

Gatlinburg, Tennessee fire death toll rises to 13

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The death toll from wildfires in Gatlinburg, Tennessee has risen to 13, and an estimated 70 people remain missing as search and rescue efforts continue in the gutted city. Wildfires that began in the Chimney Tops area of the Smoky Mountains late last week spread rapidly, destroying at least 1,000 structures in Sevier County. Containment and prevention efforts are at a critical juncture in a region that has been parched by drought.

Reports of newly documented fatalities come amid questions about how Tennessee Emergency Management Agency (TEMA), as well as city and county officials, have handled the fire and evacuation warnings as the fires gained ground. TEMA and Sevier County and Gatlinburg officials have swapped blame for the poorly managed disaster. TEMA claims that evacuation warnings were sent to anyone in the area with a mobile device by 9 p.m. on Monday night. By that time, however, the fires had already devastated much of the town and cell service was down for several people.

Sevier County Mayor Larry Waters, questioned about the response to the fires at a press conference on Friday evening, defended the county's response, stating that he refused to engage in "Monday morning quarterbacking" and essentially laying the blame for the lack of early evacuations on a lack of cell service.

At the same press conference, Great Smoky Mountains National Park Superintendent Cassius Cash stated that park, county and state agencies had allocated the appropriate amount of resources to combat the flames. He cited the use of four helicopters to drop water Sunday, and said that winds had swept through earlier than forecasted. His deputy further defended the response, stating that "1,000 firefighters and engines lined up end to end" couldn't have doused the flames.

A video shot by Gatlinburg resident Michael Luciano as he fled the inflamed Chalet Village reveals the horrors of attempting to evacuate the Appalachian town. In the video, the flames spread rapidly on either side of the steep, curvy mountain road. Embers spray the vehicle as Luciano screams at the driver, "Go! Go! Step on the gas!" The driver complains about the poor visibility in the smoke, and Luciano's dog can be heard panting from the heat. At one point in the video, Luciano says that no evacuation warnings had gotten through to Chalet Village—"not even from the news."

Mandatory evacuation orders remain in place as of Friday night, although Gatlinburg police have allowed homeowners, renters and business owners, as well as insurance adjusters, to check in on properties and to retrieve any belongings. Checkpoints were set up at a single entry point. Residents and property owners were required to produce proof of residency.

Many areas of the city remain dangerous, due to downed power lines and remaining hot spots among the ashes. Gatlinburg's fire chief called the devastation "unfathomable." While he attempted to offer hope to those awaiting news of missing loved ones, he warned that the death toll would continue to mount as search efforts continued.

"We're never going to give up hope," he said to reporters. "I will always hang onto hope that there's a chance of rescue," he stated at a news conference on Thursday. "But now ... We have to come to a realization that the potential is great that it could be more of a recovery than a rescue."

In some parts of Sevier County, Miller stated, structures had been so completely destroyed that "to search much further would take forensics."

The number of people unaccounted for in Sevier County remains unclear, and officials have stated that

they are currently following up on about 70 leads. They cautioned that this number may not reflect the actual number of missing persons.

Fire departments from other parts of Tennessee have sent search and rescue personnel to assist with efforts. Franklin Fire Department engineer Jeff Boggs, who had just recently vacationed in Gatlinburg, characterized the damage as “apocalyptic”: “That’s honestly the best way I know to describe it,” he told Nolensville Home Page reporters. “I’ve never seen fire on this scale, and I probably won’t see it again.”

“The situation is awful,” Boggs said. “Even in doing what we do, we are going to see awful stuff.”

Boggs also noted, “There’s military, all kinds of state highway patrol and state this and that. There are people from South Carolina and as far away as Arizona.”

As people continue to grieve the loved ones they lost in the fires, and as others continue to hold out hope for a reunion with missing family members, Sevier County officials have begun focusing more upon the source of the fire. The National Park Service and the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives believe the fire was man-made and are investigating it as arson.

While the largest fire has been successfully extinguished, many smaller fires remain. In the dry conditions, the dangers posed by those remaining fires—as well as the many hot spots among the downed timber and dry leaves—continue to be a threat that firefighters must continue to combat.



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