

## Officials brief governor on fire season

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BRAD HORN/Nevada Appeal A Nevada Division of Forestry inmate crew from the Stewart Camp works to control the perimeter of a burn pile near Spooner Summit on Thursday. Federal, state and local officials gave Gov. Jim Gibbons a primer on Nevada's upcoming fire season, which they said could prove to be aggressive once again.



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Despite nine straight days of rain over western Nevada, area fire officials say they are preparing for another dangerous fire season.

A group of officials representing federal, state and local agencies briefed Gov. Jim Gibbons on their predictions Thursday.

Forestry Division Fire Program Manager Mike Dondero told him five of the 10 worst fire seasons since 1960 have been in the past seven years.

Last summer, he said, nearly 900,000 acres in Nevada burned.

"The problem is how big these fires get," he said. "I don't know whether it's global warming or the fuels out there."

Elko County accounted for most of last year's total - some 600,000 acres in all.

Gibbons said the group needs to get the word out because, given how "soggy" it's been the past two weeks, "fire, right now, is pretty far from our minds."



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Cathleen Allison/Nevada Appeal Gov. Jim Gibbons talks with Nevada Division of Forestry Fire Management Officer Mike Dondero during a meeting Thursday afternoon at the Capitol.

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Dondero said the rains will delay the fire season but that all it takes is a couple of weeks of hot weather and winds to dry out vegetation and bring the danger back.

Especially dangerous, he said, are the growing areas along the I-80 corridor - where the dominant vegetation is cheatgrass. He said fires happen practically every year in that corridor "because the cheatgrass comes back so fast."

Dondero said weather experts are predicting slightly higher than normal temperatures this summer, which won't help matters.

State Bureau of Land Management Director Ron Wenker said his agency has programs to treat those areas but only about 10,000 acres a year. He told Gibbons they need to treat about 50,000 acres a year to control "flashy fuels" like cheatgrass.

Ed Monnig of the U.S. Forest Service at Tahoe said they expect to get about \$10 million for treatment in the basin this summer. He said altogether, close to \$37 million has already been spent to reduce dangerous fuels at Tahoe.

The group warned Gibbons their resources to fight fires this summer are about the same as last year.

"The key to the whole thing is to catch (fires) small," said Dondero.



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BRAD HORN/Nevada Appeal An inmate from a Nevada Division of Forestry crew from the Stewart Camp works on burn piles near Spooner Summit on Thursday.

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Robert Knutson of the Bureau of Land Management said the agencies make up for the small amount of available equipment with mobility and interagency cooperation.

"What makes us strong is the ability to move resources and cooperation is making it work."

He said the higher elevations got a break this year.

"We had a good snowpack this winter," he said.

Weather experts told him this is the first spring in 50 years that the level of Lake Tahoe really didn't rise with the snow melt.

"Basically it soaked into the ground," he said.

That, Dondero said, will give the trees and other vegetation above 7,000 feet some protection against fire.

He said the areas of most concern are those at lower elevations where "flashy fuels" are everywhere and can dry out rapidly when hot weather arrives.

The group told Gibbons private companies and individuals have to get involved as well. Wenker cited a BLM program that has trained and organized cattle ranchers in northern Humboldt County to take on fires until the pros arrive. The program is expanding into the Elko area as well and is providing protective clothing, training and some equipment to ranchers and others living in rural areas.

Gibbons said the Angora Fire that burned 3,100 acres at South Lake Tahoe last July shows the need for homeowners to pay attention to fuels around their property: "We do know from the Angora Fire that those homes that had defensible space around them pretty much were saved. Those that didn't burned."

Asked about the cost of fighting fires given the state's budget problems, Gibbons said he hopes there is enough money in the budget to pay for firefighting. But if the cost goes over, he said, "we'll have to deal with it."

"The most important thing to do is protect the lives of the people of Nevada."

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Nevada's

wildfires:

Year Fires Acres burned

2007 775 895,025

2006 1,274 1,348,871

2005 794 1,032,104

2004 950 40,950

2003 881 17,546

2002 771 77,551

2001 1,277 654,253

2000 1,171 699,210

1999 1,185 1,871,956

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