

Fire Season Could Mean Double Trouble for West

Double trouble is the phrase for the 2005 fire season in the western United States and Alaska, according to the third National Seasonal Assessment Workshop, held March 28–April 1 in Boulder, Colo. At the workshop, fire behavior analysts, fuels specialists, intelligence personnel, fire meteorologists and climate forecasters examined recent weather and fuels conditions, as well as climate projections for the late spring and early summer.

Continuous and heavy fine fuel growth, a result of abundant autumn and winter precipitation, is the main concern for the southwestern states. Forest ecosystem desiccation, a result of low winter precipitation and long-term drought, is the main concern in the Pacific Northwest and Northern Rockies. Thus, there is a higher than normal potential for Southwest rangeland fires, and a higher than normal potential for Northwest timber fires.

Tree mortality throughout the western United States and southern Alaska also poses a threat for increased fire potential, especially where interspersed with abundant fine fuels. In addition, Southern California and Eastern Great Basin representatives expressed concerns that initial response to fires could be slowed in some areas because roads have been covered by landslides or washed out by floods.

ALASKA, PACIFIC NORTHWEST

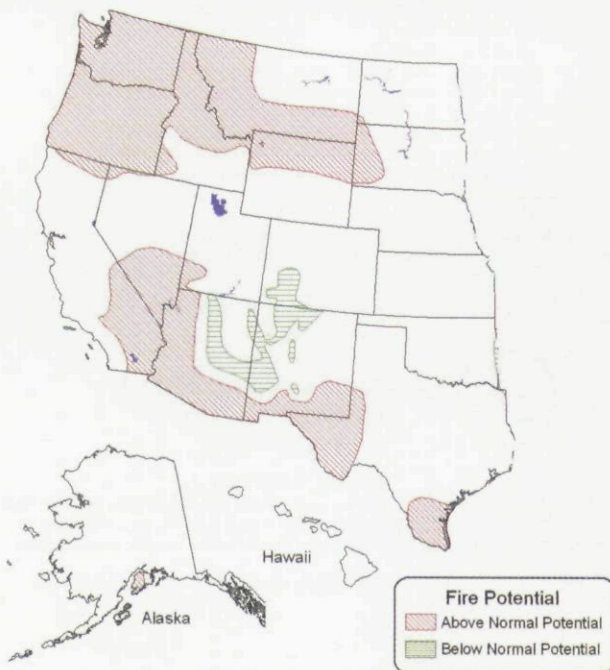
In Alaska, the 2005 fire season is expected to be normal, with the exception of the western Kenai Peninsula, where low

snowpack amid large areas of bug-killed spruce create increased fire potential. The climate outlook is for a warmer-than-average spring, which is likely to mean an earlier start to the fire season.

In the Pacific Northwest, above-average fire potential is expected for based on ongoing drought, low snowpack, and the likelihood that El Niño-type conditions will continue steering storms away from the area. Snow is expected to melt earlier than usual in May. If this is the case, then logs and other large fuels will reach critical dryness in late June or early July. This would increase the possibility of large timber fires, even at high elevations. Forests west of the Cascades could burn well into October unless the region receives abundant spring precipitation.

ROCKY REGIONS

The combination of long-term drought and low snowpack will lead to above-average fire potential in the Northern Rockies, especially in northern Idaho and western Montana. Spring rains are expected to limit fire potential early in the season but boost fine fuels that contribute to grassland fires by early sum-



mer. High fire potential is expected between July and September.

In the Rocky Mountains, above-average fire potential is predicted for drought-stricken northern Wyoming and South Dakota's Black Hills. In some areas, including the Black Hills and Wyoming's Shoshone National Forest, insect outbreaks have reached epidemic proportions, causing widespread tree mortality. Below-average fire potential is expected for portions of southern Colorado, thanks to substantial winter and spring precipitation.

GREAT BASIN, CALIFORNIA

In the southern Great Basin, near-record high precipitation in southern Nevada and southwestern Utah has

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contributed to abundant grass growth. Once these fine fuels cure, rangeland fire potential will greatly increase. In the northern Great Basin, extremely low precipitation amid ongoing drought will likely lead to a timber fire problem in Idaho.

Above-normal fire potential is expected for southern California desert and grassland areas and the northeastern corner of California based on current and forecast weather and fuel conditions. Elsewhere in the Golden State, near-normal fire potential is expected. Fire season is expected to begin a few weeks earlier than normal in the southern California desert areas and a little later than normal in the higher elevations.

