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Arizona newsmaker

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With one wildfire already burning in Arizona, the state finds itself in a precarious position. One person leading the efforts to protect the state is Kirk Rowdabaugh, Arizona state forester since 2004. Rowdabaugh has been in charge of wildfires for the state Land Department since 1997.

1. How did you get into this line of work, and how long have you been at it?

I have been at it 35 years. I got into it by accident. I was working for the Forest Service as a timber marker when I was 18, and they asked me to work the Fourth of July weekend with a fire crew. I made more money that weekend than in a month of tree marking, and I was hooked. I eventually earned one of the very first advanced degrees in wildland fire science in the United States.

2. What is unique about this coming season?

What is unique about this season is the drought and what that has done to the fire environment this year in Arizona. Plus, 50 years of fire exclusion and what that has done to cause fuel buildup. And extraordinary population growth, with expansion of urban-wildland interface. So we have a perfect storm of weather, fuels and people. The potential is as bad as I have ever seen it. We have a continuum of fuels that I don't think has ever existed before in Arizona.

3. If you could alter one public behavior, what would it be?

I would ask and hope that people would take responsibility for caring for their property. They should do the fire mitigation measures before the season to protect their homes from wildland fires. Nothing the firefighter can do the day of the fire compares to what the homeowner can do right now.

4. What else can the public do to help?

The other thing is not to start fires and to be cognizant of fire restrictions and closures. Be extremely careful with any source of fire during the summer, including cigarettes. About 60 percent of Arizona fires are started by people, including several of the biggest ones. If we can get people to be careful, really careful, conceivably this could be one of our best fire seasons.

- Michael Clancy

Each Sunday, The Arizona Republic will profile a Valley or state resident who has been in the news.

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