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Prevent, prepare for wildfires in Colorado

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It has been just three years since Colorado's most intense fire season.

In 2002, the state saw 3,072 wildfires that burned more than 600,000 acres and destroyed nearly 1,000 structures. This July was the second hottest recorded in Colorado, and it was the driest since 1939.

With last month's extreme heat and very little moisture, we again are facing dangerous wildfire conditions throughout Colorado and the West. The early spring rains that helped to quench the thirst of several years of extreme drought, sprouted lush vegetation not seen in years. That vegetation, green and thick in May, has become the dry fuel to spark quickly spreading fires. The hot, dry weather is conspiring to create dangerous wildfire conditions that threaten lives, property, our clean water and air - all across Colorado.

Last month, the Mason Gulch Fire in Custer and Pueblo counties burned nearly 12,000 acres, causing the evacuation of 5,000 people from their homes while threatening livestock, wildlife and about 750 structures. More than 900 people - including firefighters, local and state officials and residents - bravely joined together, risking their lives to protect people and property. With the Mason Gulch Fire, I declared a state of emergency so that the state could assist in fighting this fire every way possible, including \$2 million of emergency funding. With several other dangerous wildfires currently burning in the state, it is more important than ever that all Coloradans, particularly those who live in the wildland/urban interface, are educated and prepared so that they can best protect their families, property, communities and ecosystems.

To bring attention to the dangerous wildfire conditions this summer, I have proclaimed Aug. 14-20 as Wildfire Awareness and Safety Week. It is critical that individual home and property owners take action to improve their families' protection from dangerous wildfires. Tactics as simple as removing leaves and pine needles from roofs and gutters, storing firewood away from the house and mowing or pruning back flammable vegetation can improve your home's resistance to wildfire. Other helpful strategies include improving access to your home for firefighters, using flame-resistant building materials, and establishing defensible space on your property. Details on these and other "firewise" tips can be found at www.firewise.org or on the Colorado Department of Local Affairs Web site at: [www.dola.state.co.us/oem/ PublicInformation/piol/htm](http://www.dola.state.co.us/oem/PublicInformation/piol/htm)

The Colorado State Forest Service has identified at least 6 million acres of forestland that are at high risk for large-scale and damaging wildfire. State and federal land managers are working closely together to mitigate the risks in these priority areas. In 2004, these agencies treated 33,378 acres on the Front Range alone as part of an interagency fuels treatment partnership aimed at protecting threatened communities and watersheds. Fuels treatment treating downed timber and dry brush through either controlled burns or removal is an effective means of mitigating potential fire danger.

This year, the State Forest Service is again coordinating with my office to ensure aerial and ground equipment and trained personnel are in place and available for firefighting.

The state's resources include three exclusive-use single engine air tankers, 10 wildland-urban interface fire fighting engines and three 20-person crews through the Department of Corrections. Additional equipment and firefighters are made available through long-standing agreements with our federal land management partners.

I invite all of our residents to join me in this effort to prevent and mitigate the risk wildfires present to us all. While we all can pray for moisture to reduce the risk of wildfire, Coloradans must take on the responsibility to do their part to protect themselves and Colorado.

