Egg Prices No Yoke

Shoppers, Businesses Feeling Impact

By Joseph Haney

If you've spent any time on social media over the past few weeks, you've probably seen a number of memes circulating joking about the recent increase in the cost of eggs, ranging from an image of an egg in a ring box with the caption "He went to Kroger" (instead of "He went to Jared's") to someone offering to trade a dozen eggs for a jeep.

Prices for the incredible edible egg have been steadily climbing since last spring, with the average cost of a dozen large, grade-A eggs nationwide being $4.25 at the end of the year, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics - about what local grocery store shoppers have been seeing here.

The price is also more than double what consumers across the nation were paying on average the year before. In December 2021, the average price of a dozen eggs was $1.78.

While a part of that price increase has been due to the rising cost of raising chickens and running a commercial egg laying operation, a larger factor is an outbreak of Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza (HPAI) or, as it's more commonly known, avian flu.

Since the first outbreaks were reported last February, more than 58 million birds have been killed in the U.S., either by being sick or, more likely, in the process of euthanization designed to prevent the spread of the disease. The influenza is deadly to birds, killing infected animals in less than 48 hours, and is highly contagious and can spread through a flock quickly.

According to the most recent statistics from the Department of Agriculture's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS), more than 43 million commercial egg layers have been affected, with nearly 20 outbreaks around the country that affected flocks of more than a million birds. Additionally, 2.5 million commercial broilers (chickens raised for meat) and nearly 9 million commercial meat turkeys have been affected throughout the country.

Virginia had its first outbreak in a commercial flock last week, with a commercial turkey operation in Rockingham County

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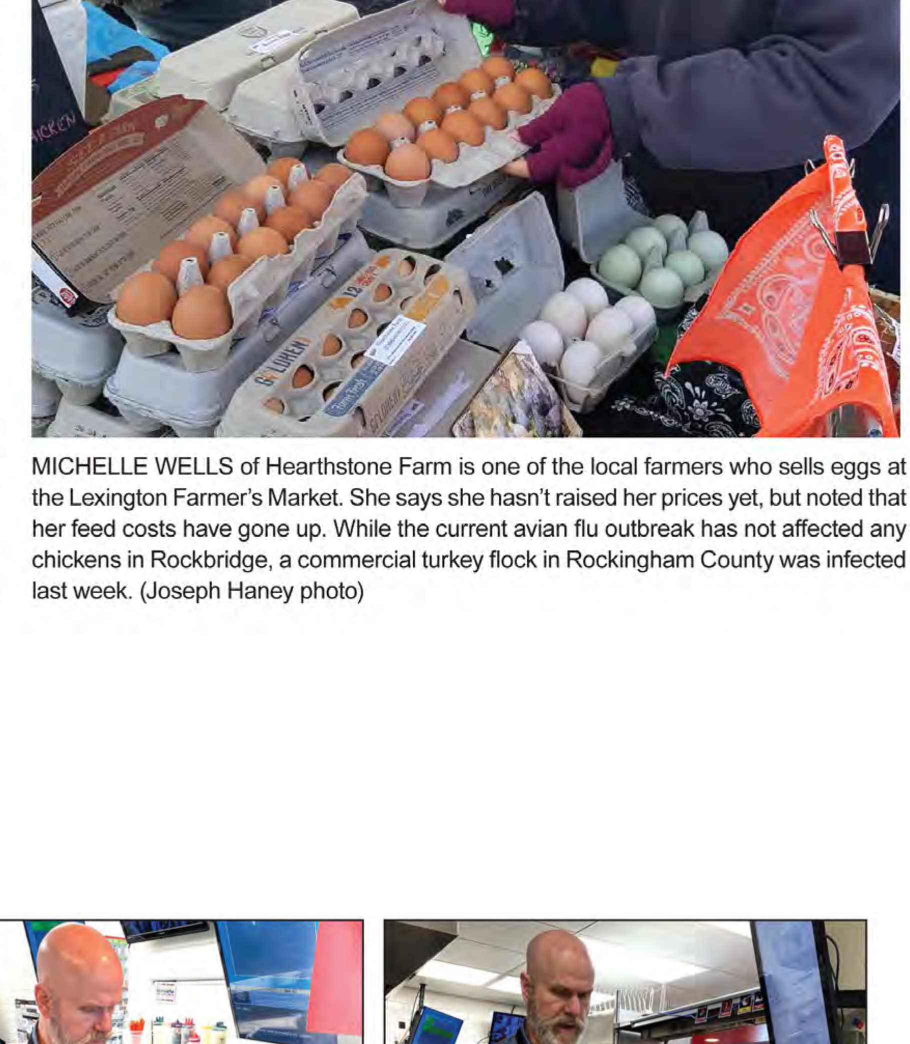

