Wildfire Preparedness & Prevention

Presented by: Fire Chief John Coffey
Town of Black Mountain Fire Department
August 11, 2024



Purpose of Address

To outline the current wildfire risks facing Black Mountain, prevention strategies, and the critical need for strong enforcement and citizen engagement.

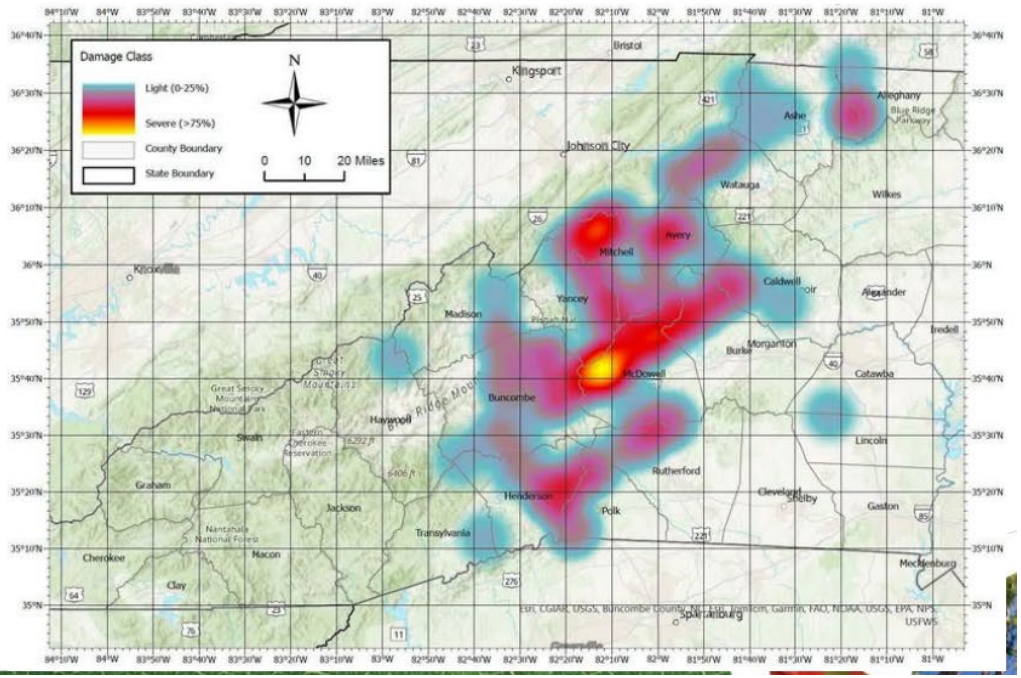
Geographic Vulnerability

We are a **wildland-urban interface (WUI)** community—where homes meet flammable vegetation.

Our steep terrain, dense tree cover, and narrow roads increase the complexity of response and evacuation.

Helene Response





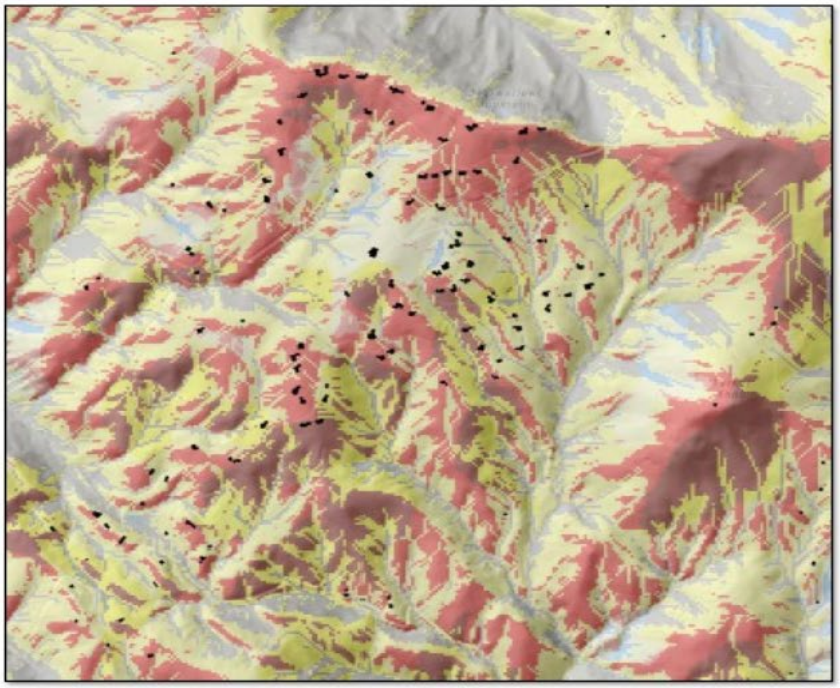
NCFS Helene Recovery – Identifying the Problems

