Debrief on Pinnacle fire mostly positive

No injuries, no buildings lost in 10,600-acre blaze

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PICKENS — Local and state responders swapped notes Thursday on what worked, and what could have worked better, in the fight against the Pinnacle Mountain fire in November.

Firefighters and other emergency officials met for a lunch debrief at Pickens First Baptist Church's Fellowship Hall in downtown Pickens with officials from the state's Forestry Commission, which teamed with county responders and the U.S. Forestry Service to fight the blaze. The fire started atop Pinnacle around Nov. 9 and spread through much of Table Rock State Park and up to the North Carolina state line before being dowsed by early December rains.

The commission's forest management chief, Russell Hubright, said the operation out of the Table Rock Wesleyan Camp ran well, especially when considering that it incorporated firefighting crews from as far away as Utah and as nearby as Holly Springs.

"Things ran well enough, and a lot of people told us they wouldn't mind coming back," said Hubright, who helped lead the meeting Thursday. "They felt they were doing something useful and, I'll tell you, the community support was awesome."

All told, Forestry Commission officials were most impressed that no one was hurt and no buildings were lost to the 10,600-acre fire.

The biggest problem for the firefighters may have been communications — some of the crews used radios that operated at 800 megahertz, while others from smaller volunteer departments around the state were using lower VHF bands.

"In some of the cases, we had guys carrying two different radios just to be able to communicate," Hubright said. "So we're looking at that at a state level, and Pierce is looking at county communications."

"We learned a lot because Pickens County has never seen a fire of this magnitude."
SHANE WALTON
PUMPKINTOWN FIRE CHIEF

"Pierce" — Pickens County Deputy Director of Emergency Management Pierce Womack — has already convened a committee of local responders to address that problem, and he said Pickens County Sheriff Rick Clark is keen to help as well.

Both Womack and Pumpkintown Fire Chief Shane Walton said the experience of battling wildfires in such hilly terrain was valuable training their volunteers may not have gotten otherwise.

"You learn every time you go out on the scene," said Walton, who worked the Pinnacle fire with a half dozen of his volunteers. "We learned a lot because Pickens County has never seen a fire of this magnitude. ... We'll definitely be better prepared if it happens again."

The tree canopy in the burn area was largely unaffected, as most of the fuel for the fire was dead wood and other detritus piled up thick on the forest floor as the result, in part, to last year's extended drought. In fact, Table Rock park rangers have said recently that the mountains could be brighter this spring, with more new growth than they've seen in years.

Pickens County officials are still waiting to hear how much the Federal Emergency Management Agency will pay for the operation, which cost over $5 million. FEMA is expected to cover at least three quarters of the cost, and members of the county's legislative delegation have said they expect the state's House and Senate to be amenable to covering the county's costs for the rest of it.

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South Carolina National Guardsmen prepare a Blackhawk helicopter to carry 700 gallons of water at a time to put out fires on Pinnacle Mountain at Table Rock State Park in Pickens in November.