MICHELLE WELLS of Hearthstone Farm is one of the local farmers who sells eggs at the Lexington Farmer's Market. She says she hasn't raised her prices yet, but noted that her feed costs have gone up. While the current avian flu outbreak has not affected any chickens in Rockbridge, a commercial turkey flock in Rockingham County was infected last week. (Joseph Haney photo)

RUSH EARMAN studies the screen at the Lexington Domino's to see where his next delivery will be.

MAKING PIZZA has been part of Earman's roles with Domino's over the past 36 years.

AFTER THE PIZZA comes out of the oven, Earman boxes it to be ready for delivery.

Rush: The Man, The Legend, THE PIZZA GUY

Community Big Part Of Former Franchisee's Recipe For Success

By Hope Huger

Rush Earman knows pizza.

After 36 years of working with Domino's Pizza, he's had his fair share of hand-tossed dough, cheese and marinara sauce, and toppings.

For the past 27 of those years, he's been the franchisee of the chain's store in Lexington – and a familiar face to many.

Throughout his time at the store on Jefferson Street, Earman has supported fundraisers, provided pizza lunches at schools and sporting events, maintained sales throughout a pandemic, and has cultivated a strong partnership with the local community.

On Sept. 6 of last year, Earman decided it was time to pass the torch - or pizza cutter, in this case - and sell his single-store franchise.

"The old guys can still do it, but it's about time for me to let these younger guys who are 25 years younger than me to do it … We finally got to the point where we said we didn't know if we could continue working at the level we were working at … We understood it was time to let some young people come in and give us a hand," he said.

Earman began working with Domino's in Roanoke in 1986, but he hadn't always worked with pizza. Before starting with Domino's, he worked as a fashion merchandiser in his hometown of Harrisonburg. From scarves and brooches to shoes and shirts, Rush could throw together an outfit for just about anyone.

Being a motivated student and child of hardworking parents, Earman wanted to move up the employment ladder. At that time, Domino's Pizza was expanding and Earman liked the idea of quick upper mobility, he said. He took the management job at a Roanoke Domino's and never looked back. From there, he moved among various branches. He managed Lexington's store from 1988 to 1989 before transferring to a Domino's in Charlottesville – "the Mecca of pizza" at the time, Earman said. He worked in Charlottesville for seven years before purchasing the Lexington store.

Prior to Earman's involvement, the Lexington Domino's was struggling, he said. The former franchisee walked out on the store, opening the door for Earman. Earman left his management position in Charlottesville in 1996 and built the Lexington store from essentially the ground up as the store was in shambles following the abrupt departure of the previous owner.

This move for Earman came with its fair share of challenges. Soon after leaving his job in Charlottesville, Earman's only son was born in August while the legal process of the store's purchase was still being finalized. Earman was unemployed as he and his wife Susan were waiting to move into his store. This stage didn't conclude until November 1996.

"It was nutty! That was one of the toughest times," he said of being without a job for seven months and with a newborn. "We got it [the store] open and had pictures with the newspaper. We did the great, big grand opening thing. We even had pizza eating contests – all the goofy things to get open – and here was my wife running around with this tiny, little infant, so yeah, it's definitely the long game."

Rush and Susan actually met through Domino's Pizza while working in the same store. They remember the hustle and bustle of the early days when the chain's "30 minutes or less" slogan was a scary command. Those busy nights prepared them for even more demanding nights at their own

