



## **Chimney Tops 2 Fire Summary 12/12/2016**

### **Incident Summary:**

The Chimney Tops 2 Fire was reported in Great Smoky Mountains National Park near Gatlinburg, TN, on Wednesday, November 23, 2016, at approximately 5:30 p.m. The wildfire began burning in a remote location (Chimney Tops) of the park in steep terrain with vertical cliffs and narrow rocky ridges making access to the wildfire area difficult for firefighting efforts. On Monday, November 27<sup>th</sup>, exceptional drought conditions and extreme winds caused the wildfire to grow rapidly, causing numerous new wildfire starts from embers carried far in front of the main fire, as well as downed powerlines within the Gatlinburg community. The wildfire was determined to be human-caused and is currently under investigation. The Tennessee Bureau of Investigation reported that two juveniles have been arrested for aggravated arson in connection with the Chimney Tops 2 Fire and Sevier County fires.

### **Chronology:**

#### **Wednesday, November 23, 2016**

- At approximately 5:30 p.m., park firefighters observed a smoke column at the top of Chimney Tops located about 2 miles off-road by trail. (Chimney Tops is located about 5.5 miles inside the park.)
- A crew hiked into the fire as darkness approached and discovered a fire burning among a rocky terrain at the top.
- With darkness and the inaccessible terrain, vertical drop offs and thick vegetation interspersed, the incident commander determined it would not have been safe, effective or possible to try to fight the fire directly.

#### **Thursday-Saturday, November 24-26**

- A crew returned to the fire on Thursday morning and identified a containment area that was lower down on the mountain in terrain more conducive to fighting fire with a higher chance for success.
- Over the next 3 days (Thursday thru Saturday), there was very slow fire growth (1.5 acres-6 acres) as the fire smoldered and crept down slope in the steep, rocky terrain.

#### **Sunday, November 27**

- The relative humidity dropped and a weather inversion lifted, causing the fire activity to increase. Firefighters ordered three large helicopters to make bucket drops on the fire throughout the day to slow the spread of fire. An order was placed for additional firefighters and wildland engines. At the end of the day on Sunday, the size was about 35 acres.
- Overnight Sunday the weather changed. The relative humidity remained low and overnight winds increased to roughly 20-40 mph. A wind event had been forecast to begin at 1 p.m.

but strong winds developed earlier than forecasted. The fire was not staffed at night due to falling rocks and dangerous snags.

### **Monday, November 28**

- After daylight, park staff discovered that burning embers created spot fires as far as ½-1 mile from the main fire on Chimney Tops. Multiple spots were outside the containment area around Chimneys Picnic Area and another spot high on the slope on Bullhead Ridge.
- Given the exceptional drought conditions, low humidity, and high winds, the fire activity became extreme. Spot fires ½-1 mile away from the fire front is extremely rare in this part of the country and in these fuel types.
- Park fire crews started providing structural protection in the park.
- Fire departments were alerted outside the park in Gatlinburg to monitor potential spot fires.
- Monday morning, air support was ordered but could not fly due to high winds and poor visibility. More crews and a complex fire incident management team were ordered by the park.
- A spot fire was discovered in the Twin Creeks area of the park, 3 miles downwind from Bullhead Ridge, at about 11:30 a.m. The Fire was about 1.5 miles from the park boundary.
- Gatlinburg Fire Department and park crews responded to provide structure protection. TN Division of Forestry responded with bulldozers and crews.
- Winds increased over the course of the day and evening to 40-50 mph sustained with gusts up to 87 mph. Smoke reduced visibility. The Gatlinburg Fire Department brought in fire support from all over the region.
- Shortly after 5:00 p.m., as the Chimney Tops fire approached the boundary, winds started taking down powerlines which ignited some new fires in the city and part of the county.
- The city of Gatlinburg went from having no fires in the city at 5:00 p.m. to having multiple active fires roughly an hour later. The fire situation intensified from there in the extreme windy conditions.

### **Tuesday, November 29**

- Fire activity started to subside with steady rain and diminishing winds after 2:00 a.m.