

Another bad year for wildfires

Warnings issued; conditions ripe for ignition of forest grass, trees

Tom Beal Arizona Daily Star

Conditions that pushed fire through a million acres of Arizona grassland and forest last year could return this spring to Southern Arizona.

The warnings are out, and some early fires have already proved difficult to manage.

Some places are obviously immune to threat.

Even if fire were to break out on an unburned spot in the Chiricahua Mountains, it could easily be steered into the "black" left over from last year's Horseshoe 2 Fire, which burned at varying severity through most of the range's 235,000 acres.

Elsewhere in the Sky Island mountain ranges of Southern Arizona, the grasses are high and dry, the mid-altitude woody trees and shrubs have dried to a point usually not seen until late April, and the high-altitude coniferous forests have less than half their normal blanket of snow.

Conditions are particularly bad in Southeast Arizona, where the 12 mountain ranges of the Coronado National Forest hold 1.8 million acres of grass, shrub and tall trees. Last year, 82 fires burned across 365,000 of those acres, destroying structures, including 70 homes.

"The predictions are for an above-average season again this year," said Coronado spokeswoman Heidi Schewel.

The Forest Service released a warning in mid-February about "conditions similar to 2011" in the Safford Ranger District after three fires broke out in the grasslands of the Stockton Pass area of the Pinaleño Mountains. Those mountains, dotted with cabins and the telescopes of the Mount Graham International Observatory, have received less than half of their normal snowfall this winter.

Unless conditions stay cool or unexpected rain arrives, the fire season could start early, said Schewel, who noted that there is no "normal fire season." Schewel said 17 fires have burned nearly 200 acres in the Coronado so far this year.

The mid-February Hilton Fire burned 460 acres of grass and shrub in the Empire Mountains north of



Extremely dry trees and plants - especially "fine fuels" such as grasses - mean severe fire danger in the Molino Basin and Bug Springs Trail areas in the Santa Catalina Mountains.

DOUG KREUTZ / ARIZONA DAILY STAR



Sonoita, an area managed by the Bureau of Land Management and the State Land Department.

Fire has become a year-round phenomenon in the Southwest. "I don't know that there is such a thing as normal for us anymore," Schewel said.

Fuels specialist Drew Leiendecker, who was present in warning in February 2011 of a vicious fire season, said conditions are again ripe for burning.

"Right now, we're seeing conditions you'd expect to see in late April to early May," said Leiendecker, of the Coronado's Sierra Vista Ranger District.

The summer monsoon rain totals were about 10 percent above normal, leading to the growth of grasses or "fine fuels."

Late fall and early winter rains wetted down some of

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continued . . .

the forest, but they weren't enough to counter 10 years of drought in the region, Leiendecker said.

January and February, warm and rainless, dried out the mid-altitude oak, manzanita and juniper trees.

The big trees atop the mountains will also dry out early, said Schewel, unless lower temperatures return or rain falls.

The long-term predictions are for warm and dry.

"Drought is once again on the march," according to the University of Arizona's CLIMAS center.

"Snowpack conditions in all of Arizona and most of New Mexico are below average."

In addition to catastrophic fires, last year's conditions led to fire restrictions and closures of many forests in Southern Arizona. The Coronado closed to visitors in the first week of June.

All fires that begin this time of year are considered human-caused. Lightning fires show up in the statistics beginning in April.

For now, the Forest Service is urging caution with fire in campgrounds and the backcountry.

Fire danger

Ten years of drought have increased the danger to the region.

1.8 million Acres in the Coronado National Forest

82 Fires that swept through the forest last year

365,000 Acres destroyed by fires in the Coronado National Forest last year

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