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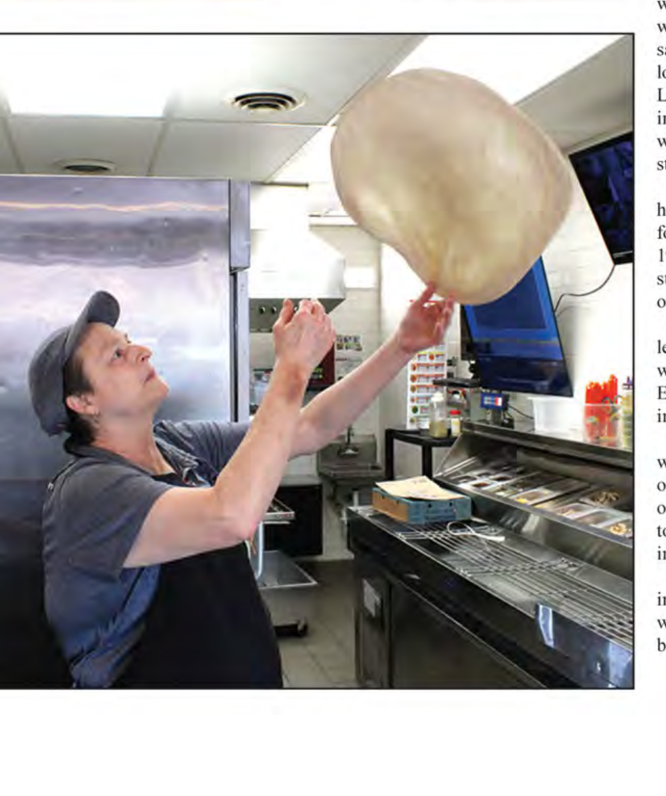
ABOVE, Rush Earman displays a freshly made pizza that's ready to hit the oven. He's enjoyed the past few months of getting back to the pizza basics as he works as a regular Domino's employee as the Lexington store transitions to a new franchisee. AT RIGHT, Susan Earman prepares dough by tossing it into the air. Rush and Susan have worked side-by-side as husband and wife for 27 years in their store. (all photos by Hope Huger)



FLAMES from the Matts Creek fire can be seen in this photo from James River Road outside of Arnolds Valley Sunday night. Firefighters had conducted a strategic firing a helicopter that day south of Glasgow and east of Greenlee to remove fuel for the fire. (Zane Irby photo)

Breathing Easier

Rain Aids Fight Against Massive National Forest Fire

By Anneliese Schneider

A soaking rain Tuesday is helping put an end to a massive wildlife on National Forest lands on the Bedford-Rockbridge County border that brought heavy smoke to the area over the past week.

What the Forest Service called the Matts Creek fire, which started in Bedford County just over a week ago, had grown to an estimated 11,016 acres by Tuesday morning.

"With the much-needed rainfall and the actions over the last 48 hours and through the night, we do want to emphasize that the major threat to the general public has been taken away in protecting all these areas," Troy Floyd, with planning operations on the fire, said in an update posted yesterday morning.

"Over the next 24 hours we're going to see how much rainfall we're going to get in the general area. Our incident meteorologists are forecasting anything between 1 to 3 inches over the next 24 hours, which is a substantial rain for this time of year, so that's really worked out well," Floyd said.

As of noon Tuesday, the fire was considered 33% contained.

"Due to the ongoing rain, fire spread is nearly impossible," according to fire behavior analyst Greg Titus Tuesday. "Do not expect to see active fire today."

"Due to the good work done to contain the fire, lack of active fire and concern over public and firefighter safety during heavy rain, firefighters will take a pause from field operations today and focus on training and equipment maintenance at the Incident Command Post," according to the Forest Service update Tuesday. Firefighters were to return to the fire area today, Wednesday, to continue their containment work.

The Matts Creek reported on Nov. 1 miles southeast of Bedford County ar River Face Wilderne

It spread rapidly, f Nov. 13, to 150 acre about 1,400 acres or

By Friday, when fi tions were turned o incident manageme 5,100 acres were bu

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FIREFIGHTERS conduct tactical firing operations on the Matts Creek fire Sunday to reduce the fuel for the fire. (Forest Service photo)

THE MOUNTAINS are ablaze in this photo taken Sunday night from near the Stonebridge Building, the former Natural Bridge High School, by Jason Rinehart of Buchanan.

Fire

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As of noon on Monday, the size of the fire had doubled again, reaching 10,106 acres.

Some of this expansion was due to controlled burns, which were used to direct the fire into terrain where firefighters could work more safely.

"Essentially, we had a wind change that was looking at giving us a north to east wind push today, and looking at that, yesterday, we had all this open edge on the west side of the fire," said Dave Walker, operation section chief, at a press conference on Monday at the parking lot for the James River footbridge at Snowden, which had been closed since the start of the fire.

