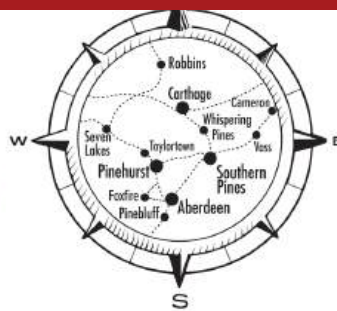


THE PILOT



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Site, Funding Set for Moore School IT Building

BY MATT LAMB
Staff Writer

Moore County Schools is closer to finding a new home and funding for its currently beleaguered information technology building.

Following several false starts, the district is looking to place the facility on a parcel behind the football field at

Union Pines High School.

Until recently, the district planned to use state lottery dollars to fund the \$3.3 million project; however, lottery funding cannot be used for facilities that do not contain students.

The county Board of Commissioners stepped in this week, agreeing to use capital reserve funds to cover the

bill, provided the Board of Education uses an equal amount from its lottery coffers to offset the county's cost for Carthage Elementary School. The county agreed in February to pay for a new Carthage so long as the school stays on its existing site.

see **IT BUILDING**, page A12

'PRECEDENT SETTING'

New Data Is Strong For MIHS

BY MATT LAMB
Staff Writer

If the inaugural ninth-grade class of Red Wolves at the Moore Innovative High School are the standard bearers, the bar has been set high.

The school district's newest educational offering, housed in Van Dusen Hall on the Sandhills Community College campus, wrapped up its first year last month, and as the numbers roll in, students' educational outcomes far exceed state averages.

Principal Ashlee Ciccone, who was met with a round of applause, highlighted the year's efforts at the Board of Education's most recent work session.

"As you can imagine, every single decision has required thoughtfulness as we set a precedent for Moore Innovative High School," Ciccone said. "As such, we've had both successes and challenges, both of which we've embraced wholeheartedly in an effort to create a high school experience that meets the needs of a wide target population."

Cooperative innovative high schools are a collaboration between local school districts and community colleges or universities. Intentionally compact and capped at 100 students per grade level, they offer a small-cohort model that provides the student population with enhanced support and guidance from teachers, administrators and counselors.

MIHS shunts students' core, state-mandated academic courses into the first two years, before opening up the breadth of what SCC has to offer, in hopes of training students to fill jobs in rapidly growing fields like advanced manufacturing, architecture and construction, health sciences, and science, technology, engineering and math (STEM).

Students complete honors-level coursework and are enabled to obtain a high school diploma while beginning or completing an associate degree, receive vocational credentials and certificates, or earn up to two years of college credit within five years. Moreover, innovative schools are not hamstrung by certain restrictions imposed by the Department of Public Instruction on comprehensive high schools, like strict adherence to school calendar laws.

The project was spurred on by a \$25 million earmark in the General Assembly's 2023 budget and

see **DATA**, page A9



FRIENDLY FIRE

COURTESY OF ALAN TEED

Above, a young longleaf pine stands sturdy as a prescribed burn crawls across the forest to enhance the native landscape; below, a burn crew member monitors a prescribed burn.

Prescribed Burns Help Ecosystem, Prevent Wildfires

BY ANA RISANO
Staff Writer

Like the phoenix rises from ashes, so do the towering longleaf pines and wispy wiregrass of the Sandhills. This region was shaped by consistent wildfires hundreds of years ago to be what it is today.

It is also why several entities, including the local division of The Nature Conservancy and the state Forest Service, conduct prescribed burns each year. Not only does fire help existing plant life flourish, it clears excess debris from properties to prevent larger, uncontrolled wildfires.

"Public safety is our number one objective," said Sandhills Stewardship Manager and Burn Boss Alan Teed. "People don't

necessarily understand that. They think there is a level of recklessness that goes into (prescribed burns). We all live here. We are all part of the community. We're trying to be good neighbors about it."

For several years, Moore County has consistently ranked as one of the top five counties in the state for the number of wildfires. In 2025, there were 219 instances of wildfire in the county, burning 428 acres. That averages to about 1.95 acres per fire — on par with the state average.

