Wildfires have always burned in the South. Here's why they're getting worse.

Ruby Mellen, Brady Dennis

FLAT ROCK, N.C. — Michael Cheek gunned his white truck up the rocky hill as helicopters whirred overhead. His tires crunched over the unpaved roads, dulling the near-constant crackling of his walkie-talkie:

"The last thing we heard is it was 50 percent contained."

"He won't answer us on the radio."

The spring wildfire season had barely begun, but already it was relentless. Cheek, the North Carolina Forest Service's mountain division director, needed to get to the top of the ridge, where yet another new blaze was approaching.

"Due to the Helene debris, the fires are going to be bigger," Cheek said. "Homes are going to burn. And hopefully no one dies."

While conflagrations in the West — like the devastating fires that tore through Los Angeles in January — tend to capture Americans' attention, the region spanning from Texas to Virginia regularly sees more wildfires than any other part of the country.

The Southeast accounted for more than one-third of U.S. wildfires last year, according to the National Interagency Fire Center (NIFC), and nearly half in 2023.

Already this year, fires have prompted evacuations in states including South Carolina, Oklahoma, Texas and North Carolina, where numerous blazes continue to rage, including the Black Cove Fire south of Asheville, which on Tuesday was still burning uncontained and had grown to more than 3,000 acres.

One 2023 study found that while the West continues to dominate research and federal spending on wildfires, "recent signals suggest that wildfire risk is increasing in the eastern U.S. as well."

There are multiple reasons that risk is increasing, said Victoria Donovan, a professor of forest management at the University of Florida who is one of the report's authors. But a key one is this: The Southeast has a high percentage of people living in fire-prone areas.

The Southeast's booming population has placed more people and homes than ever in the path of potential wildfires — a fact that makes fighting such blazes more and more complex, said Gary Wood, a retired North Carolina Forest Service employee who now helps implement national wildland fire strategies in the region.

"Now, it's a whole different ballgame," Wood said. "Everybody's moving to the South."

For example, one recent study from the U.S. Department of Agriculture detailed how from 1990 to 2020, North Carolina experienced rapid population growth and expansion into areas at risk for wildfire. Buncombe County, home to Asheville, saw a 70 percent growth of housing in such areas, the study found.

Foresters here have long worked to prevent out-of-control blazes on a routine basis, by intentionally burning areas to get rid of potential fuel. But this year, dry and windy conditions and debris from Hurricane Helene and other storms have contributed an above-normal wildfire risk. And as parts of the Southeast experience rapid population growth, the blazes are becoming harder to fight and contain.

Robert Scheller, a professor of landscape ecology at North Carolina State University, said that when it comes to judging a fires' impact, "it's more than just the acreage burned, but also, what is the density of humans on the acreage burned."

Compared with many parts of the country, he added, the South is just "a more densely settled landscape."

'We need to start burning'

The afternoon Black Cove Fire sparked on March 19; more than 75 blazes had sprung up across the state on an especially dry and windy spring day.

Cheek, sporting fire-resistant clothes, a worn baseball cap and a curly beard grown to his chest, finally made it up to the ridge where eight firefighters gazed at the growing plume of smoke in the distance. Huge trees felled by Hurricane Helene, the remnants of which blew through here in late September, blocked pathways in the forest.

Residents prepared to evacuate. Joseph Russell, 25, said he had never seen a fire so close before, and packed all of the things he said he couldn't replace: old photos, clothes, his pet snake and his grandfather's guns.

A bulldozer worked to dig a protective path around houses on the hill. A helicopter flew overhead dousing the flames with water from a thin hose dangling from its belly, but it was too smoky for aircraft to get very low.

Crew leaders leaned against the bed of Cheek's truck and pored over a map of the terrain. The goal, they decided, would be to fight the fire with fire. They had set the forest on the top of the hill ablaze, in hopes that the already-charred ground would slow the wildfire's hungry path toward any homes in the area.

At 6:24 p.m., they had mapped out their first line.

"We need to start burning," Cheek said.

The crew doused the perimeter with fuel and lit it.

It has already been a vicious fire season in North Carolina this year, according to the NIFC, with more than 2,700 blazes and more than 11,900 acres burned as of March 24.

Bobby Arledge, who for the past dozen years has been the fire marshal in Polk County, south of Asheville, has seen firsthand the risks posed by conditions in the Southeast. Earlier this month, firefighters spent days combating a blaze that grew rapidly to 600 acres along U.S. Route 176, not far from the town of Saluda.

Arledge, who said he has worked in the county since 1994, is used to the low humidity and high winds that this season often brings. But in the wake of Helene, he said, “I’ve never seen this much debris down.”

And it is likely to linger for years, he added, in part because so much of it is on private property. That means the heightened risk for fiercer and more frequent wildfires in the area will loom for a long time to come.