The western side of the fire had reached Rockbridge County by the weekend, with the first flames being spotted by county residents on Thursday night.

The James River and controlled burns limited the fire's expansion to the north, and another fire line had been established on the south side, in the area of the Blue Ridge Parkway. However, the western edge was still largely uncontained late Sunday, so firefighters took action before the wind increased.

"So the conditions were such that we reacted," Walker said. "Instead of sitting and waiting for several days for the fire to come down to our line, down on the lower elevations where we can engage safely, we took advantage of those conditions and started lighting out the ridges and let the fire do its thing and work, much like a prescribed fire, down slope.

"We had beautiful conditions [Sunday]. Light winds allowed us to use aerial resources, a helicopter and PSD [plastic sphere dispenser] machine, to drop ignition on the ridges and light the ridges, so that we could get fire established on the ridgelines and working down off the slopes in a very slow methodical fashion," he said.

"Through the night that fire continued to progress off the ridges and down to the flats, where firefighters can safely engage," he said.

On Monday morning, this operation was working as planned.

"So today, we woke up this morning, being in that position, where fire is down to the lines in certain places, and we're engaging that and mopping up those edges, and then doing a little bit of additional lighting, down below, still keeping that fire behavior very low, and bringing fire out to the line, before the rain comes in tomorrow," said Walker.

"Then we'll have a nice clean product to work with to mop up and ensure that our fire is on the downward side of being mopped up contained and controlled," he said.

Despite the growth in the total area of the fire, the overall containment continues to increase, from 2% Saturday to 15% Sunday to 27% Monday to 33% by noon on Tuesday.

"If you look at the actual mileage on the perimeter or a 10,000-acre fire, 27% of that, that's over a quarter of that perimeter," Walker said Monday. "And then, when the fire comes down to the lines [on the west edge], you're going to see this number jump up fairly rapidly."

Progress continued on Tuesday.

"Over the last 24 hours crews were able to take the lines and bring the fire down and hold it, all down the western side down the Arnolds Valley Road, all the way up through Petites Gap, and all the way around Division Delta [a quadrant of the firefighting effort], the lower end on the Blue Ridge Parkway," Floyd said in his Tuesday morning update.

"Crews did a really good job hot-spotting yesterday, and then of course we've got the rainfall coming in, so we've pretty much taken all the threat to the public and fire spread out of play over the last two days."

At the Monday press conference, Walker said that the emphasis is on protecting firefighters and resources over limiting the size of the burn.

"In order for us to keep the fire small, we'd have to engage the fire on very steep, rugged ground, which increases the exposure to all our firefighters, our aerial resources. etc.," he said.

"So, as we look at this fire and as we came in to help the local agencies here, we have to look at a long-term strategy of how best to do this safely, cost-effectively, and of course meeting the needs of the resources well," Walker said.

The growth of the fire and the controlled burns brought it into lower elevations, which is safer for firefighters.

"If we get down to the lower edges, the slopes are less. It's easier to meet the fire, under our terms, with higher probability of success. As so, because of that, it's a larger footprint. Instead of several hundred acres, or a thousand or two, you're looking at 10,000 acres," said Walker.

"But, we've done it in the right conditions, with low fire behavior, the intensities are