State Forest Service spokesperson Philip Jackson said the main reason is "careless debris burning" — something completely avoidable.



Head to page A10 for more on **PRESCRIBED BURNS**

Forum Shines Light on Youth Experiencing Homelessness

BY ANA RISANO
Staff Writer

A recent community forum led by nonprofit TabraPlace highlighted a concern of increasing rates of youth experiencing homelessness, noting Moore County is not immune to this trend.

TabraPlace offers long-term housing and research-based support to provide a home for young women and men who may be aging out of foster care or who would otherwise be without a permanent residence. It's the only program of its kind in the area.

"There are kids out there who need TabraPlace to make sure that they're set on that right path, to make sure that they have the support system," said nonprofit board member Rachel Maloney, who spoke about her experience growing up in foster care.

Tabra Chamberlain, the nonprofit's namesake and co-founder, is a social worker with Moore County Schools, serving as the McKinney-Vento liaison and foster care point of contact. The nonprofit grew out of needs she and others were seeing in schools and in the community.

The McKinney-Vento Act provides rights and services to youth experiencing homelessness. Chamberlain's work includes identifying students experiencing homelessness and coordinating resources.

This school year, Chamberlain said there are 291 students living in unstable housing, whether couch-surfing, staying in a hotel or otherwise unsheltered. About 15 are unaccompanied youth set to graduate, with nine planning to attend higher education.



ANA RISANO / THE PILOT

Nonprofit board member Rachel Maloney, co-founder Tabra Chamberlain and Moore County social worker Xi'ana Waiters

see **HOMELESSNESS**, page A7

OPINION

Saying 'No' But Still Losing Out

Whispering Pines rejected a new development plan, and will lose the updates that came with it.

PUBLIC SPEAKING

I'll Pay it Forward

Readers share their views on a number of current events.



SANDHILLS SCENE

Backyard Grill Masters
Rekindling an Ancient Art Barbecue, an all-American summertime passion, has an all-American history.

SPORTS

The Boys Are Back in Town
Bogeys welcome several players back from previous summers.

