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'A wall of fire'

High winds drive wildfire that threatens Prince George

Photos by Charles Swenson/Coastal Observer

A cyclist crosses Beach Bridge Road, above, beneath a pall of smoke from the burning woods and marsh.

BY CHRIS SOKOLOSKI
COASTAL OBSERVER

Midway Fire Rescue Chief Brent McClellan has seen a lot of things in his 31 years as a firefighter.

But until last Saturday at Prince George he had never seen a mountainous wall of fire moving toward him.

"In my career that's the first one where we had a wall of fire 30-plus feet tall and moving at a high speed. I've not seen that," McClellan said. "That's the only fast moving, volatile, heavy fueled fire that I have seen. It was different."

Midway firefighters were at Prince George on Saturday to aid the S.C. Forestry Commission, which had firefighters and people on tractors on the ground.

"They cut a road through the woods to get well ahead of the fire," McClellan said. "By removing the fuels and by churning up the loose dirt, hopefully it creates a barrier."

Midway firefighters were stationed near houses.

The Forestry Commission was "working to bring the wildfire component under control and we were doing our own structure and life safety initiatives," said Brandon Ellis, Georgetown County's emergency services director.

At some point the wind shifted and the flames were fueled by the marsh grass.

"That fire started moving quick. So the fire basically came to us," McClellan said. "Our people were set up in a defensive posture and when it hit the marsh grass and



Two Fire Boss aerial tankers, left, under contract to the state Forestry Commission dropped water on the fire.

it got in backyards, our people set up hose lines."

"The wind shifted and the conditions changed. It happened rapidly; within a matter of 20 minutes or so," Ellis said. "We went from a good day to almost a bad day."

The Forestry Commission called for water drops.

Two planes collected water from Win-

yah Bay and North Inlet and dropped it onto the fire, and houses, while a pilot in a third plane gave information about where to make the drops.

"We were very fortunate to have those aviation assets and I daresay that aided us greatly in the firefighting and protecting the community," Ellis said.

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HEALTHCARE | Empathy in Action

Collaborative identifies needs to improve mental health and drug care

BY CHARLES SWENSON
COASTAL OBSERVER

Susan Myers is a counselor at Tideland Health, but last fall she was selling drugs to people already enmeshed in a web of addiction. She was only playing a role in a program called Empathy in Action that helps people see life through the eyes of people with mental health and substance abuse problems. But it was one she knew well after 25 years in recovery herself.

Last week, Myers was back in her role as counselor for a follow-up session that looked for ways public and private organizations can collaborate to help solve those problems.

"We're the ones that get the referrals," Myers said. "We're collaborating locally."

But Myers also had another

role.

She apologized to the 40 people gathered in the county judicial center, because she had to leave early. Her husband had overdosed two days before and was still in the hospital. He had suffered his third stroke in six months, she said, and was also battling stage three cancer.

"Personally, it's a vendetta for me," Myers said.

Empathy in Action's simulation is based on actual cases in South Carolina, but participants have often lived through those situations, said Jessica Seel, director of behavioral health initiatives for the S.C. Office of Rural Health, the nonprofit that created the program.

"We don't know what people have been through or experienced," she said. "It's hard to

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Charles Swenson/Coastal Observer

Susan Myers, left, listens to the discussion about the barriers to mental health and substance abuse treatment in Georgetown County as part of Empathy in Action.

EDUCATION

Schools seek funds to hire additional staff

BY CHRIS SOKOLOSKI
COASTAL OBSERVER

As the enrollment of Waccamaw Elementary School grows, principal Ashley Cameron needs more teachers.

Cameron asked the school board this week for money in next year's budget to hire another special area teacher to handle music, art and physical education.

"This is about opportunity for the kids [so] they get all those experiences other than just math, ELA classes and social studies," she said.

Waccamaw Elementary's enrollment is 553. The school has three special area teachers and seven classes so Cameron has a guidance counselor and the media specialist help out.

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Day of the Fox: Schedules fill up to mark American Revolution's 250th anniversary. **Second Front**



Game on: ShushCon brings gamers back to the Waccamaw Library. **PAGE 7**



Schools: School district's Academic Bowl trophy remains at Waccamaw High. **SECOND FRONT**

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