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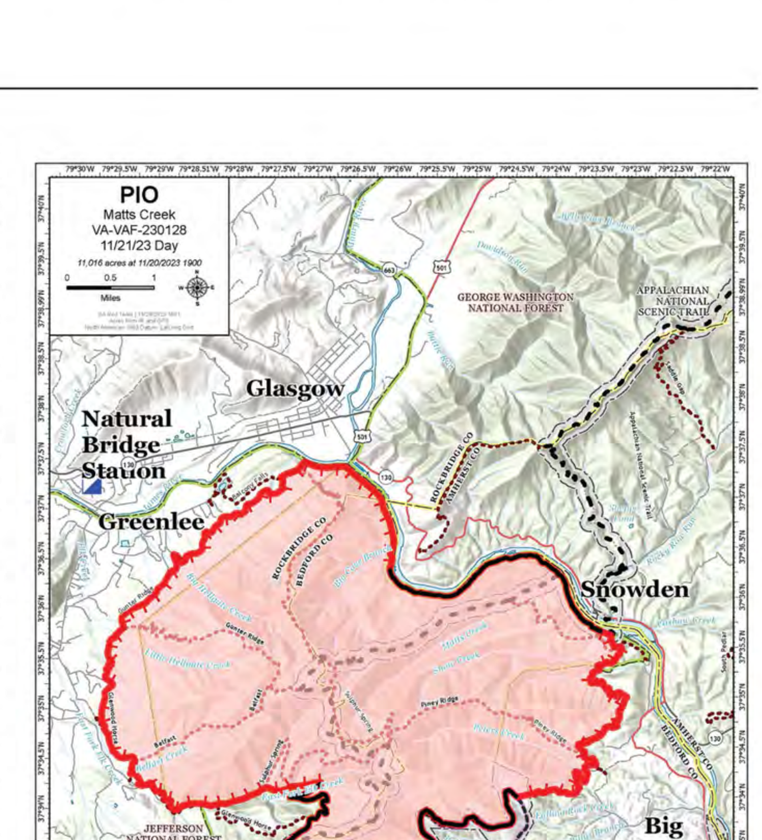
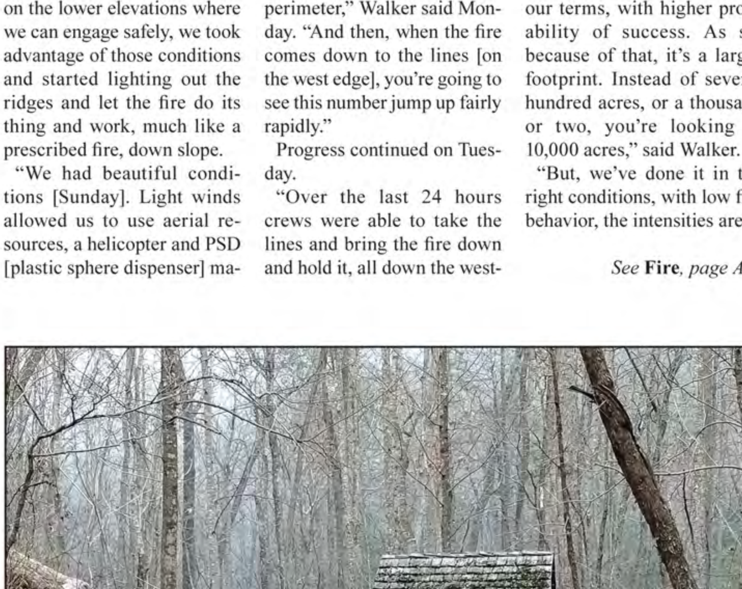
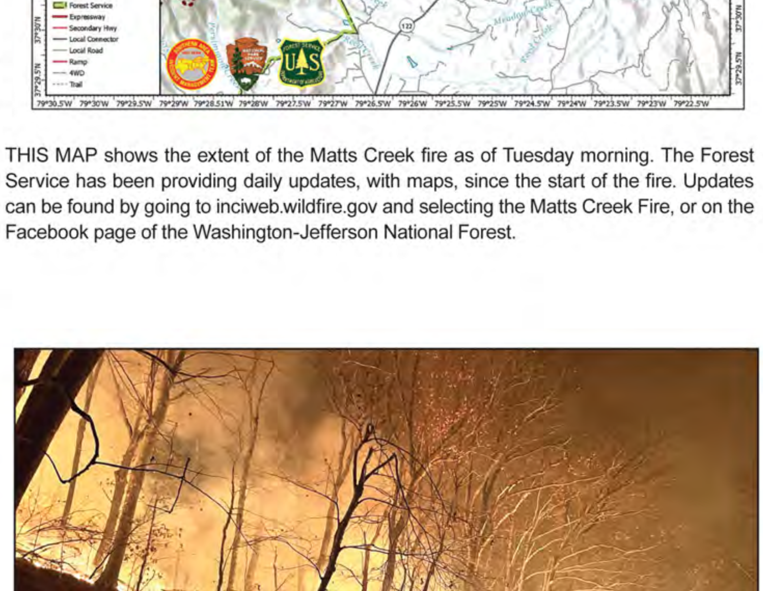


