

# Fires, tornadoes claim lives throughout southeastern US

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2 December 2016

Tornadoes swept through the drought-ridden Southeastern United States on Wednesday, killing at least six people and leaving swathes of devastated property in their wake.

At least 42 tornadoes were reported across the region, affecting Alabama, Tennessee, Georgia, and North and South Carolina. Dozens of people were injured, and thousands were left without power in the aftermath of the storm.

Three people were killed when an EF2 tornado touched down in the small northeast Alabama town of Ider, destroying the mobile home where the individuals lived. In the neighboring town of Rosalie, seven people, including four small children, were injured when the same tornado demolished the closed day care center in which they were sheltering; all of them had left their own mobile homes as the storms swept through the town.

An EF3 touched down in Ocoee, Tennessee between 2:00 and 2:30 a.m. It leveled the town's fire office as well as its post office, and claimed the lives of firefighter Mark Faulk, Jr. and his wife Sandra, who were visiting from Georgia. Like the victims of Alabama's tornadoes, the Faulks were staying in a mobile home.

The tornadoes were spawned by a storm system that ranged from Louisiana to North Carolina. Residents of Alabama, Tennessee, and Georgia had eagerly awaited the rain which came with the storms. Historic drought conditions had left water tables low, and wildfires raged throughout the South.

On the Monday before the storm, Alabama recorded a record number of active wildfires: a total of 108 fires laid waste to almost 3,000 acres across the state, pushing firefighters and their equipment to the limit. Over 1,000 wildfires had consumed more than 15,000

acres of Alabama land in the previous 30 days.

Fires ravaged the vacation town of Gatlinburg, Tennessee in the Smoky Mountains. A fire that had begun on a hiking trail about 10 miles from the town gained a foothold in dry, wooded areas. Strong winds swept in ahead of the storm system on Monday, spreading the conflagration over more than 15,000 acres.

The death toll for the fire currently sits at 10, although around 70 people are still missing. Seventy-four people have been treated for injuries, and many of those remain hospitalized. At least 14,000 people were forced to evacuate their homes, and nearly 200 people in Sevier County are in shelters.

The rains that came along with Wednesday's storms helped douse many of the fires throughout the Southeast, but the storms also served to complicate rescue efforts. Several inches of rain fell on the parched ground within a few hours, creating mudslides and rockslides. Even though the rain assisted with dousing the flames, not all of the fires were extinguished, and firefighters are still patrolling to check for hot spots among the leaf litter that could set off yet another devastating conflagration.

While residents weary of the drought cheered for the rain, forestry officials throughout the Southeast warned that wildfires remain a threat, and no-burn orders will stay in effect for Alabama, Georgia, and Tennessee.

These disasters have befallen the nation's most impoverished region. Tennessee is ranked 45th, and Alabama 46th, for income level—some of the lowest in the United States. Of Tennessee's population of more than 6 million, nearly 1.2 million live below the poverty line. In Alabama, approximately 900,000 people live in poverty out of a population of 4.7 million.

Mobile homes and manufactured homes, such as those destroyed by Wednesday's tornadoes, are notorious for being unable to withstand high winds and tornadoes. Yet for many lower-income people, mobile homes are the only affordable housing available. Mobile homes are typically less expensive to rent, and they cost about \$63,000 to construct, as opposed to the \$210,000 needed to construct the average family home.

Furthermore, while people with low incomes and poor credit have a difficult time procuring a loan for real estate, mobile home sellers advertise to those with poor credit, offering a path to homeownership not otherwise available to them. As with most loans available to the poor, these loans come with much higher interest rates.

The lives lost in the tornadoes could have been prevented had the people who died had stronger dwellings or easy access to storm shelters. An estimated 20 million people live in mobile homes throughout the United States. Most of those people live in impoverished states, and most of them live in the Southeast—an area where tornado activity is a regular and predictable occurrence.

An Alabama mobile home dealer boasted on their website on Thursday: "Our Lenders have 'Special Financing' Programs available for Alabama Storm Victims. We can help expedite your home buying purchase." Even in the aftermath of a statewide disaster, in which the shoddy construction of mobile homes was responsible for all reported deaths, these companies continue to prey upon people who cannot otherwise obtain shelter.

As in most poor areas, many of the areas ravaged by this week's storms are beset by an abject lack of emergency services. Ider, Alabama is serviced by a volunteer fire department, as are most of Alabama's rural communities. In places where the fire department is staffed regularly, lack of funds frequently prevents upgrades to equipment and training.

The tornadoes and fires that have caused so much loss and anguish in the Southeast this week highlights capitalism's inability to address climate change, which is making such extreme weather events much more likely. Likewise, the deaths caused by these horrific disasters are the direct result of capitalism's inability to provide reasonable shelter and social services to the workers that produce all the wealth, and by placing

profit ahead of workers' lives.

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