Light rain slows Pinnacle fire

ABE HARDESTY
ABE.HARDESTY@INDEPENDENTMAIL.COM



SUBMITTED

A helicopter tries to get water to contain the fire at Pinnacle Mountain.

A light, unexpected rain and higher humidity helped slow the pace of the Pinnacle Mountain fire Sunday in Pickens County.

Information from infrared photography showed that another 700 acres had been destroyed in 24 hours — the same amount that burned Friday. The fire has burned 2,100 acres near Table Rock State Park, making it the most damaging fire in the Upstate since 2,856 acres burned in Oconee County in 1978, according to the South Carolina Forestry Commission.

The slower rate of advance gave firefighters renewed hope Sunday, even as the southern edge of the fire reached within a half mile of S.C. 11.

"The rise in relative humidity probably helps more than the rain," said Chisolm Beckham, a resources unit leader with the Forestry Commission. "When dry leaves are piled as high as they are now, it's like a tinderbox, and the higher humidity slows the burn a little."

Mountain fires are typically slower to burn than fires in Lowcountry areas dominated by pine trees, Beckham said, but are more difficult to stop because the terrain limits use of bulldozers and makes firefighting more dangerous.

The fire, which began Monday, has forced crews to dig fire-breaking alleys by hand. South Carolina National Guard members, deploying water buckets by use of a helicopter, are also among the more than 200 workers fighting the fire.

Officials were much more confident Sunday and they were a day earlier, when the fire jumped the intended perimeter on the western side of the mountain, about four miles from Table Rock State Park, and doubled in size — from 700 burned acres to 1,400. That rate of expansion, and a movement southward toward S.C. 11, prompted an evacuation of about 100 residents who live north of S.C. 11.

A drop in the wind speed, along the the rain and higher humidity, enable those families to return to their homes Sunday. Pickens County Emergency Management officials made the call to lift the evacuation this morning after evaluating the progress of firefighting efforts.

"The (revised) firelines we've constructed so far are holding very well, particularly those on the lower portions of the left and right flanks of the fire," Forestry Commission Incident Commander Mike Bozzo said. "These are the areas we were unsure about yesterday."

Officials now hope to contain the fire by using the wide S.C. 11 as the southern perimeter and the Saluda River as the northern perimeter. On Sunday, crews continued to dig fire-breaking alleys to the west (near S.C. 178), and east (from Big Bottom Road to the Table Rock Reservoir), using intentional burns as well as trenches.

Forestry Commission spokesman Russell Hubright said bulldozers were able to cut a line "very close to the Table Rock Lake," by Sunday evening, a point that is expected to assure containment near Table Rock State Park.

"The fire can't go where it has already burned," said Forestry Commission spokesman Doug Wood. "We sacrifice a larger area that way, but we can protect more homes."

Dry conditions are expected to return to the Upstate on Monday. According to the National Weather Service's seven-day forecast, no rain is in sight.

Officials do not expect to have the fire under control for several days, Wood said.