

Southern wildfires create smoky haze, prompt health concerns

November 9 2016, by Jeff Martin

Wildfires burning across the South have created a smoky haze over metro Atlanta and prompted a public health advisory in Kentucky—and the forests are expected to continue burning for days as flaming leaves fall to the ground and spread the fire, authorities said Wednesday.

In Georgia, gusty winds from the north are bringing smoke from fires raging in the north Georgia mountains into the state capital and its suburbs, leading to some reduced visibility.

"The way that the wind is blowing today, we're getting a good dose of the smoke," said Wendy Burnett, a spokeswoman for the Georgia Forestry Commission. "We're also probably getting a mix of our fires along with fires from our neighbors from Alabama, Tennessee and North Carolina."

In Tennessee, seven firefighters were trapped Tuesday evening in a forest fire west of Kingsport, causing them to declare "Mayday." All seven firefighters were later accounted for and none was injured, said Gary Murrell, director of the Hawkins County Emergency Management Agency.

In North Carolina, fire officials hoped to provide air support to crews battling a blaze that had spread to 344 acres, but high winds prevented helicopters from flying and dropping water onto the forest, Victoria Tillotson of the North Carolina Forest Service told The Asheville Citizen-Times. During the night Tuesday, crews worked to protect up to 35

homes that were threatened by that fire.

In Kentucky, the state Department for Public Health this week issued a smoke inhalation advisory for the southeastern part of the state due to poor air quality from ongoing wildfires. Kentucky Gov. Matt Bevin declared a state of emergency last week, as firefighters continued to battle dozens of wildfires across the eastern part of the state.

High winds were whipping up the flames in several of the fires, making matters worse, authorities.

Wind gusts up to 35 mph were possible Wednesday in western North Carolina, which holds the potential for "very active fire behavior," fire officials said in the latest update on blazes in that state.

Falling leaves are posing a challenge in the Georgia fires, as firefighters build containment lines only to have leaves spread fire to those areas as they fall, Burnett said. The largest of the Georgia blazes—the Rough Ridge fire in the Cohutta Wilderness area near the Tennessee line—has burned 6,400 acres and is only 11 percent contained, Burnett said.

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