

State experts predict dangerous fire season

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State Forester Mike Dondero says the dismal snowpack and early spring with above-average temperatures force him to predict a deadly fire season in Nevada this year.

More than 1 million acres burned last year, and, he said, this season could see even more large-scale fires because the grass is still there and, in many places, the trees are in even worse shape.

"The snowpack not only provides some moisture but it presses the cheatgrass down," he said.

This year, Dondero said the ground is dry and the grass from last year is still standing, a dangerous and easily ignited fuel. He said at the upper elevations, trees are so dry "they are burning to white ash in about two hours, and that's not a good sign."

At the same time, a pine beetle infestation is killing piñon pines, leaving many trees as standing firewood and a moth infestation near Elko is killing sagebrush there.

"We can anticipate some large acreage fires this season," he told the governor and his staff Tuesday.

Gov. Jim Gibbons asked if anyone was working to transfer two Modular Airborne Firefighting Systems (MAPS) from California, where they are being phased out, to Nevada. Dondero said several agencies were involved in that effort to improve the ability of agencies to fight fires.

Other resources available, he said, include 42 fire departments in Nevada, 28 conservation fire crews of inmates at the Nevada Division of Forestry and 28 volunteer fire departments. He said there are also crews and equipment available through the U.S. Bureau of Land Management, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the U.S. Forest Service and Bureau of Indian Affairs.

Between those agencies, he said there are five air tankers, five attack aircraft, eight helicopters and other equipment. The Nevada National guard, he said, has a total of nine helicopters that can help with firefighting.

Asked whether the \$10 million in the emergency account normally used to cover fire costs was enough, Deputy Forester Bob Ashworth made it clear that money may not come near covering total fire costs if the season is a bad one.

"People expect to come back for more money because \$10 million is not enough," he said. "Costs are just astronomical."

Last year's fires cost the state more than \$11 million. Costs to the federal and local governments are additional.

• Contact reporter Geoff Dornan at gdornan@nevadaappeal.com or 687-8750.

Tips for protecting your home

Homeowners in western Nevada face an unusually dangerous fire hazard in the summer months ahead. But homeowners can take action now to protect their homes.

Creating and maintaining defensible space around a home is an easy and effective way to protect life, property and belongings, according to Steve Edgar, BLM Fire Prevention Specialist. Establishing and sustaining an area around your house free of flammable materials reduces the threat of wildfire to the home and the neighborhood and also provides firefighters with a safe area in which to defend a structure if a wildfire approaches.

The size of an effective defensible space varies from 30 to 200 feet, depending on what kind of vegetation surrounds the house and whether or not it is built on a steep slope. Things you can do to improve the likelihood that your house will survive a wildland fire:

- If you have a lawn, water it. Vegetation that contains moisture is less likely to catch on fire than vegetation that has dried out.
- Reduce the amount of fuel in the area surrounding your home. Trim flammable vegetation, such as cheatgrass and dead branches, and remove dead leaves and pine needles.
- Reduce the amount of fuel that accumulates on your home, such as pine needles and leaves that gather on your roof and deck, or in rain gutters. These fuels are especially dangerous because they are touch the house, and, if ignited by flying embers, could easily transfer a fire.
- Clear the area of any other flammable materials, like firewood or brush piles. Keep these things as far away from the house as possible.
- Eliminate "ladder fuels." These are fuels of varying heights located near each other. Fire can ascend from the lowest fuels up to the higher fuels if they are adjacent to each other, just like climbing a ladder. Separating vegetation of varying heights reduces the risk of this occurring.
- One potential ladder fuel is tree limbs that are either touching the house or the ground. These limbs can spread fire from the ground to the house and to other tree tops, where it is almost impossible to control. Trim these limbs.

BRAD HORN/Nevada Appeal file photo
The Linehan Complex fire burns toward cell phone towers at the top of Duck Hill in Carson City on June 26. The fire which burned 5,863 acres was one of more than 1,200 of the 2006 fire season.



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- Eliminate continuous vegetation. Creating space between trees and shrubs reduces the likelihood that fire will easily spread from one plant to the next.

For information, contact the Student Conservation Association Fire Education Corps at 885-6015.

Contact BLM Fire Prevention Specialist Steve Edgar at 885-6197.

- Source: BLM Carson City Field Office

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