

At least five dead as extreme drought, wildfires ravage southeastern US

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Dozens of wildfires have burnt more than 156,000 acres across the southeastern US since the beginning of November. The region is suffering a now five-month-long drought, the worst it has experienced since 2007. The states hit the hardest are Georgia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Kentucky and Tennessee.

Thousands of people have been evacuated, over a thousand are sleeping in Red Cross shelters and tens of thousands of people remain in their homes without power.

At least five deaths have been caused by the fires, including the death of one on-duty firefighter in Kentucky. Four of the biggest active fires have burnt more than 10,000 acres.

One of the most devastated communities is the tourist town of Gatlinburg, Tennessee, where at least three people have been killed. Some 14,000 people were evacuated from the town alone, which has a permanent population of just over 4,000. Fire winds hit peak speeds of 80 miles per hour, and sustained at 30-40 miles per hour for over 10 hours on Sunday night.

“We were watching it, but we didn’t really know how bad it was until somebody said we had to leave,” Shari Deason, a Gatlinburg resident told the *Knoxville News Sentinel*. Deason, her boyfriend, Daniel and her 14-month old son, William, had moved to Tennessee from Mississippi and were living in a motel room. “I didn’t cry last night, and I didn’t cry this morning, but the more I see of all this, I don’t know what I’m going to do. I don’t know if we’ve got a room to go back to. I don’t know if we’ve got anything to go back to.”

Gatlinburg’s median household income is \$32,500, which is \$5,000 less than what it was in 2000. The high cost of land coupled with the low-wage jobs in the tourist industry had already left the future uncertain for the town’s residents before the wildfires. A number of

the town’s tourist destinations, including Westgate Resorts and Black Bear Falls cabins, have been destroyed by fire. Firefighter Bobby Balding described both sides of Gatlinburg’s downtown as an “apocalypse.”

Fire departments throughout the region, insufficiently equipped and understaffed, are struggling to combat the blazes. “Most of these fire departments are volunteer,” Tennessee Fire Deputy Chief Randall Lockhart told WRCB-TV. “They have a regular job, then they go out and help fight this fire the rest of the night.”

Firefighters from as far as Alaska and Puerto Rico have been deployed to the region to assist in containment efforts. In Dade County, Georgia, at least 27 prison inmates have been deployed to clear combustible materials around evacuated residences. The governors of South Carolina and Tennessee have declared a state of emergency and mobilized the National Guard to assist in debris-clearing and dousing efforts.

FEMA has authorized federal funds to later reimburse 75 percent of firefighting and evacuation costs in Tennessee, Georgia, North Carolina, South Carolina and Kentucky.

Fire investigators throughout the region believe that most of the fires have been caused by human activity, through either careless behavior or arson. However, the extreme weather conditions in the region are what have made them so severe.

According to the US Drought Monitor, the southeastern US has suffered moderate drought conditions since May and severe drought conditions since June, with decreased rainfall and increased transfers of water from the land surface to the atmosphere. Conditions have intensified—since the beginning of November, most of the region has

suffered extreme to exceptional drought.

Exacerbating the drought is the La Niña phase of the El Niño-Southern Oscillation cycle, which produces drier, warmer winters in the southern US.

This year has been one of the driest in several North Carolina counties in 105 years, according to state records. The Tennessee Valley Authority has had to throttle hydroelectric power generation to conserve water. Autumn and winter crops are failing to germinate, creating a higher risk of erosion and flash flooding when the region does see precipitation.

Cattle producers have been forced to feed their livestock hay due to a dearth of pasture, or sell off the animals prematurely.

The head of forecast operations at the National Climate Prediction Center, Matthew Rosencrans, observed that the current drought was not as severe as the two-year drought in 2007, but warned, “Droughts like to beget droughts; once you are in one it is very hard to get out of one.” At one point in the 2007 drought, the city of Atlanta had less than 90 days of water supplies left. The National Weather Service’s Climate Prediction Center forecasts high odds of below-normal precipitation in the Southeast for the next three months.

A report published earlier this year by the US Environmental Protection Agency pointed to the impact of climate change on conditions in the region. It noted that since 1970 average annual temperatures in the region have increased by about two degrees Fahrenheit.



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