

Daily forecasts track smoke from southern fires

30 May 2007

At the request of the Georgia State Department of Health, scientists with the Southern Research Station Smoke Management Team located at the Center for Forest Disturbance Science in Athens, GA, are producing daily smoke forecasts which help communities determine potential health risks caused by current wildfires across south Georgia and north Florida. Smoke from these fires has impacted major airports and interstates throughout both States, and statewide air quality advisories have been issued. Smoke forecasts will be particularly useful when deciding to issue warnings for sensitive populations such as infants and children, pregnant women, older adults, and people with chronic heart or lung diseases such as asthma.

The forecasts show smoke concentrations over continuous 72-hour periods, combining detailed weather forecasts with information about the fire to estimate the amount of smoke produced and where that smoke will be transported. The smoke forecasts focus on a specific class of pollutant, particulate matter smaller than 2.5 microns in diameter or PM 2.5, that is known to be associated with respiratory problems and is a criteria pollutant measured by the Environmental Protection Agency as part of the National Ambient Air Quality Standards.

"The smoke forecasts are extremely useful to communities surrounding wildfires as well as those in neighboring States," says Dr. Scott Goodrick, Smoke Management Team research meteorologist. "Our research also helps Incident Command Teams suppressing these fires, providing information they can share with local health officials who determine potential health risks."

Fire conditions throughout the region are the worst in decades, and fires are expected to burn throughout the area for at least another six weeks.

In the past few weeks, smoke from wildfires has impacted metro Atlanta, with reduced visibility at Hartsfield International Airport, as well as the towns of Athens and Columbus, which are more than 250 miles from fires burning in southern part of the State. Roads and driving conditions have also been affected, with transportation officials reducing speed limits on major highways into Florida due to visibility concerns. Several interstates have been closed at various times during the past month, including Interstate 10, Interstate 95, and Interstate 75.

Source: Southern Research Station - USDA Forest Service

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