WEATHER FORECAST



TODAY
94°
70°

Yikes, It's Hot
Feels Like: 97°
Precip: 8%
Winds: WSW at 8 mph



MONDAY
94°
68°

Hot and Stormy
Feels Like: 102°
Precip: 88%
Winds: SE at 4 mph

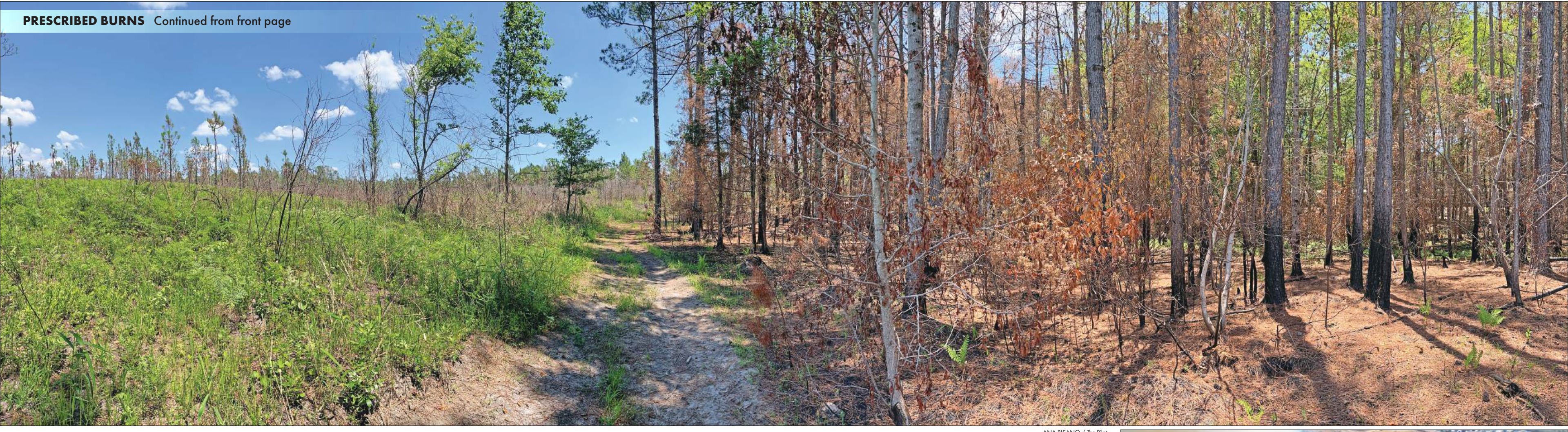


TUESDAY
87°
68°

Hot and Humid
Feels Like: 96°
Precip: 25%
Winds: E at 5 mph



PRESCRIBED BURNS Continued from front page



To the left is the previously burned area of Calloway that stopped a wildfire's spread in April. It's in early phases of green up, where the plant life comes back. To the right is the area scorched by the wildfire, still darkened with burn marks.

Wildfires

Of the 219 fires in Moore County last year, 123 were from escaped backyard and debris burning — often because the landowner or worker walked away from the fire. The other top reasons for wildfire were 20 incidents of arson and 25 involving machinery like farm equipment or lawnmowers that can spark a fire. Three fires last year were caused by lightning.

Jackson emphasized the safety element required with any burning, saying that not walking away from a live flame is key. He said it amazes him when reading through wildfire reports and seeing the reasons. He shared one story where a person held a bonfire for New Year's Eve and then left it burning unattended to go watch festivities on TV. It took just a moment — and a shifting breeze — for the fire to spread into the neighbor's yard.

The counties experiencing higher rates of wildfire are mostly in the Sandhills region, but they are often smaller because crews are able to knock them down quickly with personnel and heavy equipment. The counties with the highest number of wildfires in 2025 were Moore, Robeson, Richmond, Columbus and Harnett. Larger wildfires more often occur in the mountains or on the coast, where it can be difficult for crews to navigate terrain.

But wildfires are not like prescribed burns, where con-

trolled, slow moving flame is applied across a landscape. Prescribed burns are meticulously planned and weather dependent.

That's also why Jackson recommends anyone applying for burn permits and looking to clear debris on their property reach out to their county ranger, who can answer if a certain day is better or worse for burning.

Bringing the Fire

The burn season has looked a little different this year, given a roughly 42-day statewide burn ban from the end of March through early May due to drought conditions. Prescribed fires are traditionally conducted between January and early spring, but as Teed confirms, they can happen any time of the year if the weather is right.

"We shut down a week or two before the burn ban came down the pipeline because I was uncomfortable with the conditions," Teed said. He has been in this position for about 1½ years, working previously as a seasonal burn crew member in the area since 2016.

A lot of preparation goes into a site before applying prescribed fire, including establishing fire breaks and walking the land for any safety concern issues like holes or dead trees. But interpreting the weather is the most important. Elements like humidity, temperature and wind speed can dictate a good or bad day for burning.



Sandhills Stewardship Manager and Burn Boss Alan Teed with The Nature Conservancy at the site of the April wildfire that impacted part of the Calloway Forest Preserve just south of Moore County

The amount of "fuel moisture" — debris like leaves and tree limbs on the forest floor — also impacts a burn plan. A property that hasn't seen fire in 50 years likely has more fuel on the ground compared to a site that sees fire every three years.

Each burn plan is unique given a site's conditions. For a typical burn, Teed said he sets up a team with at least seven people, often requesting between 10 and 20 to ensure adequate coverage. But he said there is a fine line between not enough

and too many people on a burn.

And despite days of planning, Teed doesn't know if a prescribed burn is a go until about 6 a.m. the day of, receiving a spot forecast from the National Weather Service office in Raleigh. That is his go/no go indicator. Scheduled burns fall through all the time.

"It's a lot of hurrying up and waiting," Teed said. "That's the emphasis that TNC places on safety. The forecast is so susceptible to change. I could look at the forecast the night before and then turn around the next

morning and it's completely different."

But when it's a go, the crew dons their safety gear, grabs their drip torches and water, and heads out. A relatively new tool TNC has started using is an aerial ignition drone that drops small incendiary balls that catch fire after about 30 seconds. Teed said it's a great way to mitigate risk to personnel.

