

'Fine and dandy' year in the Rockies: Wet summer keeps wildfires at bay

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DENVER – A comparatively wet summer in the Rocky Mountain West has dramatically reduced the size and number of wildfires this year.

"After the last several years of major fires, our office is just fine and dandy with what has happened," said Colleen Finneman of the Northern Rockies Wildfire Coordination Center in Missoula, Mont.

Wildfires have blackened only about 12,000 acres in Montana this year, compared with 150,000 by mid-August last year. Utah is having its quietest fire year since 1997.

"This is a great summer from a fire manager's and a governor's budget office perspective," said Bob Harrington, Montana state forester. "From a seasonal firefighter's standpoint, we have a lot of frowns on people's faces."

Fewer fires mean less demand for the seasonal crews.

The storms that moved across Wyoming this year packed less danger than in previous years.

"Most of the lightning storms we've had have had a lot of rain with them," Wyoming state weather forecaster Bill Crapser said.

Utah got a break even on rainless days, said Deb Bowen of the Great Basin East Wildfire Coordination Center in Salt Lake City.

"We've had surges of moisture in July and August; even when it didn't rain it was humid, reducing the fire danger," said Bowen.

Larry Helmerick of the Rocky Mountain Coordination Center in Denver cautioned that the fire season isn't over, and several blazes were burning in the region this week.

"If you are a homeowner and you lose your house, it doesn't matter to you whether 1 million acres burned this year or one acre," said Helmerick.

New Mexico has had only six large fires this year, compared with 33 last year, said Jay Ellington of the U.S. Forest Service in Albuquerque. The acreage burned dropped from 245,499 acres last year to 82,916 this year.

Arizona had the biggest acreage total in the region, 217,000, compared with 186,494 last year. But even that was a huge decline from the 1 million acres that burned in 2002.

Harrington said Montana has become so accustomed to heat and drought that this summer's cool

temperatures and heavy rain seemed almost foreign.

"This is what we used to call normal," he said. "But it's hard for us to remember what a normal summer is because it's been so long since we've had one."

Despite the decline in fires, firefighters and managers have had plenty to do, said Helmerick. The region has sent firefighters to Alaska, for example, and crews have capitalized on good weather to manage some lightning-caused fires, allowing them to burn up dry timber and reduce the threat of future fires.

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