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Red alert

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Gov. Jim Gibbons got a grim warning Tuesday about another bad fire season.

Federal, state and local fire officials gathered in Carson City to give Gibbons a preview of the conditions for the coming months.

A dry year means fuels at lower elevations are more prone to fire, said Mike Dondero, forestry program manager for the Nevada Division of Forestry. And at higher altitudes, a lack of snow means large fuels, such as trees, will ignite easier and burn quicker, Dondero said.

A large fallen tree trunk can burn to white ash in about two hours because it is so dry, Dondero said.

"That's not a good situation," he told Gibbons.

The long-range forecast calls for Nevada's temperatures to be warmer than normal this summer and precipitation to be lower than normal, Dondero said.

Of the 10 worst fire seasons since 1960, five have been in the last seven years, Dondero noted. Last year, 1.3 million acres burned, according to the presentation given to Gibbons.

Allen Biaggi, director of the Nevada Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, said there seems to be a permanent shift in the fire cycle caused by a change in vegetation.

Cheatgrass and other weeds, such as red brome, are pushing out native species like sagebrush, Biaggi told Gibbons. They contribute to more frequent and damaging fires that are costly to fight, he said.

"The state of Nevada spends over \$10 million alone in fire suppression efforts," Biaggi said of annual costs. "We've got to stop that."

Gibbons asked whether the state had set aside enough money this year to fight fires.

"I think we will be coming back, as we do every year," Bob Ashworth, deputy state forester, said. "The costs are just astronomical. They don't seem to be in check yet."

After the presentation, Biaggi elaborated on his calls for more proactive efforts.

The state can do more to reseed burned areas to bring back native species, he said. The state might need to plant crested wheat, a non-native species, because, in the short term, crested wheat can compete with



During a brush fire last month, a wall of flames approaches homes on Heights Drive in northwest Reno. The wind-driven brush fire started in the canyon between McCarran Boulevard and Heights, and it quickly moved to the fencelines of more than 20 houses. (TIM DUNN/RENO GAZETTE-JOURNAL)

cheatgrass. In the long term, however, native species will replace crested wheat, Biaggi said.

Another solution is to create areas of green vegetation that act as natural firebreaks and stop the spread of fires, Biaggi said.

Without these efforts, the state will continue to lose land used for grazing, wildlife and recreation, he said.

"It's not just a state-of-Nevada issue," Biaggi said. "There's no one agency that can do it."

There's no one else to copy, either, Biaggi said. Nevada is the leader on this issue.

"We're really the testing ground, because this is really where cheatgrass is the most pervasive and the biggest problem," Biaggi said.

Gibbons asked fire officials about grazing policies that discourage cattle and sheep from eating vegetation.

Gibbons' thoughts were echoed in a telephone interview with Preston Wright, owner of Marys River Ranch in Elko County.

"I think what we really want to see in the state is some kind of increased flexibility to let the ranchers restore some of this fire-damaged country," Wright said.

Ranchers could be allowed to graze livestock more heavily on cheatgrass in February, March and April, Wright said. And the livestock can eat other grasses other times of the year.

"A grazing animal eats the grasses that are a fine fuel, that are important for carrying a fire from brush to brush," Wright said.

By reducing the fuel, it would return the fire closer to natural cycles in which the fires so not burn as hot as they have been, Wright said.

The Nevada Cattlemen's Association also supports increased use of grazing animals to reduce fuel, saying in a statement: "There are also many other grazing techniques that can be used both pre- and post-fire that can help sustain our Great Basin ecosystems."

Ed Monnig, supervisor of the Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest, said grazing serves a legitimate use of public land.

As far as grazing animals significantly reducing fuel loads, Monnig said, "I don't know that we have good monitoring of our data on that."