

Printable version: Thursday, May 3, 2007

## 5. WILDFIRES: Record Ga. blaze moves into Okefenokee Swamp; agencies see summer risks

Arthur O'Donnell, *Land Letter* editor

A difficult-to-control wildfire that has closed parts of the Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge is part of a record-setting complex of blazes currently being fought in southeast Georgia. Two large fires that began last month near Waycross, Ga., have now burned through more than 90,000 acres, according to the National Fire Information Center.

Started after a tree fell across high-voltage electric wires on April 16, the Sweat Farm Road/Big Turnaround complex fire is now about 70 percent contained but not expected to be fully under control until after June 1. Together the blazes comprise the largest wildfire ever recorded in the state.

About 875 firefighters from the Georgia Forestry Commission and six surrounding states are working to contain the blazes, which have caused about \$20 million in damages so far and destroyed 21 homes. No one was reported injured in any of the fires.



A helicopter checks the fireline, helping to keep the Waycross, Ga.-area blaze within an established perimeter. Photo courtesy of [www.inciweb.org](http://www.inciweb.org).

expecting another potentially tough year.

So far this year, however, the number of blazes recorded by NIFC is about average at 25,307 as of May 3, with 498,694 acres burned. The land figure is somewhat below the eight-year average of 619,000 acres, but the averages were greatly boosted by record tallies in 2006. By this time last year, there had already been 35,113 wildfires that covered more than 2.25 million acres, which included several huge Texas grass fires early in the year ([Land Letter](#), Nov. 2, 2006).

While Western lands are highly vulnerable as the summer approaches, it appears that Minnesota has also been prone to blazes, with over 518 fires to date affecting 50,000 acres and four separate fires currently burning 12,160 acres, mainly in the northwest corner of the state. According to the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources, the 25,000-acre Juneberry fire near Badgers is now fully contained, although more than half the state remains on an elevated fire alert.

### Dry conditions, warm temps raise fire risks in West, Southeast

Drought, low snowpack and warm temperatures have primed the West for another dramatic wildfire season, the National Interagency Fire Center said this week.

Florida, southern Georgia, Alaska and the Rocky Mountains are also potential trouble spots, the center said. Last year, the government spent nearly \$2 billion fighting fires that burned more than 9.9 million acres.

Tom Wordell, a Forest Service fire analyst, said dry conditions in California's Sierra Nevada and the Northern Rocky Mountains are expected to emerge earlier this year than last.

Gov. Sonny Perdue (R) toured the area Tuesday, pledging to seek federal disaster assistance but declining to specify how much. "When you're fighting fire, it's not time to balance your checkbook," the Republican governor told reporters.

Although watching the situation closely, U.S. Fish and Wildlife managers are not overly concerned that the blaze has entered the Okefenokee Swamp. According to daily reports on the situation, "the burning of the swamp will, in the long-term, ultimately benefit the swamp wilderness habitat, which is a fire-dependent ecosystem." Nonetheless, firefighters have moved to protect several historic structures in the refuge and state Swamp Park. They are trying to prevent the blaze from moving past the swamp line or crossing Highway 1.

There are concerns about a number of smaller fires in the area that appear to be caused by arson. State officials said that arson is the second leading cause of fires, accounting for 18 percent of wildfires in the state. Several suspicious fires in Ware and Charlton counties are being investigated.

Across the country, fire season is just starting to hit stride, with officials