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Fire burns Austin Cary Conference Center



Matt Stamey/Staff photographer

By Cindy Swirko/Staff writer

The 25-year-old cypress log conference center at the University of Florida's Austin Cary Memorial Forest was destroyed Tuesday afternoon by fire.

The building had hosted an array of community events, weddings and other activities in addition to forestry classes.

Alachua County Fire Rescue District Chief Andy Carlisle said the cause of the fire has not been determined and is under investigation.

Michael Andreu, associate professor of forest systems, said the building is a physical and emotional loss for UF and the forestry program.

"It's a major setback for us. It's a sad day for the school. The previous building, that this building replaced, also burned down," Andreu said. "This (center) is very integral to the school of Forest Resources and Conservation along with the university. There are a lot of people who have connections here."

Andreu and Carlisle said the fire was spotted by a staff member on a deck outside the building and was reported at about 2:15 p.m. A class had been held in the building but ended earlier.

Carlisle said the first fire truck to arrive was from the Waldo station. It reported that the building was about 50 percent burned. The truck was a tanker, but it ran out of water. A pond is nearby, but the crew said it was unable to get water from it to fight the fire.

The building is more than a mile down a lime rock road from Waldo Road, and it took time for more trucks to get there.

"They had 1,000 gallons of water on there with two people. When they ran out, they had the fire knocked back real good, but they ran out of water, and it took so long for everybody else to get here," Carlisle said. "It was so fully involved by the time we got here. The entire time, it was fought from the outside because of that."

Andreu said the deck had electrical wiring. He added that while the area has experienced recent rain, a build-up of dry brush could have ignited. But Andreu cautioned that those are just possibilities.

An investigator with the State Fire Marshal's Office came to the site to investigate.

Controlled burns recently were conducted near the building, in part to reduce brush to prevent fires and also to teach forest management practices, Andreu said.

UF is self-insured, so there is no money to replace the building, he added.

"With the existing economic climate we're in and cutbacks, this is just poor timing," he said.

Austin Cary Forest spans about 2,000 acres and has several smaller buildings near the conference center.

The acreage, primarily longleaf pine, was acquired in the 1930s. The Works Progress Administration constructed roads, buildings and drainage ditches.

It serves as a natural laboratory of the University of Florida for forest resource education, demonstration and research. The grounds also are open to the public, and the conference center was leased for events such as weddings and retreats.