

PHOTOS BY KATIE MCLEAN/ INDEPENDENT I

Linda Tipke of Lake George, New York, hikes the Foothills Trail in Pickens on Thursday with friends she's visiting from Pumpkintown.

Table Rock trails reopen for hiking

Park staff clearing some less traveled ones

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The Pinnacle Mountain fire is gone, and Table Rock State Park's hiking trails are back.

Hikers are flocking back to the park in northern Pickens County, as trails closed by the Pinnacle Mountain fire are being cleared and returned to service.

"We took a pretty good hit in November, obviously, but from then on we've been close to normal," said Scott Stegena, an interpretive ranger at the park. "If it's not raining and not too cold, people are coming out to use the trails."

The Table Rock Trail, Pinnacle Mountain Trail and the Foothills Trail have all reopened, as have the Carrick Creek Falls Overlook and the CCC Lakeside trails. Some of the less traveled trails — Carrick Creek, Mill Creek, Ridge, Palmetto and Mill Creek Falls Spur — all remained closed because of damage from the Pinnacle Mountain fire that consumed over 10,000 acres in and around the state park in November and early December.

Stegena said he and other park staff have been busy clearing those trails since the fire was extinguished in early December. Much of the damage came from dead wood and brush falling onto the trails. Bulldozers churning up earth to make fire breaks in the high-

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A sign along the Foothills Trail indicates trail directions at Table Rock State Park.

Trails

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er elevations scarred some trails, which Stegena said would require more heavy machinery to fix. That work should be done by spring, he said.

The park's tree canopy escaped serious damage, according to Stegena. The fire appears to have cleared out much of the dead wood and detritus on the forest floor without doing too much damage to plant root systems. That would indicate that a bright spring is a possibility.

"We expect a good comeback for most things," Stegena said. "I think we might be pleasantly surprised once spring arrives."

The Pinnacle Mountain fire ignited Nov. 9 and burned for nearly a month. Teams of firefighters from across the U.S., working from a base at the Table Rock Wesleyan Camp, fanned out across the park andup to the North Carolina state line to work lines, make fire breaks and do controlled burns.

South Carolina National Guard helicopters were daily sights, picking up water from park reservoirs and dumping it on hot spots.

Those efforts helped to prevent the Pinnacle fire from crossing into western North Carolina and linking with forest fires that decimated much of Pisgah and Nantahala national forests.

The Federal Emergency Management Agency is expected to pick up three-fourths of the tab for the firefighting effort, with the remaining quarter to be covered by Pickens County.

It's not clear yet as to how much the cleanup will cost Pickens County taxpayers.

"We do not have these figures yet," said Lauren Gilstrap, the county's public information officer. "There are representatives from the State Emergency Management Department coming next week. We will know after that."

State representatives Gary Clary, R-Clemson, and Davey Hiott, R-Pickens, said in December that they thought the Legislature would be willing to step in and pay for the county's share, but there has been no such action yet in this year's session.

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A hiker starts along the Foothills Trail, a section of the Table Rock trail system, on Thursday in Pickens.