Pickens council declares state of emergency

Evacuations planned today as wildfire battle continues

BY ERIC SPROTT
THE JOURNAL

PICKENS — To help allocate resources in the ongoing battle to put out the fire at Pinnacle Mountain at Table Rock State Park, Pickens County Council called an emergency meeting Wednesday and declared the county to be in a state of emergency.

Meanwhile, a large-scale burnout to help get the fire under control is scheduled to get underway today, while roughly 70 families will be evacuated from an area north of S.C. Highway 11 as a precautionary measure.

The blaze, which as of Wednesday evening covered 3,283 acres and was 35 percent contained, has been going on for more

SEE WILDFIRE, PAGE A5

...vers more than 3K acres

than a week, with 170 personnel now fighting it. Given the slow, but steady, nature of the fight, Pickens County Council chairwoman Jennifer Willis said the time had come to declare a state of emergency to help get the necessary tools to extinguish the wildfire.

"There's been an enormous amount of information that's gone into this decision," she told The Journal. "We've been receiving twice-daily updates on the fire since last week when it broke out.

"We're working diligently to contain the fire, but we're struggling. We need additional resources and the ability to have some flexibility with the way we do business as a government body, and the state of emergency allows us to do that."

In addition to now being able to receive assistance at the county, state and federal levels, Willis added the county already qualified for FEMA funding through the Department of Natural Resources and the South Carolina Forestry Commission.

Denise Kwiatek, the director of Pickens County Emergency Management, added the state of emergency declaration shouldn't cause any panic.

"We're just doing this so we can gather resources," she said. "Panic is not necessary."



Kwiatek

Today's burnout, which is expected to cover more than 2,000 acres, will put additional smoke in the air in the northern part of the county, as officials are discouraging travel on Highway 11, while people with respiratory issues across the area — including Oconee County — are still encouraged to stay indoors as much as possible due to poor air quality.

Officials said Wednesday evening that evacuations will be recommended for residents on Back Park Road, Country Creek Drive and the west side of South Saluda Road north of Highway 11, and evacuees need to plan to be evacuated for 72 hours.

A shelter will be opened at 8 a.m. today at East Pickens Baptist Church, located at 2244 Gentry Memorial Highway in Pickens.

Any evacuees who have animals that need to be sheltered or who need help evacuating are asked to call (864) 898-2437.

A cold front moving through the mountains this weekend will bring high winds and lower humidity, so fire officials are taking aggressive measures to bring the fire under control before that front arrives.

National Guard helicopters continued to drop water on hot spots Wednesday, especially in the Panther Gap area between Pinnacle Mountain and Table Rock. Elsewhere, fire crews improved fire lines and patrolled areas that had been burned out on previous days.

The Associated Press reported Wednesday that more than 5,000 firefighters and support personnel, including many veterans of wildfires in the arid West, and 24 helicopters are battling blazes in the fire zone, which has spread from northern Georgia and eastern Tennessee into eastern Kentucky, the western Carolinas and parts of surrounding states.

More than 30 large fires remained uncontained, federal officials said in a Wednesday update. Fires across the region have burned a total of 128,000 acres, or about nine times the size of Manhattan.

— Justin Lee Campbell and the Associated Press contributed to this report.

esprott@upstatetoday.com | (864) 973-6681
Follow on Twitter @Journal_ESprott