“It’s just the challenge we face.”

For North Carolinians who lived through an epic storm last fall, the heightened threat of wildfire is a devastating development.

Tim and Susan Hardy bought their Old Fort home, east of Asheville, 17 years ago but never experienced fires until January, when one tore through their backyard, devouring their beloved blueberry and azalea bushes and charring the massive oaks that Helene’s strong winds felled in September.

“It used to be a sanctuary here,” Susan said, gazing at the blackened branches and gully of downed trees as her 7-year-old goldendoodle Ruby trotted by her side. “Gardening was kind of my thing. That’s been the hardest part.”

When the fire broke out and the couple had to evacuate, officials said they couldn’t promise the house would be spared. Tim thought of his instruments. Once an aspiring rock star, he has collected some 50 guitars that hang all through their house. He has a tremor that makes it hard to carry a cup of coffee to the couch without spilling — but when he plays, he’s steady.

“It made me have more empathy for places that have fires a lot, like California,” he said.

But in these residential areas, fires could become more and more of a reality. An October assessment by the North Carolina Forest Service estimated that 822,000 acres of timberland suffered some sort of damage during the storm, with more than three-quarters of that on private land. In neighboring Tennessee, Helene’s wrath was not as extensive, but even so the state’s forestry division found that more than 139,000 acres of forest land had been lost to the storm.

The timber could provide more than a decade of ground fuel for fires as it continues to dry out, say foresters. Helene toppled oak trees before they had shed their leaves for winter, said Adam Warwick, a fire manager at the North Carolina chapter of the Nature Conservancy, a nonprofit organization working on restoration across the region. Now those dead leaves on the ground, when ignited, create large blazes that can make the fires more intense. The oak itself could take a long time to completely dry out, providing fuel for many years to come.

The regional problem isn’t limited to Helene’s wake.

Ludie Bond, a public information officer for the Florida Forest Service, said that two other

hurricanes last year, Debby and Milton, also blew down a lot of heavy timber in the South. Earlier this month, a wildfire broke out in Miami-Dade County, burning more than 26,000 acres.

The Hardys have thought about leaving Old Fort after so many months of extreme weather. “We’ve shopped around,” said Tim. “But we can’t find any place that would be better.”

Fighting fire with fire

One way conservationists and foresters are trying to reduce these risks is through prescribed burning, a practice of lighting a forest fire under safe conditions to prevent more out-of-control burns in the future.

For decades, forest managers have suppressed fires, leaving more fuel on the ground.

“The South is the exception,” Warwick said. “The culture of prescribed burning has continued.”

But the same factors driving wildfires make it harder to sustain this approach.

On a cloudless Tuesday morning, members of the North Carolina Forest Service and the Nature Conservancy gathered in an empty field in DuPont State Forest, which boasts more than 10,000 acres, many waterfalls, and attracts some 1.2 million visitors each year.

Burn boss Mike Santucci briefed the crew on conditions, including humidity, wind and the landslides and debris from Helene that they had have to navigate around.

“If people pass through and have questions, talk to them, educate them about good fire and bad fire,” Santucci urged.

Warwick’s team at the Nature Conservancy helps state foresters, struggling with staff shortages, carry out burns about 50 times a year. They travel across state lines, into Tennessee and South Carolina. It’s grueling work that pays between $18 and $25 an hour — most workers hold other jobs.

Jenifer Mallinoff, a Maryland native who moved to the area four years ago, led her second burn ever for the group in DuPont. Her voice was calm and precise as she instructed her team to dip red cans full of fuel onto the dried underbrush and start the flames. Soon the crackling of kindling echoed through the forest. Huge plumes of smoke rose into the air.

“I just love being out in the woods,” Mallinoff said as gentle winds swirled ash around her.

For most of the workers, fire and nature go hand in hand. Warwick delighted in the burning surroundings, pointing out salamander habitats, woodpeckers and rare plants. These activities clear space for new plants that thrive in direct sunlight to emerge, he said. But he added that their work is growing more difficult as more people move closer to the forests, since they can complain.

“The biggest hurdle for burning is the smoke,” said Warwick.

That same week, Cheek — who helped start the prescribed burn program in DuPont a decade

and a half ago — was focused on the wildfire now underway, walking along the ridge as residents packed their bags in case they needed to evacuate.

The sunset, visible from wooden decks attached to rural cabins, turned the Blue Ridge Mountains pink and sent orange streaks through the sky.

“Everywhere I go, I’d rather be here,” said Cheek. “Even with this destruction.”

He got back in his truck. His walkie-talkie crackled again: “There’s a large brush fire coming up the mountain towards the Blue Ridge Parkway.”

“Oh joy,” said Cheek. “It could be a long night.”