

# Road Reopens As Forest Fire Cools

BY SUSAN USHER

After a week of "road closed" signs and detours, N.C. 211 reopened to through traffic between Supply and Southport around the clock Sunday.

The road, with firefighting traffic still heavy at times, was expected to remain open as the first forest service crews from across the state begin packing their equipment Monday and heading home.

Ground crews spent the day Tuesday "hunting hard-to-find smoke to put water on," said Greg Pate, a forest service spokesman. "It's been a good day."

"All our ZADAR flights and infrared photographs show that most of the fire is cool, except for the small areas we worked today. We're going to fly over again tomorrow morning and see if there are any hot spots left."

The infrared views show that areas around homes along N.C. 211 evacuated temporarily last Tuesday evening are "completely cold."

While the N.C. Forest Service began releasing some personnel and equipment from the fire scene Monday, Pate said regional support would remain until Thursday morning (today) to help district firefighting efforts, including dismantling of the irrigation system installed last week along the northeastern front of the burn area.

About 60 firefighters remained on the scene Tuesday, down from a high of about 90 Forest Service and 30 volunteer firefighters last week.

Once the support team pulls out, Pate said the fire "won't be forgotten." It will be monitored daily by air from the Whiteville District office and on the ground by county Forest Service personnel.

As of Saturday, the total cost of fighting the fire was approaching the \$100,000 mark, according to Utilization Forester Dave Brown of Raleigh.

Firefighters' efforts to cool the fire got help from several directions over the week—rainfall accumulations of up to 1½ inches across portions of the



STAFF PHOTOS BY SUSAN USHER

STATE AND LOCAL firefighters work side by side to eliminate a hot spot in the woods behind a house on N.C. 211. From the left are Brunswick County Assistant Ranger Robert Norton and Tri-Beach VFD members Keith Sawyer and Doug Todd.

burn area, a tie-in to two county wells in the N.C. 211-Midway Road area and a determined effort to track and wet down all "hot spots."

"The only way to stop this fire is to wet it down," said Laura Barston, an Elizabeth City District assistant ranger. "We are not going to let it get out of that area again if we can help it."

Crews worked Friday and into early Saturday connecting the county wells to a series of irrigation piping, portable drop tanks, booster pumps and 2½-inch hoses that snaked into the woods on the north side of N.C. 211 along a wide fire break circling the front of the fire's hottest area. From that point lengths of 1½-inch hoses fed two half-mile rows of portable irrigation sprinkler heads steadily dousing the fire's perimeter.

"This is really convenient," said Ranger Hugh Frazer. "On most fires like this you don't have the water like that. When it's this dry, canals

are usually dry too. We have had to bring water in by tanker from as much as five or six miles away."

Volunteer firefighters manned tankers during the week, "nursing" or refilling the large water tanks of all-terrain vehicles—adapted military Gamma Goats and crawling Nodwells used by the state to access the fire's interior.

Efforts to cool the fire's hot spots ranged from volunteer firefighters turning up smoldering sod with a rake and dousing with a hose to Forest Service tractors pushing over and chopping up an entire section of burned dead trees on the north side of N.C. 211.

Assistant rangers were equipped with bellwether kits last week that allowed them to measure wind speed and direction, humidity and rainfall as they monitored the fire and efforts to control it. Rain gauges were mounted along the perimeter of the burn area.

The fire began with a lightning strike July 25 and was first contained at approximately acres. It then jumped fire lines twice more, on Aug. 1 and Aug. 3. It has been contained since last Tuesday, after blackening an estimated 1,750 acres, the largest fire in Brunswick County so far this year.

Major owners whose property was affected by the fire included Homer Wright and Claude Smith of St. James Plantation and Odell Williamson.

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BOILING SPRING LAKES volunteer firefighters Dave Tainvoris and Michael Parsons go after a hot spot with hose and rake.

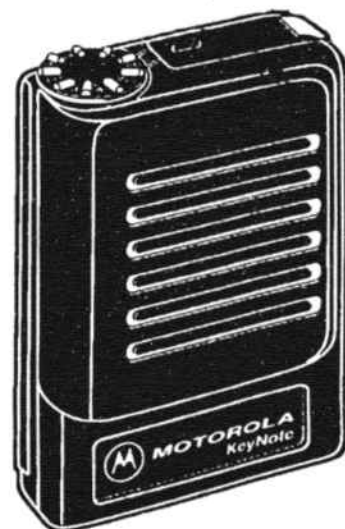
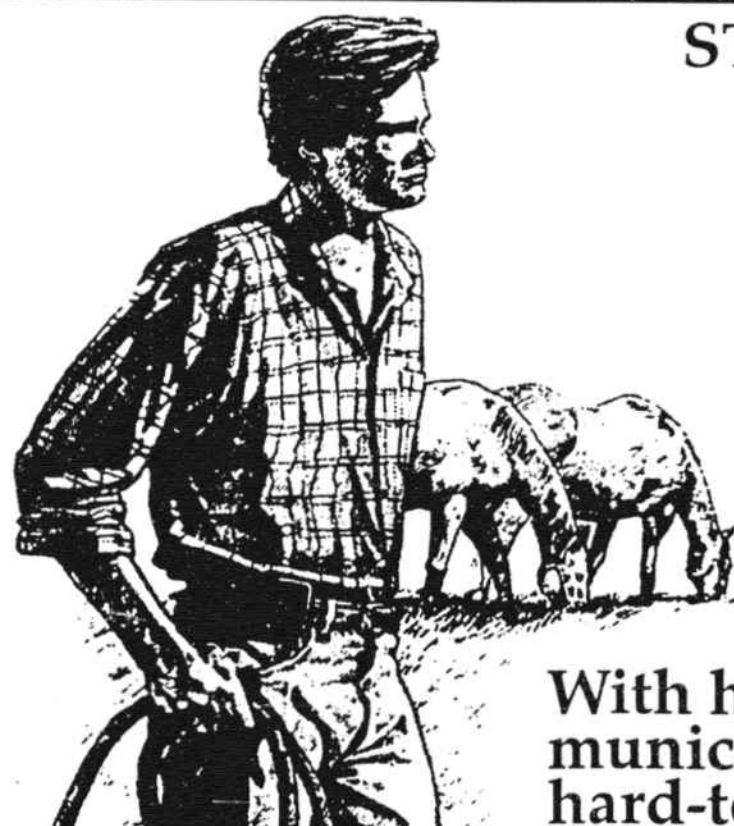


A MILE-LONG ROW of irrigation sprinklers soak the edge of the burned-over area on its northeast front, helping reduce the chance of the fire jumping its containment lines.



A WHITE ASH residue is all that's left when peat-rich organic soils burn, as seen in this aerial view of the fire on the southwest side of N.C. 211.

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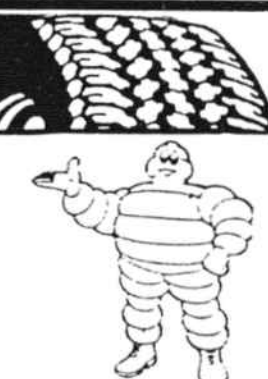
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