- Estimated 820,000+ acres of timber damage
- Fuel management & Wildfire preparedness
- Forest Management
  - Opportunities
  - Challenges
  - Utilization
  - Oak opportunities
  - Invasive species

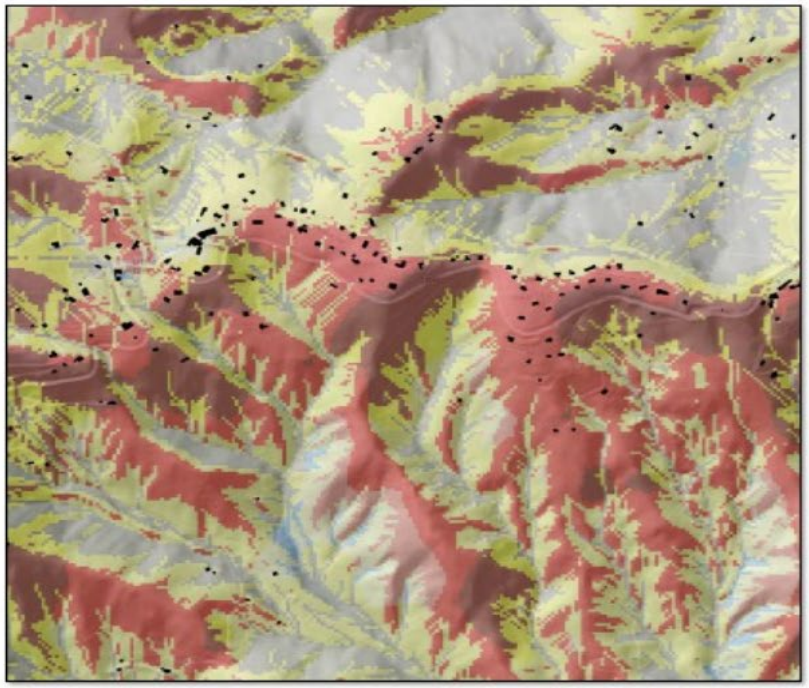


