

FIRE IN THE SOUTH

The Southern Wildfire Risk Assessment

A REPORT BY THE SOUTHERN GROUP OF STATE FORESTERS

2008

Executive Summary

THE SOUTH IS ONE of the fastest growing regions in the nation, with an estimated population growth of 1.5 million people per year. The South also consistently has the highest number of wildfires per year. Population growth is pushing housing developments further into natural and forested areas where most of these wildfires occur. This situation puts many lives and communities at risk each year. For example, in 2006 most of the wildfires that occurred in Texas were less than two miles from a community. In that same year, the 10-year average of fires from October through March in a three parish area near New Orleans was 2,350 fires, which burned 27,000 acres.

The frequency of fires occurring in the South is highly variable, due in large part to the variability in weather patterns. Dry weather patterns can increase fire frequency and fire size; for example:

- During 2007, Tennessee had one of the worst droughts in its history and

by June, 2,000 fires had burned 33,000 acres, which is a typical amount for an entire year.

- For one 30-day period during the dry spring fire season of 2004, Georgia averaged more than 100 wildfires per day.
- In a single day in 2008, North Carolina fought 302 fires that burned 9,400 acres, which is almost half of the 10-year average for acreage burned annually.

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- Since 2005, the Kentucky Division of Forestry has suppressed 287 wildfires that were greater than 100 acres in size.
- In March of 2007, Alabama wildfires burned nearly 1,000 acres per day.

During dry years with higher than normal fire occurrence, effects on infrastructure and communities can be significant. Following are some examples:

- In 2006, nearly 2,500 structures were destroyed and at least 20 people were killed in wildfires in Texas and Oklahoma.
- In 2006, the Arkansas Forestry Commission fought 2,461 fires that destroyed 130 structures.
- During two days in 2008, South Carolina experienced 179 fires that damaged or destroyed 43 structures and threatened another 36 structures.

To address the significant wildfire problem in the South, all 13 southern states and several Federal agencies pooled





their resources to conduct a regional Southern Wildfire Risk Assessment. Some of the main objectives of this assessment were to (1) identify areas most likely to have wildfires, (2) identify communities most susceptible to wildfire damage, (3) prioritize fuel reduction treatment programs, (4) help agencies work together to improve emergency response across jurisdictions, and (5) help prioritize and illustrate the need for Community Wildfire Protection Plans.

The Southern Wildfire Risk Assessment analyzed several key components of wildfire risk in the South. Some of the major findings of the assessment were as follows:

- Wildfire risk is widespread across the South with more than 5 million acres at high risk of wildfire, based on the likelihood of each acre burning.
- There are 118,083 communities at risk of wildfire damage in the South and of those, 43 percent, or more than 50,000 communities, are at high to very high risk.
- Wildfire occurrence across the South is high; there are an average of 68,000 wildfires that burn a total of approximately 938,000 acres per year.
- The wildfire risk assessment classifies more than 100 million acres in the South as having moderate to extreme fire occurrence per year based on historical wildfire ignition data.
- In the South, more than 88 million acres are classified as wildland-

urban interface (WUI), areas where communities and homes are next to or within fire-prone natural areas.

- The wildfire risk assessment mapped fuels consistently in each southern state for the first time, which enhances wildfire management and protection planning.

In the fire-adapted ecosystems of the South, the issue is not whether an area will burn but when it will burn and at what intensity. The Southern Wildfire Risk Assessment is being used to address this issue by state and federal agencies to support wildfire planning and protection

efforts. At the local level, the assessment is being used to increase awareness of the fire problem in the South and help the public understand fire management issues. The assessment also demonstrates the necessity for fuel reduction treatments, generates awareness of and support for wildfire protection planning, and helps agencies determine how they can work together to deploy limited firefighting resources. Additionally, it demonstrates the necessity for funding to implement regulatory actions, and it supports budget requests with concise and equitable state information about wildfire risk.

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To view the *Fire in the South 2* report, please visit: www.southernwildfirerisk.com/reports/FireInTheSouth2.pdf

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