"We can safely introduce fire inside of the burn unit without putting people in there, and it's very precise too," Teed said.

"So you actually program different variables into it and you can manipulate the fire behavior based off of those variables. It's really high-tech and neat."

The state Forest Service also tries to implement prescribed burns as often as they can. Jackson emphasized that prescribed burns are useful preventive safety measures.

"We can consume fuel in a prescribed, well managed, low intensity manner, rather than a wildfire getting established, burning hot and getting difficult to control," Jackson said.

Each year, between 12,000 and 17,000 acres are burned in the Sandhills. Much of that property is in the Sandhills Game Lands, property owned by The Nature Conservancy and public parks like the Walthour-Moss Foundation preserve.

Teed said TNC tries to burn about 2,500 acres a year in the Sandhills, but with the drought, he's not sure they will hit that mark this year. So far, the group has burned between 1,200 and 1,500 acres.

"There are a bunch of different variables that go into burning, but when you get to the level of drought that we are at, the trees can become stressed," Teed said. "And if you introduce another disturbance into the ecosystem like fire, that stress can compound and lead to undesirable mortality."

Along with wildfire prevention, prescribed burns can enhance the native landscape of the Sandhills and can be used

for site preparation for farmers, because it can improve pasture forage and add nutrients to the soil.

'Green Up'

Prescribed fires are important for several ecological reasons, including maintaining longleaf savannas where sunlight can filter between the pines to reach the forest floor. Pine savannas are unique habitats that a variety of life depend upon, from the pine barren treefrogs and threatened red-cockaded woodpeckers to wiregrass and the rare pyxie moss.

"If you burn it in the growing season, the following year it has a more viable seed crop," Teed said of wiregrass. Fire also helps promote self propagation and clears areas of non-native species that may choke out native plants.

The time period after fire is prescribed is called "green up," when the plant life is rejuvenated.

The Nature Conservancy maintains the Calloway Forest Preserve, just south of Moore County off N.C. 211, with prescribed fire. Teed said the roughly 3,000 acres of forest are burned on a two-year schedule.

On a tour through the preserve, Teed pointed out red-cockaded woodpecker cavities and the occasional wildflower. One woodpecker family is nestled in a low cavity, with babies heard chirping as a parent swooped between nearby pines.



A prescribed burn underway at Calloway Forest Preserve, just south of Moore County off N.C. 211

"This is one of my favorite places on Earth," Teed said.

The back of the property features older growth forest with light streaming between the pines. That area was burned last year, Teed said, noting the seed-laden wiregrass.

Burning the preserve on a schedule proved fruitful in more ways than one this past April, when a recently burned section of the property helped stop a wildfire that popped up nearby.

Fighting Fire with Fire

Teed, driving along one of the sandy trails, showed the "burn unit" that stopped the fire's spread. It had been burned one month earlier and was in its early stages of green up.

"You hear a lot of stories

about areas that have been managed with prescribed burning or like wildfires from previous years slowing the progression of wildfires. But this is the first time where I've truly seen a freshly burned unit stopping a wildfire, which I think is really freaking cool."

The wildfire covered about 8 acres, with four of them on TNC property. The fire occurred near a railroad line parallel to N.C. 211. The cause of the fire is undetermined at this time.

Teed said the temperature was about 90 that day with a low relative humidity that allowed the fire to run hot and fast. The winds were out of the southwest, blowing the fire toward the previously burned unit. He pointed out the scorch marks on the pines showing where flames touched, and the orange leaves and needles of the canopy where smoke lingered.

"So you saw big scary flames, but the fire wasn't progressing past the burn unit, which was really a relief because there are houses and private property downwind," Teed said. The fire was identified quickly because a neighbor spotted the smoke. Teed noted smoke management is an important part of prescribed burning —

about public outreach.

"One of the reasons why this (fire) was identified very early on as an emerging incident is because our neighbors called me," Teed said. "We really invest in the community, and one of the ways I do that, especially with how rampant the development is, I try to pick days where I am able to utilize the wind to steer smoke away from smoke-sensitive areas."

