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Rain eases Arizona fire fears

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As California battled a premature start to its fire season, forest experts here said April rains may save Arizona from a similar fate this year.

At least for a while.

"We're in better shape this year than we were in past years," said Tom Swetnam, director of the tree-ring research laboratory at the University of Arizona, after speaking at a conference of Western forest officials meeting this week in Scottsdale.

The rains last month increased moisture levels in Southwestern forests, buying some time for Arizona.

In California, about 1,400 firefighters fought to contain fires that ignited over the weekend, three weeks earlier than usual.

A 4,800-acre fire in Riverside County, southeast of Temecula, is threatening more than 250 structures. The largest fire in the county, a 9,000-acre blaze south of Corona, has prompted evacuations of up to 4,000 households.

The two blazes have more than doubled in size and intensity in the past 24 hours, fueled by dry conditions and record-high temperatures

Those fires are burning primarily in grass and low-lying scrub that dried out as temperatures spiked.

In Arizona and New Mexico, the spring rains have delayed similar tinder-dry conditions.

"We had that little punch of moisture here two to three weeks ago," said Roy Hall, a fuels and prescribed-fire specialist with the U.S. Forest Service's Southwestern office. "That greened up some parts of Arizona and New Mexico that haven't been green in 10 years."

By the time those green areas dry out, the Southwest should be on the cusp of the monsoon, he said.

However, on Tuesday evening, fire crews continued to battle a 250-acre blaze near the Colorado River.

Crews held the "Bend" fire on the Fort Yuma-Quechan Reservation at 60 percent containment from Tuesday afternoon, said Lori Cook, a spokeswoman for the crew fighting the fire.

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The fire forced the closure of Interstate 8 for about three hours on Tuesday after the blaze jumped from the southern side to the northern side of the highway. I-8 reopened near Yuma about 3:30 p.m.

About 30 to 40 people were believed to be living in tents or camps in the fire area, and some of those people were being asked to leave, Cook said.

She said the blaze was within about a quarter-mile of a recreational vehicle park, but the fire was moving away.

"We're not too concerned about them at this point in time," Cook said of the RV parks in the area.

"We're just monitoring it and checking for any spots or any flare-ups."

The fire, which began Monday night, was burning through salt cedars, willows, cottonwood and cat tails. It was human-caused, but officials had no other details on how it started.

Cook said there were 16 engines and 93 people fighting the fire.

Forestry officials attending the four-day conference of the Western Forest Leadership Council were told that the threat of catastrophic wildfire is high and likely to worsen, even as the forests get bursts of periodic moisture.

The West is five years into a drought cycle that could last decades, if not longer. Add in a trend of rising temperatures and the loss of trees to bark beetles, and the forests are at great risk, Swetnam said.

"The signs are not good," he told council members, who represent 17 Western states and Pacific islands. "We've got long-term history of drought, even before humans with greenhouse gases came along."

It's important to learn to live with fire and manage the forests accordingly, Swetnam said.

"We have to be strategic with where we thin the forests," he said. And Westerners have to re-examine their relationship with water, he added, suggesting that the proliferation of fountains and golf courses is a poor reflection of priorities in a drought-stricken region.

Gov. Janet Napolitano told the forestry officials that Arizona is trying to go on the offensive against forest fire, rather than the traditional defensive approach.

For example, the state has cut brush and trees on 11,000 acres of state and private land, and is trying, unsuccessfully so far, to get the federal government to release dollars before a fire breaks out, rather than as the ashes are cooling.

But there's only so much the state can do because most of the forests in Arizona are run by the federal government. She said 97 percent of the acres that burned during last year's fire season were on U.S. land.

Napolitano told the audience that she, along with other Western governors, will work to get Congress to allocate the \$760 million in spending called for in President Bush's Healthy Forests Restoration Act. That money must come from new dollars, not by shuffling money from, say, firefighting efforts to forest-health projects.

"There is no more important priority on the environmental side than the restoration of the forests to health," she said.

Associated Press contributed to this article.

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