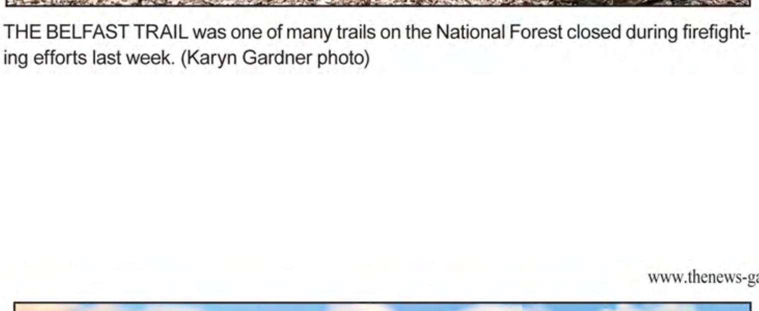
THIS MAP shows the extent of the Matts Creek fire as of Tuesday morning. The Forest Service has been providing daily updates, with maps, since the start of the fire. Updates can be found by going to inciweb.wildfire.gov and selecting the Matts Creek Fire, or on the Facebook page of the Washington-Jefferson National Forest.



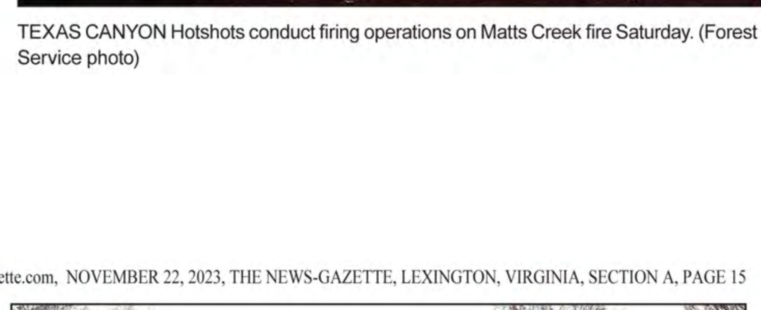
THE BELFAST TRAIL was one of many trails on the National Forest closed during firefighting efforts last week. (Karyn Gardner photo)



TEXAS CANYON Hotshots conduct firing operations on Matts Creek fire Saturday. (Forest Service photo)



SMOKE RISES from the mountains after a helicopter dropped "ignition" on the western edge of the Matts Creek fire in this view from James River Road. (Zane Irby photo)



HOUSE MOUNTAIN disappears in this shot of downtown Lexington taken Wednesday afternoon after heavy smoke enveloped the area. (Darryl Woodson photo)

Fire

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low. It's just like a nice, managed, prescribed burn, meeting resource objectives and meeting safety and cost containment efforts," he said.

The fire has been contained on National Forest land, and no structures have been damaged.

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An estimated 40 firefighters were on the scene the day after the fire was reported. As of yesterday morning, that number had jumped to 380, including firefighters and support teams.

A command operations center was set up in the Stonebridge Building, formerly Natural Bridge High School, late last week.

Firefighters have been called in from across the country.

"We have people from all over the country, based on their skill level," said Joe Mazzeo, information officer, at a press conference Friday at an overlook on U.S. 501 just east of Glasgow.

Federal help left local fire departments free to respond to calls as needed.

"That's why we're here. So we free up the local volunteer departments to respond to things in their district. We don't want them tied up, helping us, and then have something happen, in their community, and not have anybody to help," Mazzeo said.

Volunteer firefighters responded to one such call Sunday, Nov. 19, when a small fire was reported off Hercules Lane near Snowden.

By Tuesday, this fire was contained at .75 acres, and determined to have been started by human activity, unrelated to the larger fire.

While cause of the Matts Creek fire is still undetermined, Walker said Monday that the size of the fire shouldn't impact an investigation at the origin point.

Drought conditions in the area and a buildup of leaf litter contributed to the speed with which the fire spread.

"This area in Virginia is going through a very significant drought. It's 30-plus days without any appreciable moisture," said Walker.

"With every single day that ticks by without moisture you have a compounding of reduced moisture in the fuels, making the fuels much more available and much more explosive, leading to faster, more intense, and larger fires that become harder to contain, harder to control," he said.

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Firefighters will be back at work today, Wednesday, continuing containment efforts and repairing areas damaged in the fire suppression efforts.

"We are getting a handle on the fire spread of the Matts Creek. Mother Nature has come in, the timing was just perfect and helped us out, and all the hard work that the crews did throughout the last several days and the last weeks," Floyd said in his Tuesday morning update.

