



A Different Kind of Thanksgiving

By John Goff

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As Thanksgiving Day was approaching this year, I actually had time to reflect on a few things. Compared to this time last year, we at the Alabama Forestry Commission truly had a lot for which to be thankful. Because of the state-wide drought in 2016, we were experiencing one of the worst fall fire seasons we had seen in 10 years! Wildfire behaviors were witnessed that only the agency's 'old timers' had ever seen . . . re-burns (when a wildfire burns through a stand and the resulting needle cast falls on the forest floor; then the stand 're-burns' escaping containment), crown fires (when the tree canopy, rather than ground litter, is the carrier of the fire), as well as fires spotting a quarter mile in front of the flaming front, igniting yet another fire with which to contend, creating a very dangerous situation. Yes, all of these situations were occurring here in Alabama, not California!

It all started in mid-September and culminated on November 28, with 2,198 fires that burned 29,533 acres during that two-and-

a-half-month period. November 28, 2016, will be remembered in history as the day that wildfires raged through Gatlinburg, with 14 lives lost as a result of that tragedy. On that same day – November 28, 2016 – wildland firefighters with the Alabama Forestry Commission had their hands full as well, responding to 106 wildfires that burned 3,201 acres.

There were several significant events that happened last fall worthy of pointing out:

- There were 36 'named' wildfires (over 100 acres) including the Cyclops Fire (1,308 acres) and the Lookout Mountain Fire (2,096 acres)!
- To cover the shortage of wildland firefighters in the northern part of the state, the AFC shifted personnel resources from the southern area of the state. A total of 28 employees served these one-week 'tours of duty' away from their homes and families.

***Fall 2016: 2,198 wildfires
burned 29,533 acres***

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From a historical standpoint, in the past 10 years at least, Alabama has not experienced a two-and-a-half month ‘consecutive’ period with the number of fire occurrences or acres burned as we saw during September through November of 2016. No other two-and-a-half-month stretch even comes close . . . 75 days with no breaks! The main point to make is that we experienced no significant injuries. Our guys and gals spent many long hours in the woods and on the roads, remaining safe through all the wildfires. That says a lot about our employees and the quality of work they perform when protecting your forests.

The number of wildfires that the AFC controlled last fall was also unprecedented for the number of wildland firefighters we had on staff, 156. Currently our staffing numbers have fallen even further to 137, setting the stage for a shortfall of resources when, not if, we have another fall fire season such as last year.

From the public standpoint, all the wildfires were handled last fall with minimal property loss and no fatalities. However, it was a huge ordeal for the AFC to accomplish. Some might say, “The Alabama Forestry Commission handled it, so they must be okay from a funding and personnel standpoint.” Right? Well, no. With declining budgets, we have neither adequate staff nor equipment to do our jobs safely and efficiently. Alabama ranks third in the nation for most timber (second, east of the Mississippi River, behind Georgia). Yet this agency – which is mandated to protect those very valuable resources that bring in over \$10 billion in revenue to the state every year – is one of the most underfunded forestry agencies in the Southeast.

Compared to the same time frame as last year’s fall fire outbreak, the 2017 fall fire season has been a walk in the park with only 83 wildfires burning 470 acres. On Thanksgiving Day alone last year, the AFC responded to 22 wildfires for 456 acres. That means that approximately 50 AFC wildland firefighters were away from their families for at least some, if not all, of Thanksgiving Day in 2016.

In 2006, I had to leave our Thanksgiving Day festivities early to respond to a wildfire in Clay County where I was working at the time. There was no way we could have known that day, but it ended up being the last time I saw my Dad, who passed away a week later. Our employees sacrifice a lot of family time; it comes with the job, but it is not recognized nearly enough. We understand those sacrifices here inside the agency, but I’m not sure it ever gets voiced outside the agency. Maybe now you will have a better understanding of what an AFC firefighter has sacrificed when they show up to contain a wildfire after hours or on the weekend (be it Thanksgiving, Christmas, a kid’s birthday, ballgame, or a wedding anniversary).

As you sit down to dinner this Holiday Season with your families, you can rest assured if it’s a pretty fall or winter day outside, there is a wildfire somewhere in the state, and an Alabama Forestry Commission wildland firefighter is there. 🙏

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- A total of 16 equipment resources (dozers and wildland fire engines) were relocated from south Alabama to north Alabama.
- The AFC partnered with several other agencies who assisted in wildfire suppression on a much higher level than normal, which was crucial to getting the job done due to our reduced staffing. Those partners included the U.S. Forest Service, Alabama Law Enforcement Agency (ALEA), Alabama National Guard, countless volunteer fire departments, the Georgia Forestry Commission, Alabama A&M ‘Fire Dawgs,’ Westervelt, Warrior Tractor, state and county EMAs, as well as countless media outlets.
- Additionally, the AFC coordinated with the Alabama National Guard, ALEA, and the National Forests of Alabama for air support. There was even a fire-retardant drop in Alabama, the first one ever!
- The AFC spent just over \$2 million to contain the 2016 fall wildfires.