

West wildfire threat looms early this season

Nature hasn't cooperated, officials say, so it's up to people to take precautions

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The summer wildfire season has barely begun and fire officials already are warning Utahns to prepare for another rough summer.

The forecasters foresee an average fire potential for parts of Utah east of Interstate 15 and above-average potential for fires west of the interstate. Based on the state's snowpack, runoff, weather predictions and condition of the soil and plants, they say Utah has the potential once again to be a hotspot for wildfire through August.

Rick Ochoa, fire weather program manager at the National Interagency Fire Center in Boise, said nothing can be done about the natural conditions that factor into the latest fire forecast.

"But we can be very careful about fires this year," he said, by creating a buffer zone around homes in Utah's grasslands and forests and by careful tending of campfires and cigarettes.

Ochoa and other fire managers finalized their latest forecast Tuesday. They highlighted the fact that drought conditions are expanding and intensifying in the West even as weather forecasters predict a drier, warmer spring and summer.

In addition, their report says, this year's poor snowpack and early snowmelt are likely to leave timber dry and to bring an early onset to the fire season. Meanwhile, there's lots of new cheatgrass and grass leftover from the past two years - along with forests stressed by drought and beetle infestations - that may drag out the fire season late into the summer in both the grasslands and in the mountains.

All of these factors have Sheldon Wimmer of the U.S. Bureau of Land Management's fire office wondering most about Southwestern Utah, around Cedar City and St. George.

"The drought has intensified there," said Wimmer, who is attending the national fire meeting.

Last year, there were about 600 wildland fires that burned 220,000 acres in Utah.

Ed Delgado, who analyzes fire potential at the Eastern Great Basin Coordination Center, said this is an initial assessment, subject to change as more information comes in about weather and other developments.

Still, he's concerned that the grassland fire season that typically involves the spring and early summer is blending into the high-elevation fire season in late summer and fall. It could leave fire managers scrambling to meet all of the firefighting needs at any one time.

He said: "That leads to a resource problem."

Many fire managers are already fretting about having adequate personnel, equipment and money for this season.

Jim Springer, spokesman for the Utah Division of Forestry, Fire and State Lands, noted that the number of communities at risk from wildland fires has grown from about 400 five years ago to 600 this year. Meanwhile, the federal funds to help communities reduce their vulnerability - by removing dry pine needles and clearing grass from around homes - remains limited.

"More and more development just continues to grow the problem," said Springer, whose agency is predicting above-average fire potential in southern Utah.

Jay Jensen of the Council of State Foresters pointed out the cost of fire programs has grown from about \$300 million to \$500 million a decade ago to about \$1.5 billion last year, the worst fire season in a half century.

"Our costs on the wildfire side are increasing, but our funding is capped," he said.

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Funding cut

As the drought deepens in the West and Utah heads into what many predict will be a difficult fire season, many fire managers worry about funding for preventing and fighting wildfires.

Under the federal government's State Fire Assistance program, primarily to help private landowners reduce the wildfire hazards on property surrounded by wildlands, Congress approved \$79.1 million this year.

The Bush administration has proposed \$68.1 million for next year, while the National Association of State Foresters has said at least \$145 million is needed.

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