Protection Plans
- Assisted high-risk communities through the Community Wildfire Defense Grant to procure more than \$2.1M in federal grant funding to plan for and mitigate wildfire risk. More than \$1.4M of that is being invested in communities in SE Ga.

- Support and participate in Wildfire Prevention and Education Teams that help raise public awareness in Georgia.
- Contributing member of the Southern Area Prevention & Mitigation Working Team to foster interagency leadership and coordination of fire prevention, prevention education, and mitigation programs and activities.
- 139 nationally recognized Firewise communities helping reduce risk at the local level.
- More than 34,000 structures and dwellings protected by Firewise activities.
- Fire Neural Network (FNN) pilot project using 10 high-resolution lightning sensors at 10 GFC unit locations in SE GA surrounding the Greater Okefenokee Association of Landowner area
  - Lightning detections are displayed in conjunction with various weather and fire danger rating system basemaps, allowing additional decision-making context regarding follow-up investigation with aerial or ground resources
- Pano AI pilot project with camera stations in Wheeler, Montgomery, Treutlen, Telfair, Toombs to detect and report smoke and detect wildfires sooner
  - Integrated into burn permit system to distinguish between permitted Rx burns and wildfires
- Ongoing public outreach about the necessity of fire prevention, including paid social media boosts. Outreach was amplified and pushed more aggressively beginning in January 2026.
  - CY2025: 41,300 students reached through FFA Field Days, Smokey Bear & General School programs, Billy Lancaster Forestry Youth Camp, Natural Resources Conservation Workshop
  - CY2025: Nearly 100,000 general public reached through Smokey Bear and other public events
  - 530 educators trained over 20 years of GA Teacher Conservation Workshop – estimated 162,750 students impacted
  - 181 educators trained in Project Learning Tree in 2025

### **LEGISLATIVE INVESTMENT**

- Significant investment in wildland firefighter compensation, raising starting pay 42% over the last five years and providing increased employer match for retirement plans up to 9%
  - Ranger turnover has dropped from 27% to 10%, resulting in more experienced, well-trained firefighters
- \$22M in tractor replacement in the last two years – 63 tractors purchased
  - Significant increase from previous funding levels (\$2M - \$4M annually)
- \$4.8M for new fire suppression helicopter plus operating funds
- \$1.1M in operational funds for increased wildfire suppression costs
- \$8.6M in interoperable communications infrastructure