

Printable version: Thursday, May 17, 2007

5. WILDFIRES: Okefenokee refuge fire poses double trouble

Arthur O'Donnell, *Land Letter* editor

Firefighters from across the nation have joined the effort to control several large fires centered in the Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge in Georgia. Although crews are apparently making headway in containing the Sweat Farm Road/Big Turnaround complex fire that began in mid-April, an even larger blaze is posing a significant threat to public lands and private structures ([Land Letter](#), May 3).

The Bugaboo scrub fire, evidently begun May 5 by a lightning strike in the southern end of the Okefenokee Swamp, has now grown to over 250,000 acres and spread into northern Florida, closing both the wildlife refuge and parts of the Osceola National Forest.

In all, 1,600 firefighters from state and federal services -- some from as far away as California -- are working to stem the blazes, which are largely fueled by swamp scrub and pine plantations.



A helicopter drops flame retardant at the fire line of the Ham Lake fire in Minnesota. Wildfires are being reported across the nation somewhat earlier than usual because of dry conditions. Photo by Richard Sennott/Great Basin team. Courtesy of www.inciweb.org.

Besides shutting the Okefenokee refuge and Osceola forestlands to the public, the heavy smoke and threats of fire have closed the Dixon Memorial State Forest and Stephen C. Foster State Park in Georgia. As many as 1,000 homes and private buildings were also being threatened.

According to the National Interagency Fire Center's latest figures, the Sweat Farm Road fire, at 46,264 acres, was 81 percent contained yesterday. The adjoining Big Turnaround fire, at just over 90,000 acres, was 45 percent contained. Almost half of the affected area, 62,000 acres, lies within the northern portion of the national wildlife refuge, and NIFC was still projecting a high potential for fire area growth because of increased winds and continued dry weather.

However, the southern tip of Big Turnaround is just 3.5 miles from the edge of the much larger Bugaboo fires, which by yesterday were covering 136,565 acres in Georgia and

119,501 acres in Florida. In particular, Georgia's Bugaboo scrub fire was just 15 percent contained and exhibited an "extreme" potential for further growth.

The Georgia Forestry Commission warned that gusting winds could result in "rapid and unpredictable fire behavior." Crews were trying to prevent the two large blazes from merging.

National outlook troubling

While most of the national effort has been focused on the fires in the drought-stricken Southeast, there are an increasing number of wildfires being reported around the country -- somewhat earlier than the usual fire season. By midweek, federal fire managers reported 11 large still-active blazes totaling nearly a half million acres across the nation. In southern Florida, a complex group of fires was reportedly covering 17,200 acres in the Big Cypress National Preserve. Minnesota firefighters joined with Canadian crews to try to contain the 75,000-acre Ham Lake fire that began in the Superior National Forest on May 5 before spreading across the international border. Over 1,000 firefighters had brought the Ham Lake blaze into 20 percent containment yesterday.

A relatively small but high profile brush fire on Catalina Island, off the California coast, was brought under control last weekend after forcing the evacuation of the island's tourist center at Avalon.