"It's helping to reduce all the threat, get all the smoke out of the area that residents have been trying to deal with, and get everybody back where they can return and have a great Thanksgiving, and that's something we're really happy about and want to thank everybody for."

Smoke from the fire had been a major issue in the Rockbridge area, reaching hazardous levels last Wednesday through Friday before winds shifted much of the smoke to the east over the weekend. Much of the smoke this week has been limited to the Glasgow-Natural Bridge areas.

Rockbridge, Buena Vista, and Lexington schools were closed Thursday and Friday of last week and Monday and Tuesday of this week due to concerns about air quality.

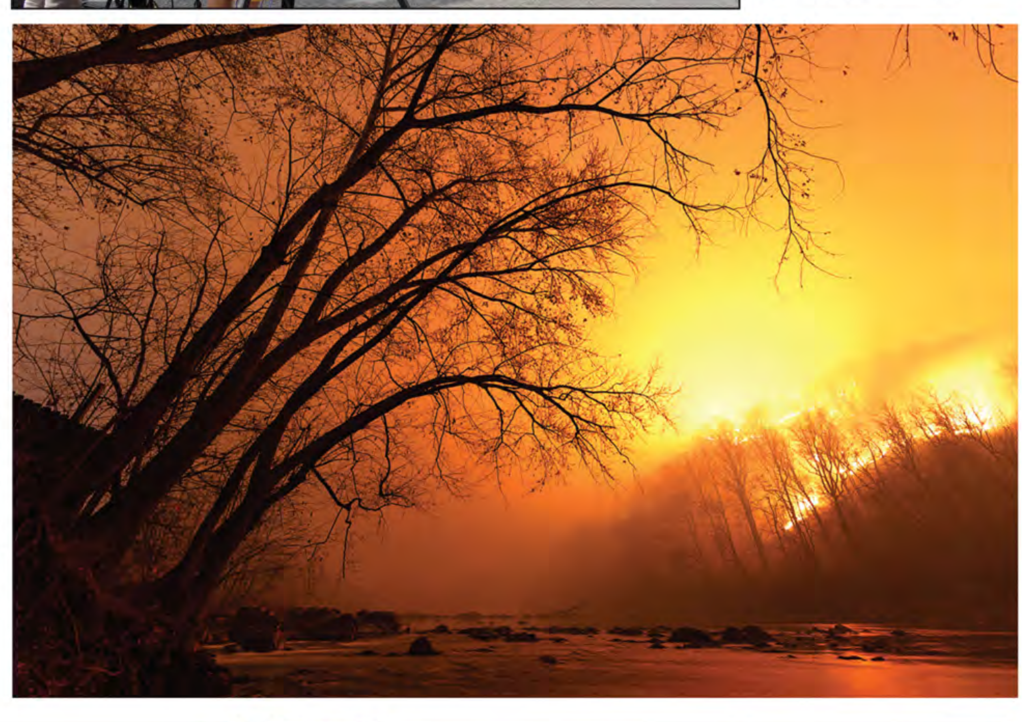
The Forest Service smoke outlook predicts minimal smoldering and smoke impacts for the next few days.

Sections of the Blue Ridge Parkway and the Appalachian Trail have been closed during the firefighting efforts, as has the James River Face Wilderness and all associated trails.

Though the threat from the fire is contained, Floyd advised that some closures may remain in effect due to concerns about damaged trees or debris.

Updates can be found by going to inciweb.wildfire.gov and selecting the Matts Creek Fire, or on the Facebook page of the Washington-Jefferson National Forest.

ABOVE, smoke can be seen in the mountains in the distance in this drone photo taken Sunday above the Stonebridge Building, formerly Natural Bridge High School, which is being used as a command operations center for the firefighting effort. AT LEFT, Joe Mazzeo, information officer, conducts a press conference Friday at an overlook on U.S. 501. BELOW, the flames were reaching the south side of the James River across from Glasgow in this shot taken Sunday night from the confluence of the James and Maury rivers. (photos by Glenn Rose, Anneliese Schneider and Jason Rinehart)



FLAMES could be seen from Natural Bridge Station by Thursday night as the fire spread westward. (Kat Bishop photo)

THE LINES of fire on Sunday night can be seen in this photo taken from near the Stonebridge Building, the former NBHS. (Jason Rinehart photo)