Structures compared to the combined background and Helene fire hazard

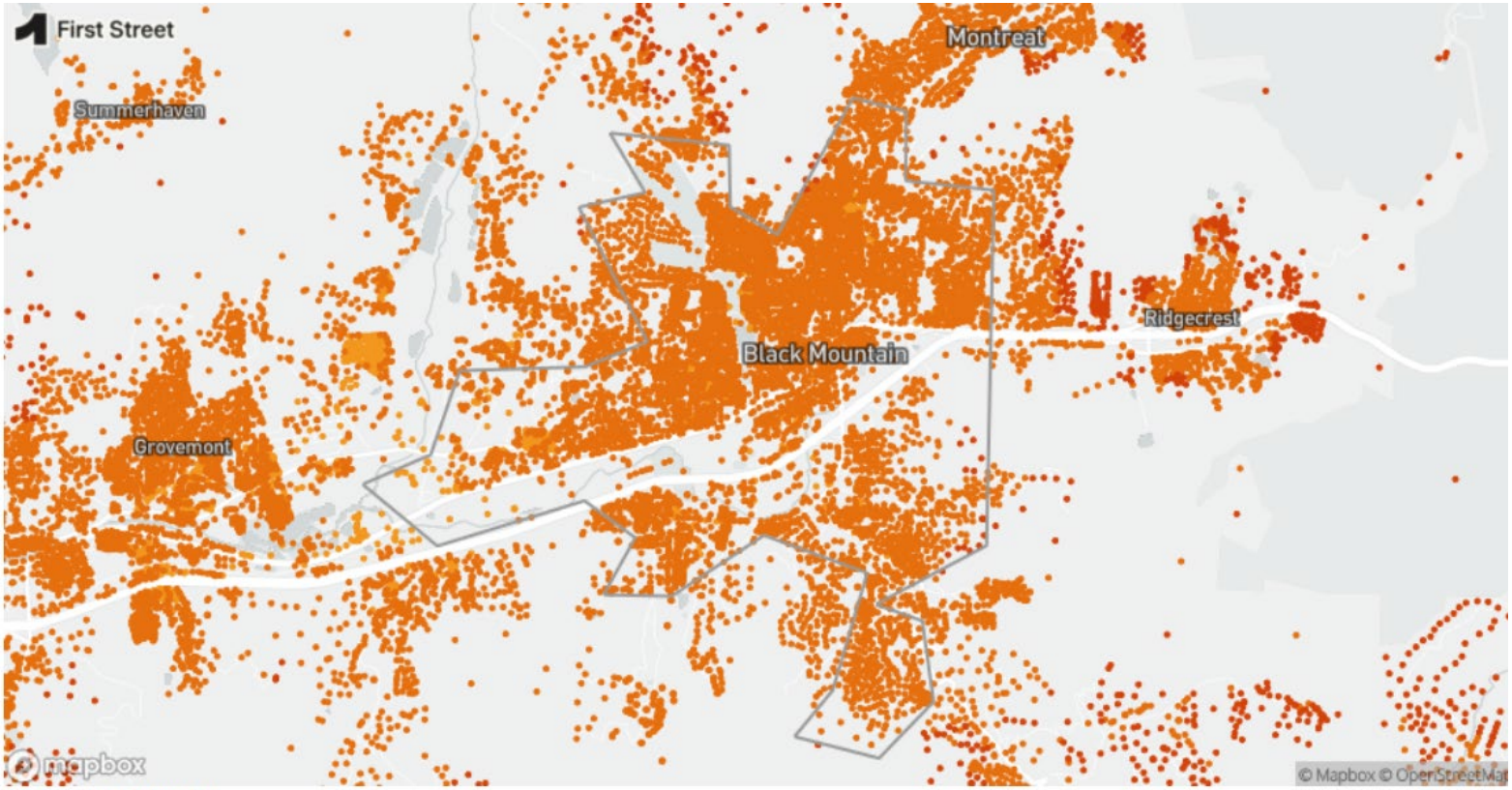




Bearwallow Mountain, Henderson, Buncombe Co.



Little Switzerland area, McDowell-Mitchell Co.



