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## Researchers Project Intense Fire Season in the West

By NOELLE STRAUB of [Greenwire](#)

It will be hot, dry and a bad fire year for much of the West, Forest Service researchers are predicting.

Researchers have completed an updated national drought and fire forecast for the next six months saying that 3.66 million acres are expected to burn. That is about average nationally, but there is an "unusual" concentration of activity in the West, they said.

Higher-than-normal fire levels are expected in most of Texas, the Southwest, California and the Pacific Northwest this year compared to a base period of 1971 to 2000, they said, with huge fires projected for much of Northern California and the Sierra Nevada range.

By far the worst drought conditions, referred to as "extremely dry," are found in California, western Oregon and Washington, pockets of North Carolina and northern Wisconsin. But major fires are not anticipated in every dry place, and some areas with normal moisture are at high risk of tens of thousands of acres burning, especially northwest Texas and eastern New Mexico, they said.

Ron Neilson, a professor of botany at Oregon State University and a bioclimatologist with the Forest Service's Pacific Northwest Research Station, said it appears an El Niño is beginning and there may be tentative shifts in the Pacific Decadal Oscillation, both of which are large climatic forces that can affect weather on broad regional or global scales. That may produce the type of conditions for the broad, turbulent storms that can produce a lot of lightning to start fires, he said in a statement.

"Lately we've had unusually turbulent weather in the U.S. for the summer months," Neilson said. "The Midwest is getting heavier-than-normal rain, and we've had some very unusual and powerful storms in the West, as well. Everywhere I go, people keep saying the weather is just really, really weird."

More specifically, the researchers said "very large amounts of fire" are projected for Northern California and small parts of southwest Oregon, coastal areas north of Los Angeles, large portions of the Sierra Nevada, and a huge area of northwestern Texas and eastern New Mexico. Significant amounts of fire that are considered "above normal" are predicted for most of Texas and the Southwest, many parts of Oregon and eastern Washington, and northern Montana.

Almost no areas east of Texas and the Rocky Mountains are expected to have higher-than-normal amounts of fire, except for some small pockets in central Florida, northern Georgia and northwestern Nebraska.

The projections were made with the Mapped Atmosphere-Plant-Soil System developed by researchers from the Forest Service and OSU. They were prepared by Neilson and James Lenihan, a fire and ecosystem modeler with the Forest Service, and incorporate work from the OSU Spatial Climate Analysis Service.

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