

## Fire worries heat up with dry, scorching days

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With temperatures reaching 100 degrees on Thursday and drought conditions advancing each sunny day, Chattanooga-area residents may soon have another detail to sweat: forest fires.

The volatile combination of a seven-inch rain deficit for the year and a high-pressure system drying out the soil already has proved troublesome for North Georgia firefighters.

Earlier this week, one 10-acre fire burned for more than three days in Whitfield County before firefighters brought it under control with the help of bulldozers and helicopters.

Neal Pascal, a meteorologist at WRCB-TV, said the cycle of hot and dry winds that have plagued the East for the past two weeks is responsible for the hazardous conditions.

Relief may come this weekend when forecasters are predicting up to one inch of rain. Following that, temperatures should drop to about 89 degrees and stay around 90 degrees for all of next week, Mr. Pascal said.

"The drought situation right now is not critical," Mr. Pascal said. "It is getting serious, though."

Tim Phelps, information and education program specialist for the Tennessee Division of Forestry, said fire season usually runs from October through May because vegetation contains less water during those months. However, because of unusually high temperatures and lack of rain, the summer's vegetation is drying out and becoming flammable, he said.

That's what firefighters in North Georgia have been grappling with for the past four days on the Rocky Face Mountain fire.

Jeremy Ridley, a ranger with the Georgia Forestry Commission, said the fire probably began on Sunday night when someone tried to set fire to empty fireworks boxes that firefighters later found charred. State investigators are pursuing the possibility of arson, he said.

Josh Burnette, assistant district manager for the Georgia Forestry Commission, said firefighters determine the possibility of forest fires based on a one-to-1,000 scale, with the larger number representing drier soil.

"Anything 500 or over puts us at a risk for fires," Mr. Burnette said. "The Georgia fire registered as a 600 on our scale."

Mr. Burnette said people should be aware of materials that could spark or fuel a fire, including fireworks, campfires, pine needles, straw and sparks from electronics.

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