2,000 acres to get torched

Firefighters will take aggressive measures today to bring the Pinnacle Mountain wildfire under control by burning more than 2,000 acres ahead of the fire, officials said Wednesday.

Local fire departments are going door-to-door to evacuate about 70 families who live in the affected area close to the burnout operation. The evacuation affects the area north of State 11 from Back Park Road to South Saluda Road and north to Table Rock Reservoir, according to Russell Hubright, spokesman for the SC Forestry Commission.

Fire officials are concerned about a cold front moving into the Upstate that will bring high winds and lower humidity, he said.

The burnout affects both sides of Table Rock and will extend north to the Table Rock Reservoir, south to the Pinnacle Lake area, and east to the Table Rock State Park boundary near High Low Gap.

The burnout also will significantly increase the amount of smoke in the air, Hubright said. The smoke on Wednesday forced state health officials to declare another air quality alert, while the prospect for rain to ease the situation remained grim.

The Department of Health and Environmental Control issued the Code RED air quality alert for the Upstate, saying that active children, adults and people with asthma and other respiratory illnesses should stay indoors. Area hospitals have reported an increase in patients with respiratory issues but they couldn't confirm that they were related to the smoke.

Meanwhile, Greenville County Schools canceled outdoor recess at many schools, scaled back outdoor athletic practices or

called off outdoor running clubs. Principals have also been advised to cancel field trips to outdoor locations.

The Code RED alert for Anderson,Cherokee, Greenville, Oconee, Pickens, and Spartanburg counties was extended for Thursday as well. That means the air quality is unhealthy.

Smoke from wildfires can irritate the eyes and respiratory system, as well as aggravate or exacerbate chronic heart and lung diseases.

"For individuals with existing lung or heart disease, they need to be very aware of the air quality and how much time they're spending outdoors," said Dr. Melissa Overman, assistant state epidemiologist with DHEC.

"In particular with older individuals ... and kids as well because pound-for-pound kids take in more air than adults," she added. "If you can smell smoke, the recommendation is to do your best to stay inside as much as possible."

'Historic fire'

The fire at Pinnacle Mountain in Pickens County continued burning Wednesday, consuming more than 3,283 acres so far, Hubright said.

It is about 35 percent contained, he said.

"This is largest wildfire in the last 30-40 years in Pickens County. There was one in 1978 in Oconee County that was almost 3,000 acres," he said. "This will definitely be a historic fire, one of the largest ever in the mountains of South Carolina."

Also Wednesday, the Pickens County Council declared a state of emergency, one week after the fire broke out. County Emergency Management Director Denise Kwiatek said after the council vote that the declaration would allow Pickens County to bring in more local, state and federal agencies for help. The state of emergency would also allow Wilson to mandate an evacuation, unlike the voluntary one issued Saturday. There was no estimate on the cost of the fire.

The Pinnacle Mountain fire is one of 33 wildfires covering about 80,000 acres in the Southeast being tracked by the U.S. Forest Service, according to USA Today.

The fires have been fueled by brush and trees parched by months of drought.

And it doesn't look like there's much hope for any relief in the near term, said Jason Visin, meteorologist with the National Weather Service.

"Parts of the Upstate are in extreme drought, which means it's not only extraordinarily dry, but we're seeing an agricultural impact, rivers are at low flow, and lake levels also relatively low now," she said. "We have had rainfall, it's just been so far below normal."

The drought began in early May, she said.

So far this year, Visin said, 29.8 inches of rain has fallen at Greenville-Spartanburg Airport. The normal is 41.2 inches, so the region is close to a foot below normal, she said.

The two-tenth of an inch of rain that fell on Sunday wasn't much help, she said.

"It wasn't long enough or wide-spread enough," she said. "In a lot of cases it will take multiple inches of rain for wildfires of this level."

Unfortunately, the forecast for the next few days only holds a 20-percent chance of rain on Friday as a cold front moves through, she said.

"Even if we do get rain," Visin said, "key with this is it does not look like it will be heavy rainfall or sustained for any length of time."

Another system moving into the area next Wednesday could bring some rain.

"But how much and how heavy, that's really the question right now," she said, adding there are some subtle signs that the current dry weather pattern might change by mid-December.

Burning ban remains

Meanwhile, the state Forestry Commission burning ban issued last week for the region continues. That means no outdoor burning of yard debris or for forestry, wildlife or agricultural purposes. And officials strongly encourage residents to refrain from campfires and open-fire cooking.

State burning bans are only issued when conditions become extreme, said forestry commission spokesman Doug Wood. In this case, the ban was issued when the commission got reports of sustained wind gusts and low humidity, he said.

The commission doesn't have the power to restrict campfires and open-fire cooking, he said.

It was a campfire that started the Pinnacle Mountain fire, Hubright said.

Some 170 firefighters from all over South Carolina are battling the blaze. About 70 are from the Forestry Commission, and the rest are from other fire departments, some from as far away as Myrtle Beach and Lexington County, he said.

The main challenge with fighting the fire is access — the Table Rock area is very steep, he said.

"Trying to get a bulldozer in there, even to try to get our crews with tools to do fire breaks, is almost impossible," he said.

Hubright said the controlled burn planned for today may stop the fire from spreading eastward by robbing it of fuel.

"We have a wind event coming in on Saturday," he said. "If we don't do something more assertive or aggressive now, it could move more rapidly to the east."

Burns have been done to contain the fire in the west and southwest parts of the blaze, and officials are confident those lines will hold, he said.

"What's not contained yet is the north side down to the Saluda River and the east side near the edge of Table Rock state park property," he said. "Tomorrow's burn-out is designed to rob that part of the fire so it can't go across Saluda Road."

So far, no structures have burned, Hubright said, adding people should stay away from the area because of the smoke.

DHEC said people who live near the wildfires should monitor the situation closely. Along with staying indoors, DHEC advises keeping windows closed, keeping refresh air intakes closed and changing air filters.

Exercise should be limited to indoors as well, Overman said. And those with health conditions should follow their management plans, she said.

"The biggest thing is getting through this," she said. "We strongly encourage if anybody starts having an increase in symptoms of respiratory or heart disease to seek medical attention."

In Western North Carolina, where up to 16 wildfires have forced the closure of roads, trails and state parks, Buncombe County Health and Human Services officials said people have been suffering the effects of the smoke that's blanketing the area, according to USA Today.

"With the current air quality level in the 'unhealthy' range in the Asheville area, even healthy people may experience symptoms," said medical director Dr. Jennifer Mullendoor.

A combination of arson, unattended campfires and cigarettes are believed to be responsible for those fires, according to USA Today.

Mike Eads of the Anderson Independent Mail contributed to this report.