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Sent: Tuesday, December 20, 2016 11:02 AM
To: Haley, Nikki
Subject: FW: Playing with fire: SC not ready for next big blaze - Seneca Journal 12/20/2016

Playing with fire: SC not ready for next big blaze

BY GENE KODAMA

The nation watched in horror recently as downtown Gatlinburg went up in flames in a matter of hours and with little warning. At the same time, another mountain blaze — the largest, longest and costliest in Upstate history — was burning through more than 10,000 acres in Pickens and Greenville counties and into North Carolina.

The Pinnacle Mountain fire at Table Rock State Park did not produce spectacular flame lengths, mass hysteria or sensational headlines like the Gatlinburg fire did, but it was no less serious. It was started by an escaped campfire on Nov. 9 and fought by more than 300 firefighters and support personnel until declared “contained” nearly a month later, on Dec. 4. “Control” will be declared when firefighters are confident that the fire will be held by the fire lines.

The firefighting team was led by the S.C. Forestry Commission and assisted by dozens of local, state and federal resources. This team miraculously prevented the loss of a single home or structure and averted any deaths or significant injuries from the fire. That effort will end up costing about \$5 million.

The size and complexity of the fire, created by the inaccessible and dangerous terrain, exposed the commission’s shortage of staff and equipment to handle such an event while still responding to other major events.

If other major fires had occurred, as has happened in neighboring states,

Commission staffing is currently not adequate to handle multiple simultaneous fires and other disasters. Our incident management team is called upon not only to fight wildfires but also to act as the state’s lead team for other disasters, from hurricanes to floods. It has been dispatched on multiple occasions in just the past year.

Thankfully, there will be some federal assistance available through FEMA to reduce the financial impact to the state, and donations and volunteers reduced the cost considerably.

For the first time in the agency’s 90-year history, the Forestry Commission had to request out-of-state personnel to assist us. Equipment shortages also became evident as older bulldozers were not able to handle the steep terrain, and open-cab bulldozers continued to expose firefighters to excessive heat, smoke and debris. Some operators had to leave the fire lines because of the intense and prolonged smoke exposure.

State funding has helped the agency acquire about 60 enclosed-cab bulldozers, but more than 100 are still open-cab, around 20 years old and not always reliable. All open-cab bulldozers need to be replaced with enclosed-cab models as quickly as possible. Ideally, no bulldozer should be kept in service for more than 15 years.

For too long, South Carolina has been playing with fire with inadequate wildland firefighting equipment and staffing. With long-term weather forecasts predicting more

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"When the last tree has been cut down, the last fish caught, the last lake poisoned, only then will we realize that one cannot eat money." - possibly a Native American Chief