Properties at risk from fire

Minimal | Minor | Moderate | Major | Severe | Extreme

Residential: **Moderate Risk**

4,981 out of **4,981** homes at risk

Commercial: **Moderate Risk**

354 out of **363** properties at risk

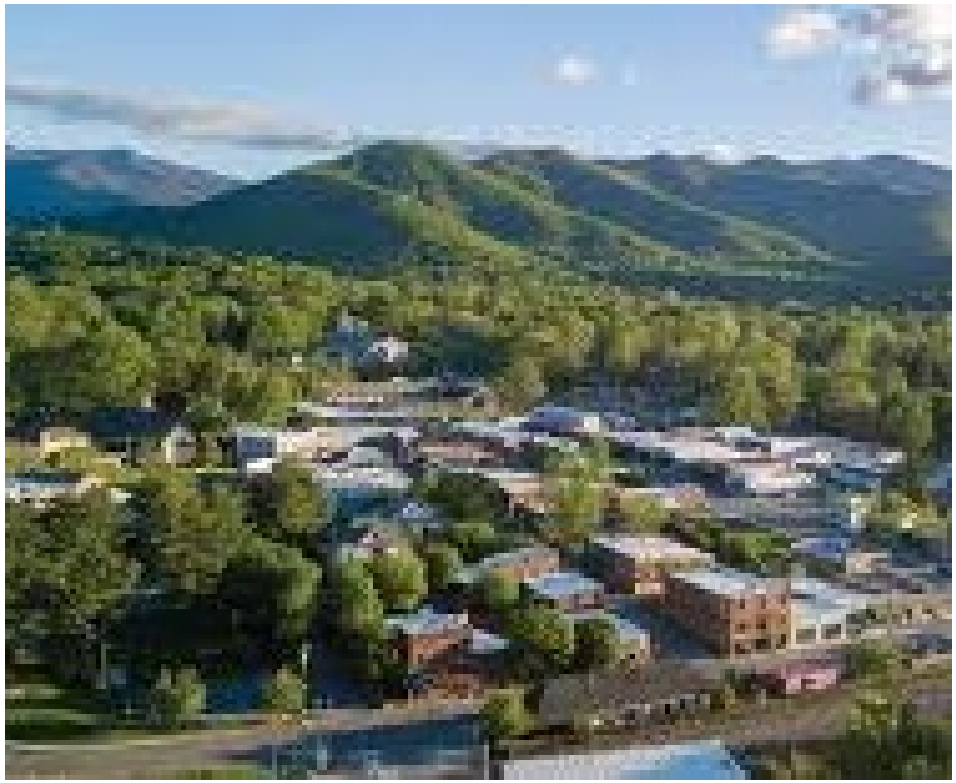
Infrastructure: **Moderate Risk**

7 out of **8** facilities at risk

Social: **Moderate Risk**

23 out of **25** facilities at risk

Moderate Risk Over the next 30 years.



- There are over **4,968 properties at risk** in **Black Mountain**
- Cut off access to utilities
- Delayed Access
- Impact evacuation routes
- This is based on the level of risk the properties face rather than the proportion of properties with risk.

Current Threat Landscape

Hurricane Helene left widespread storm debris and created a **dangerous fuel load** throughout the town and surrounding forest.

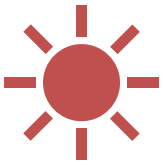
The **US Forest Service and NC Forest Service** have expressed elevated concern—calling the current situation a **tinderbox**.

Heavy ground fuels increase wildfire ignition risk

One spark can lead to fast-moving, uncontrollable fires depending on variables.

If a fire were to start under current conditions, suppression efforts could be quickly overwhelmed.

Why This Matters Now



Climate trends = longer, hotter summers



Increased risk of ignition in dry, windy conditions



Wildfires spreading across NC



Time to act is now – **prevention is our best tool**

The Three Pillars of Prevention

Compliance – Enforce defensible space and vegetation codes

Public Education – Equip residents with knowledge

Tactical Readiness – Prepare response before fire starts

Enforcing Open Burning Regulations

Strict enforcement of state and local open burning laws is essential.

We must communicate clearly that **open burning in a municipality during high-risk conditions is not only illegal—it's irresponsible.**

Seek council support for increasing penalties and prioritizing Fire Marshal enforcement.



Prevention is Our Best Defense

Proactive Education & Outreach

- Launch a **Black Mountain** “**FireReady**” campaign:
  - Localized Firewise type education
  - Community clean-up events
  - Free home risk assessments

- Engage HOAs and neighborhoods to take ownership of defensible space creation.

Engaging and Gaining Support from Citizens

Shift	Shift from Passive Awareness to Active Participation
Create	Create neighborhood ambassador programs to build local champions.
Provide	Provide residents with templates and guides for building defensible zones.

Community-Wide Strategy

Public Works – Debris removal from public spaces

Fire Marshal/Police – Enforce burn bans, assist evacuations

Planning Dept – Integrate fire code in permits

CERT – Outreach, assistance, risk documentation

Residents – Clear vegetation, follow fire rules

Call to Action

- Coordinated prevention is essential
- Every agency and resident plays a role
- Let's be the town that prevents disaster
- Vision is achievable with support and accountability

Let us be the Appalachian town that got it right.

Let us be the model that others follow.

Let us be **Black Mountain Ready.**