Below-normal fire potential is expected for most high-elevation forests in the Southwest. In contrast, above-normal fire potential is projected for lower-elevation areas. This is due to near-record high precipitation during autumn and winter, which has resulted in fine fuel growth and increased fuel continuity. Although above-average precipitation is expected to continue through the late spring, pre-monsoon dryness will cure grasses and intensify fire potential.

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California Crash Renews Air Tanker Concerns

Still waiting to learn the cause of a large air tanker crash that killed three pilots on a training mission in April, U.S. Forest Service officials in May were cautiously optimistic that large air tankers would continue to support firefighters through the season.

The April 20 crash of Aero Union Corp.'s P-3B Orion tanker near Chico, Calif., killed Brian Bruns of Minden, Nev.; Paul Cockrell of Fresno, Calif.; and Tom Lynch of Redding, Calif. — and renewed fears that the few large air tankers returned to service just days earlier might be grounded again.

Forest officials were awaiting more information about the cause of the crash from the ongoing investigation by the National Transportation Safety Board. The preliminary investigation indicated that "all of the aircraft structure was accounted for at the wreckage site," a sign that the accident wasn't caused by structural weakness.

Pending more information from the NTSB, the remaining large air tankers under contract would keep flying, said U.S. Forest Service spokesperson Rose Davis. "Seven of them are P-3 Orions that we have operational service life data on, and the other three we don't have that information, but we have them wired up with monitoring equipment, so we're going to take the risk of returning them to service so we can gather data on the firefighting environment."

Davis said the Forest Service paid for an engineering study for the P-2Vs, and was hoping to get those results in early June. "We may see enough data to give us confidence in returning the P-2Vs back, but nothing is a given.

Safety is the bottom line, and [having] some sort of confidence that they're safe to fly."

In January, the Forest Service began soliciting bids for 20 large air tankers for this year's wildland season. To win a contract, operators must produce a paper trail documenting the aircraft's service life and establish the number of hours each aircraft can be expected to operate safely. Inspectors must also clear the tankers before they're eligible.

But some called the shortage of large air tankers a "crisis" in what may be another heavy wildfire season and urged the use of foreign air tankers to help fight American wildfires. Rep. Dana Rohrabacher (R-Calif.) sharply criticized the Forest Service for relying on a "handful of contractors" to supply air tankers, when offers from Russian and Canadian wildland officials were on the table.

"The U.S. Forest Service regulations establishing the requirements for airplane-based firefighting are obviously designed to protect the good old boys and to discourage anyone else with new approaches and new alternatives," Rohrabacher said before Congress April 26. "I am suggesting that the U.S. Forest Service drop its obstructionist policies that have prevented, among other things, the use of foreign firefighting aircraft to extinguish major fires in the United States."

According to a report in the Los Angeles Times, the Russian Ilyushin-76 Water-bomber can soak an area the size of 12 football fields with one 10-second drop of 11,000 gallons. That's about four times the capacity of the largest American air tankers.

"Yet the U.S. Forest Service has blocked the Russians from providing their services here, even as we endured massive fire destruction in places like Florida, New Mexico and in California," Rohrabacher said.

Davis said it's not that simple. "The main thing is that's not up to us completely," she said. "These aircraft from other countries have to be certificated [sic] by the Federal Aviation Administration in the United States to fly for whatever operation they're going to fly.... That would be the first step. Before we'd even look at them, the FAA would have to tell us that they're legal to fly in this country."

Davis noted that the Forest Service is looking at several new ideas to update its fleet of air tankers. It's currently in discussions with Evergreen International Aviation of McMinnville, Ore., which has equipped a Boeing 747 as a "supertanker" for wildland firefighting. It has a tank capacity of 24,000-gallons.

The Forest Service is currently awaiting an operational assessment of the Evergreen aircraft, Davis said. It's weight and large size are of concern. "What can it do? Where can we use it? Can it land on our tanker bases? Some of them may not have runway weight strength to hold it. So all those things still have to be assessed on the aircraft."

Davis said companies with ideas for air tankers that the Forest Service is evaluating include Minden Air of Minden, Nev., which is developing the BAE-146, a British Aerospace jet, as a wildland jet tanker, and another company she declined to name.

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