

S.C. FIRES

Even kudzu is burning in drought

By JEFF MILLER
The State

MANNING — The earth is on fire.

Charred and smoldering, the ground unleashes plumes of black smoke that rise and fold and twist in the wind until a gray shroud drapes over the fried carcass of the Little Junkyard Bay.

Little Junkyard is a Carolina bay, one of about 200 elliptical depressions left behind long ago by the receding oceans. Most of the time, the bays are wet. But this one off U.S. 521 near Manning is so hot it crackles in defiance of the firefighters who have tried to stop the burning for three weeks.

This has been a summer ablaze.

Summer's lush foliage usually protects the forest. Fires strike mainly in late winter and early spring when the underbrush is crisp. But relentless heat and dry conditions have turned forests into tinderboxes.

If rains don't come soon, state foresters say, records will fall for both the number of summer fires and acres burned.

Halfway through July, the Forestry Commission has responded to 612 fires covering 3,392 acres. In 1986, the year that set the record for summer fires, 6,435 acres were consumed in 948 fires for the entire month.

No part of South Carolina has been spared.

"Ordinarily, we have many more fires in the Coastal Plains than in the Piedmont," said Forestry Commission spokesman Alan C. Alexander. "But this drought is statewide and we're having fire everywhere equal to the coastal areas."

Even the kudzu is burning, he said.

The drought has made firebreaks less effective. A firebreak is a strip that's plowed to contain a fire until it burns itself out. But that isn't happening.

"The vegetation is so dry on the other side of the firebreaks that it only takes a spark or an ember to get one going," Alexander said. See FIRES, page A4

FIRES

Continued from page 1

"We're seeing that happen now."

The mess left by Hurricane Hugo hasn't helped. Although it has been nearly four years since the storm ravaged the landscape, much of the debris is still on the ground. The fires are also feeding off new seedlings that are not yet tall enough to escape the flames.

Mike Ney, a forester in Williamsburg County, was one of three people working a fire near Greeleyville on Friday. They had fought a fire at the same spot last week.

"This one's been hard to fight because there's so much blow down from Hugo," Ney said. "There hasn't been much salvage."

Ney had a couple of crawlers out cutting firebreak. But he had to call in a larger one to push through the heavy timber on the ground. Luckily, one was available.

The state's aging fire-fighting equipment has taken a beating. On any given day, Alexander said, about two dozen of the 180 crawlers that cut firebreaks are broken down and out of commission.

"The equipment is heating up pretty bad," said Chuck Milam, the head forester in Clarendon County where Little Junkyard Bay is burning. "We were down here the other day and we had to pull the equipment out two or three times to cool down with my tanker."

Firefighters, he said, are faring a bit better. "As long as we have Gatorade, my guys do pretty good."

Milam's guys have been busy. Thursday afternoon, a woman tried to burn some trash and the fire got away from her.

"She said before she ever got the water hose out there it was gone," Milam said. With the wind behind it, the fire spread across a field, threatening three homes. It took three hours to put out.

State law requires people in unincorporated areas to notify the Forestry Commission before they burn trash and yard waste. (Cities have their own ordinances.) The burn area has to be surrounded by firebreaks. People doing the burn-

ing must have equipment to control the fire and they must watch it until it goes out. Violators can be fined up to \$200.

Alexander said arsonists who set fires maliciously face up to five years in prison, but they are hard to prosecute.

"It's tough to catch firebugs," he said. "It's tough to get evidence on them."

Under normal circumstances, lightning accounts for about 1 percent of forest fires, Alexander said. With these dry conditions, however, that figure is probably closer to 15 percent, he said.

Although no one has been charged, Milam suspects that the Little Junkyard Bay fire was set intentionally or accidentally. The road leading into the bay passes through an illegal dump site filled with old appliances, roofing tiles and other trash.

Someone dumping there might have caused the fire, Milam said. Either way, it may be weeks before the stubborn fire is put down.

A trip through the bay shows why.

In his pickup with the cracked windshield, Milam rolls slowly down a firebreak. The earth was moist at first but has since baked dry. And the wind pushed the fire across the break.

"It's that old peat moss dirt-type stuff," Milam says. "You can't dig deep enough to get down to what we call mineral soil" which won't burn.

The dirt along the edge of the break on both sides is smoking.

"That's roots and stuff," Milam says. "This side has already burned a second time. It's going to burn again as soon as these leaves come down."

A tree suddenly burst into flames that shoot into the sky. "There, it's burning now."

Wiping the sweat from his brow, Milam says he's hoping for "a gullywasher." He said a pilot watching for fires from the air sent word the other day that 40 drops of rain had fallen.

"He said he got them all on his windshield."