

Wildfire continues to ravage Gatlinburg, Tennessee

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Wildfires have caused heavy damage to the town of Gatlinburg, Tennessee, as thousands of residents and tourists fled and firefighters continue to struggle to contain the blaze. High winds, unusually warm weather, and extremely dry conditions have fueled fires across the southeastern US in the past month.

Fires have ravaged forested parts of Tennessee, Kentucky, Georgia, the Carolinas and Alabama and claimed at least five lives. Across the region, at least 44 large fires, covering more than 120,000 acres, remain uncontained. Since early November, more than 156,000 acres have burnt.

Many people remain unaccounted for in the fire surrounding Gatlinburg, a working class resort town surrounded by cabins and camping areas in the Great Smoky Mountain National Park. At least four people have died, and nearly four dozen have been injured. Details of the victims have not been released. The latest fatality was announced Wednesday. Officials said the body was retrieved from a burned motel.

Gatlinburg is a destination for honeymooners and family vacations. While it has a permanent population of only 4,000, in the peak tourist season the town can swell to over 40,000 on any given night. Gatlinburg's Sevier County is one of the top issuers of marriage licenses in the country, second only to Las Vegas in the marriage industry.

Even in the off-season, Gatlinburg hosts several times the number of permanent residents in town; at least 14,000 people were evacuated in response to the fires. Of the year-round residents, a great many of them live in poverty on the low wages offered by the tourism industry.

James Jones, a federal worker in Boone, North Carolina, told the *World Socialist Web Site*, "There are numerous fires in the extreme western part of North Carolina and eastern Tennessee." The area has suffered extreme drought for the past six months, he said, and dry conditions along with low humidity were contributing to the fires. "We recently had a fire near Boone that burned over 1,000 acres but no homes were destroyed."

Jones explained that the Gatlinburg blaze originated in the

Chimney Tops (a mountain in Great Smoky Mountain National Park) fire. "On Monday evening, an approaching weather system produced wind gusts up to 80 miles per hour with little to no precipitation." The wind pushed the fire rapidly to the northeast toward Gatlinburg.

Of residents, Jones added, "I am sure this disaster will have an enormous impact on their livelihoods since many of these people have lost everything they own. Many will have to reside in shelters or rely on family, friends, and charity organizations for assistance and support for the foreseeable future."

Among the dozens of structures threatened or destroyed by the fires are numerous wedding chapels, rental cabins and motels, and Dollywood, the theme park in nearby Pigeon Forge owned by country music singer Dolly Parton. Sevier County Mayor Larry Waters said Wednesday that over 150 buildings have been destroyed, with more sustaining damage.

Beyond the direct economic and social damage wrought by the fires, the disaster will have long-term economic consequences. The Great Smoky Mountains drive a tourism industry that generates billions of dollars in revenue each year for the states of Tennessee and North Carolina. Overall, the Smokies are the most popular national park in the US, drawing more than 11 million visitors a year.

Like the flooding that swept through multiple southeastern states this past summer followed by the impact of Hurricane Matthew, the wildfires expose the vulnerability of millions of Americans to the most primitive of dangers. Federal, state, and local emergency response budgets have been slashed to the bone, infrastructure has deteriorated, and the working class has been subjected to a drastic decline in its social safety net and economic position.

Those whose livelihoods and homes are destroyed in the fires will confront the grim task of "putting their lives back together" with the help of volunteers, a patchwork of charities, and paltry aid from federal authorities. Most will see next to nothing in financial assistance, and entire communities will be left on their own to rebuild.

Local news coverage of the evacuations reveals the fragile social existence of the working poor—and the fact that without quick thinking and the courageous actions of rescuers and residents, the death toll could easily be much higher.

The local ABC news affiliate reported that evacuees were “forced to leave with only the clothes on their backs as fire surrounded their homes.” A 52-year-old Gatlinburg resident, Mark Benzschawel, told a CNN reporter that police banged on his door Monday night to tell him to escape. “There was flames everywhere,” Benzschawel said. “It was a firestorm.” He alerted the neighbor, who he said was able to get out with her dog.

“We pray we don’t experience any more fatalities,” Gatlinburg Fire Chief Greg Miller told reporters, “but there are still areas that we’re trying to get to because of down trees and down power lines.” Officials said that strong wind gusts sent embers and smoke billowing down the mountainsides into populated areas and downing electric lines that sparked more fires. “Everything was like a perfect storm,” Cassius Cash, the superintendent of the Smokies commented to CNN’s local affiliate WATE.

Michael Reed told WATE reporters that he was unable to locate his wife and two daughters after being separated from them Monday night when he and his son took the family’s only vehicle to scout out the location of an approaching fire line. He and his son became mired in a traffic jam full of people trying to escape, when his wife, Constance, called him. “She...said there were flames across the street from the house. I told her to call 911.” Reed rushed back to the house, where, he said, “The road was on fire and every house was engulfed in flames. I thought she’d be standing in the driveway.” His wife, along with their 12-year-old and 9-year-old children remain missing.

Memphis couple Jon and Janet Summers are also missing, after they were separated from their three sons Monday. The children were found unconscious and taken to the hospital.

Some people who were ordered to evacuate at the last moment were unable to leave because of fallen trees, which blocked roads. Guests at the Park Vista Hotel were surrounded by fire and simply watched the flames at the edges of the parking lot. Burning debris blocked the only road out from the hotel. “When you opened the doors, it just blew you back,” said one occupant. “Embers started flying into the hotel.”

One mother who felt she and her children were succumbing to the smoke said she wrote down their names on a piece of paper, hoping they could be identified. Through sobs, she told WBIR 10 News, “I remember thinking, I was so thankful that we would pass out, so that they wouldn’t have to experience anything more devastating

than what they had already experienced.” She added to her note to say goodbye to their family. “I wrote to say that we love you and we are cuddling, calm, and at peace.” Emergency crews evacuated them after battling back flames around the hotel and clearing the roadway.

Gatlinburg resident Darlene Verito told WBIR that her family barely escaped before the fire leapt from the hillsides into the yards of their neighborhood. One of her sons came running, she said, “saying ‘The hill is on fire.’ We looked behind us, I saw a spark.” As they piled into the car, they watched the fire explode. “The whole backyard was in flames. The houses next to ours were on fire. You felt the heat inside the car and you couldn’t see two feet in front of you, and there was no one that was going to be able to come and help us,” Verito said. “I actually, to be honest with you, when I was on the phone with 911, telling them we couldn’t get down, I thought we were going to die. The smoke was filling the car, the heat, my kids—it was definitely survival mode.”

The emergency response to fires across the region has depended upon contingents of volunteer firefighters from at least 23 states. In Georgia, some 500 firefighters are stationed to fight blazes in the Chatthoochee-Oconee National Forest, where drought has created a tinderbox. Some areas of Georgia and North Carolina have seen no rain for months, and fire crews have been working 18-hour days.

Many of the fires have been attributed to arson, but the deep droughts have enabled the fires to spread far wider than the typical wildfires the southeastern US has witnessed in the past. The unprecedented conditions point to shifts in the climate. The year 2016 has been the hottest ever recorded, and severe weather has produced “100-year floods” and other anomalous weather disasters. Warm weather over a long period, dry conditions, and the accumulation of dry leaves and wood in forests all contribute to the potential “firestorms” like those around Gatlinburg.

“The region has been and still is experiencing exceptional drought, conditions in general entering this fall season were much drier than usual,” said Jim Vose, a scientist with the Forest Service Southern Research Station in an interview with the *Christian Science Monitor*. “Most climate models predict that these kinds of conditions are likely to occur more frequently in the future.”



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