

# The Wildland-Urban Interface in the Southeastern United States: Lessons from the Gatlinburg Firestorm

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We now have 100 million people living in the wildland-urban interface and intermix zones of the United States, with a large majority of these living in the WUI in the eastern U.S. The largest unpopulated area in the eastern U.S. lies in Great Smoky Mountains National Park (GSMNP) (520,000 acres) which straddles the Tennessee-North Carolina border.

Unfortunately, this wildland area is surrounded by many gateway tourism communities, such as Cherokee in North Carolina and Gatlinburg and Pigeon Forge in Tennessee.

Residents of these communities have little knowledge about the wildfire risk that exists in these communities, where fuels have built up for over 80 years due to fire exclusion practices in GSMNP. On November 23, 2016, a wildfire ignited in GSMNP 5.5 miles from Gatlinburg and burned innocuously for four days before gale-force winds on November 28 blew the fire northward into the town, eventually killing 14 people and burning over 2,540 structures, even into Pigeon Forge. This firestorm is finally beginning to raise a new level of awareness of wildfire hazard in these two communities, but more still needs to be done to ensure that the future wildfire that will strike these towns does not cause the catastrophic damage caused by the 2016 firestorm.