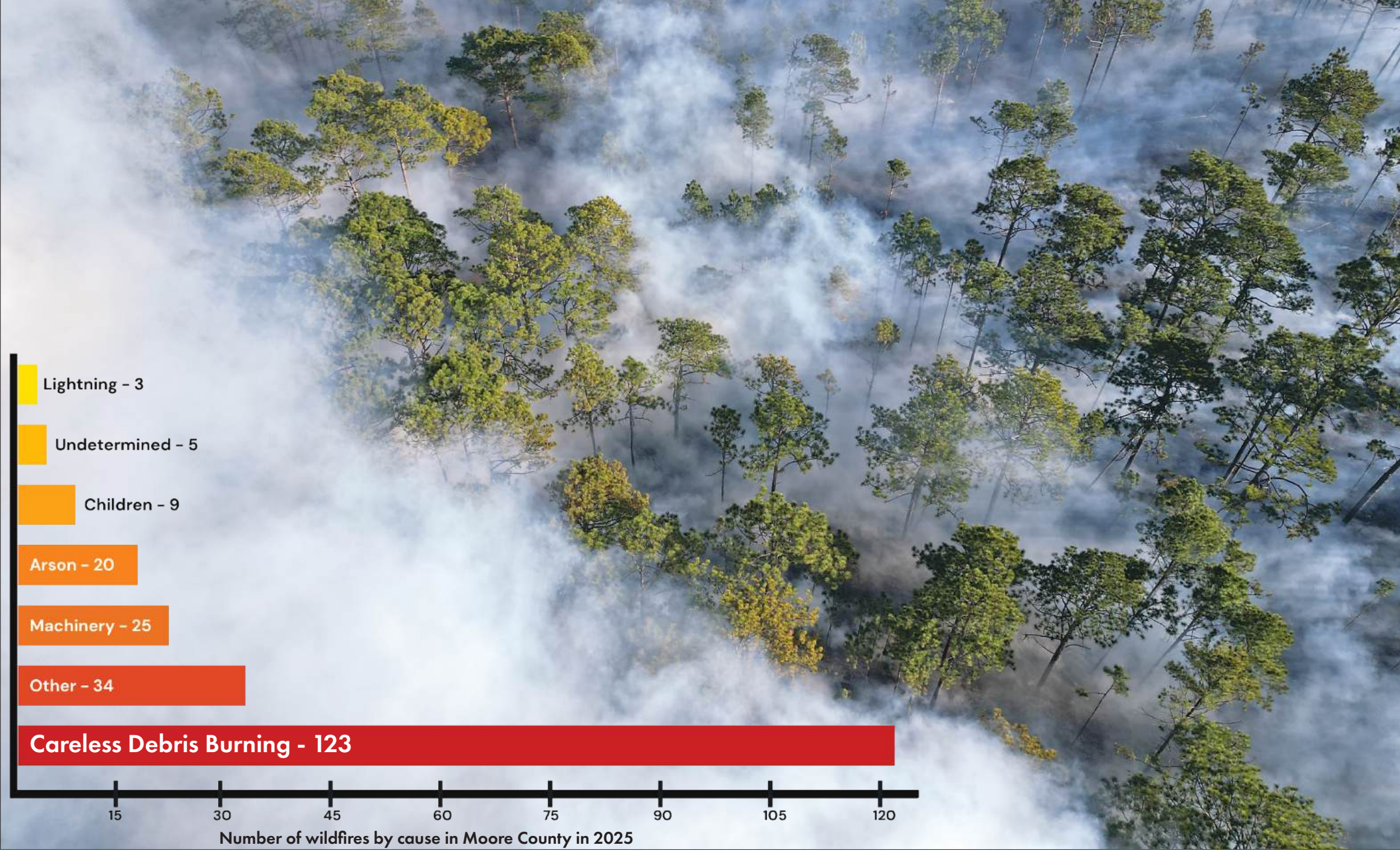
The state Forest Service took command of the fire, but additional crews helped knock down the fire, including TNC and the NC Wildlife Resources Commission.

"It just shows that it is a very close knit community and that we try to show up for each other," Teed said.

