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Wind could help firefighters in Georgia

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Enlarge By Chris Viola, The Florida Times-Union/AP

A 35,000-acre wildfire roars outside Waycross, Ga., Friday, April 20, 2007. Over 300 firefighters from multiple agencies have been battling the blaze for the last five days and estimate they have only 35 percent of it under control.

By Russ Bynum, Associated Press Writer

WAYCROSS, Ga. — Gusting wind could help firefighters Friday by pushing a 45-square-mile wildfire from the boggy Okefenokee Swamp to an upland area where it would be easier to control, officials said.

The 20 mph wind forecast Friday could intensify the blaze, which has destroyed 18 houses and forced at least 1,000 people from their homes. "The fire will be fierce today, but it will be in a place where we can get at it," said Alan Dozier, the state forestry commission's chief firefighter.

The flames jumped a fire break on Thursday into the Okefenokee Swamp and sent a thick haze of smoke through Waycross, a city of about 15,000, said Robin Cole, a spokeswoman for the Forestry Commission.

About 5,000 people, many of them senior citizens, were urged to leave because of the smoke. Some spent Thursday night at a shelter set up at a middle school.

"We're staying with my friend, a bunch of us — about 25," said Denise Lott, 45, who fled her mobile home Monday with her grown sons and her bedridden, 80-year-old father. "We're sleeping on floors and in chairs."

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Officials said they were unsure when most residents who evacuated their homes would be allowed to return.

"The fire's going to push south, which means Waycross isn't going to see so much heavy smoke and the fire's going away from the town," Cole said Friday. She said higher humidity would also help blunt the fire's spread by keeping conditions more moist.

The blaze started Monday when a tree fell on a power line. It raced through forested areas, but Cole said it had not entered the Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge, one of the nation's best-preserved wetland areas. A smaller fire, about 3 square miles, was contained Thursday, said Eric Mosley, spokesman for the Georgia Forestry Commission.

No deaths were reported, but several firefighters were treated for smoke inhalation or injuries.

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