

East Tennessee wildfires prompt evacuations of thousands of residents and tourists

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Firefighters in East Tennessee have been working to contain a series of wildfires that began last week. The fires have so far consumed over 3,000 acres and have led to the evacuation of roughly 11,000 homes and the displacement of hundreds of residents and tourists. Over 300 structures have been lost completely. As of this writing, no deaths or missing persons have been reported.

While officials have said that they are still investigating the cause of the fires, the National Weather Service (NWS) has indicated that the fires are most likely the result of strong winds mixing with dry ground conditions and low relative humidity. Imaging provided by the NWS shows that the region experienced winds ranging from 60 to 85 miles per hour on the day that the first fire was reported.

Manmade climate change driven by the burning of fossil fuels has increased the average temperature in Tennessee by 1.6 degrees Fahrenheit over the last three decades. This has contributed to more extreme weather patterns, including the drought conditions which have primed conditions for the intensification of wildfires in the region.

In an April 4 press conference, the Tennessee Division of Forestry provided an update on the state's efforts to contain the three blazes. In Sevier County, the Hatcher Mountain-Indigo Lane fire is 98 percent contained and has burned approximately 2,500 acres; the Millstone Gap-Dupont fire is 64 percent contained and has burned roughly 700 acres. In Campbell County, northwest of Sevier, the East Douglas Lane fire is 50 percent contained and has burned around 50 acres. Sevier County has lifted its evacuation orders, and only one road remains closed.

Over 200 personnel and 70 agencies have been called in to battle the fires. This includes the Tennessee

National Guard, who have been using Blackhawk helicopters to conduct aerial water drops. Forestry official James Heaton explained some of the challenges that firefighters on the ground have been facing, telling local ABC affiliate WATE 6, "This fire has been made more difficult due to the very steep terrain, very rocky slopes, so it's very hard for firefighters to access the mountains."

The fires have also raised the danger of COVID-19. Tennessee was among the first states to begin dismantling COVID-19 protections, to the extent they existed. In November of last year, as the Omicron variant was ripping through society, the state's far right governor, Bill Lee, signed into law legislation banning mask and vaccine mandates. Since then, his administration has begun ending daily case reporting, in tandem with the Democratic Biden administration.

Under conditions where the more infectious BA.2 subvariant is quickly spreading, evacuees from the fires were forced to shelter, with over one hundred people at one point occupying a single shelter, undoubtedly without even the most basic mitigation measures like masking, social distancing, and proper ventilation. A number of the evacuees were likely tourists who will now potentially be carrying the virus with them back to their own communities. According to official reporting, Sevier County has seen 30,259 total cases and 403 COVID deaths since 2020.

Sevier County is one of the most popular tourist destinations in the state, with hundreds of thousands flocking each year to the mountain resort towns of Gatlinburg and Pigeon Forge. The county's tourism industry, according to data published by the Tennessee Department of Tourist Development, produced nearly \$2.4 billion in revenue in 2020, a 13 percent decline over the previous year that was due primarily to the

eruption of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Despite this massive sum, the county only spent \$1.12 million on “Fire Prevention and Control” the same year, even though the area is known to be particularly susceptible to wildfires. Highlighting the dilapidated state of the county’s infrastructure, it was reported that the Sevier County Volunteer Fire Department had just a single fire tanker truck at their disposal, which was ultimately consumed in the inferno.

Indeed, this data is all the more damning considering that Sevier County was recently the site of one of the deadliest and most damaging fire disasters in the eastern United States. The 2016 Gatlinburg wildfires, which incinerated 16,000 acres over the course of a month, claimed the lives of 14, injured 190, and forced the evacuations of 14,000 residents and tourists. Over 2,000 structures were either damaged or destroyed. The total cost of damages was \$2 billion.

The disaster was exacerbated by the mishandling of the Tennessee Emergency Management Agency (TEMA), along with city and county officials. For example, TEMA failed to send out evacuation notices in time, and by the time the agency finally did, the fires had already devastated much of the town and many residents were without cell phone service.

Following the disaster, officials attempted to charge two teenagers with aggravated arson, but the case was dropped due to insufficient evidence. It was subsequently revealed that many of the fires were started by downed power lines, implicating local utilities and city officials.

Efforts by local residents to learn more about the causes of the disaster were hampered by Sevier County’s City Commission and mayor, who passed a resolution drastically limiting the ability of citizens to exercise their free speech rights at Commission meetings. Resolution 939 requires citizens to submit their questions no later than five days before a Commission meeting, who will then decide whether to address them.



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