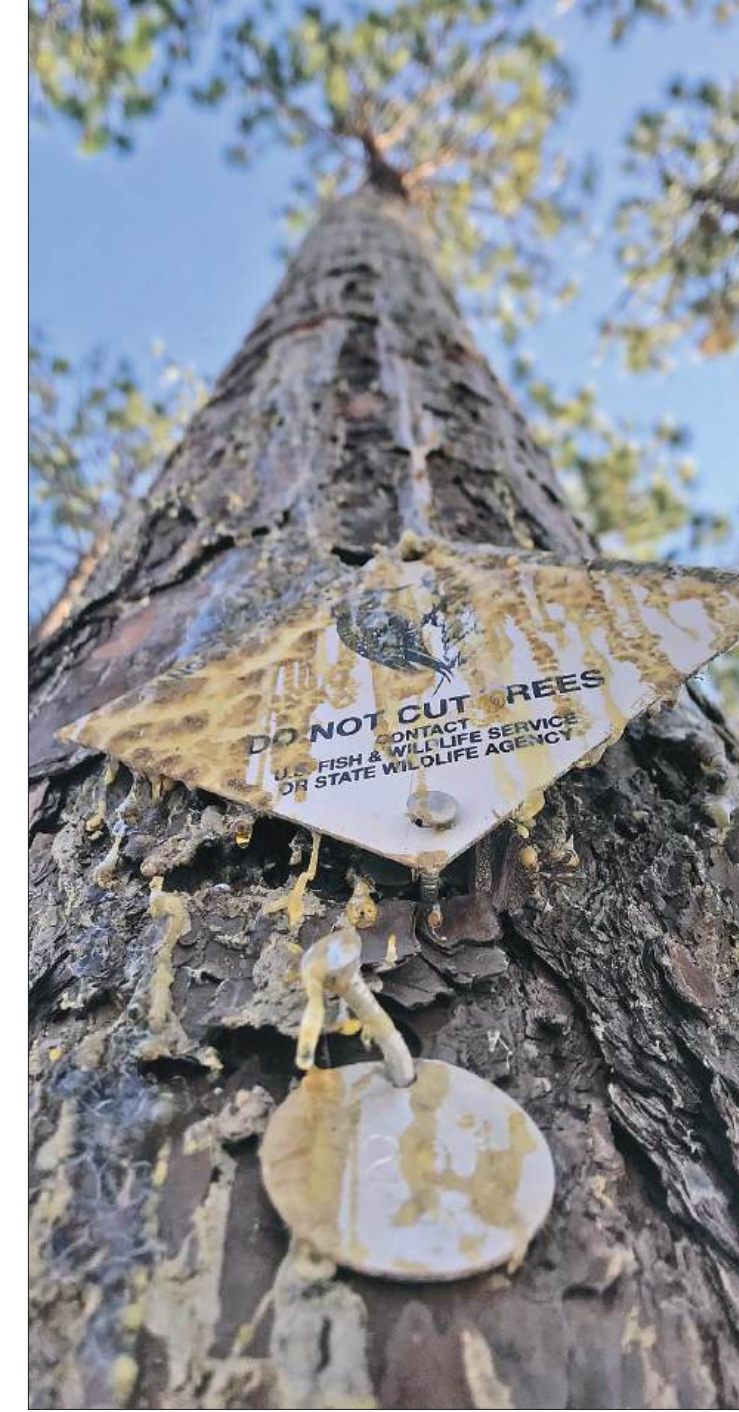
Walking along the fire break, he pointed out the greenery already showing in the area that experienced the wildfire, saying the area needed to be burned.

"It's a win because the (previous) burn helped significantly in the suppression but this area needed fire," Teed said. "The fire might have killed some trees, but in the grand scheme of things, it's only going to benefit this area."

Contact Ana Risano at (910) 585-6396 or ana@thepilot.com.



Moore County experienced 219 wildfires in 2025, with most of them caused by escaped debris and backyard burning (data courtesy of NC Forest Service); smoke above the tree canopy during a prescribed burn



Clockwise, from left, the threatened red-cockaded woodpecker lives in old growth longleaf pines; a scorched marked cavity tree; a recent burn unit



PHOTOS COURTESY OF ALAN TEED