

USDA, Interior Department gear up for 'dangerous' wildfire year

Experts predict 2021 will be above-average year for wildfire potential in the West

By **SIERRA DAWN McCLAIN**
Capital Press

WASHINGTON — USDA and the Department of the Interior are gearing up for what's expected to be one of the most intense fire years in recent history.

"May is wildfire awareness month, but these days, it seems as if the fire season is the entire year," Deb Haaland, secretary of the Interior, told reporters in a press call Thursday, May 13.

The National Interagency Fire Center in Boise, Idaho, predicts 2021 will be another above-average year for wildfire potential in the West.

Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack told reporters he's "troubled" the signals suggest the U.S. is "headed into yet another very dangerous fire year."

Jeff Rupert, director of the Interior's Office of Wildland Fire, agreed 2021's fire outlook is bad. Nationwide, 550,000 acres are currently burning, and the Southwest already has five large, active fires in mid-May.

More than 90% of the West is experiencing some level of drought, according to agency data. Rupert said he expects the worst fires across California, where drought is acute, but he also anticipates wildfires will hit the Pacific Northwest in June, July and August.

"The drought now is worse than this time last year, and the fire potential across the West is worse," he said.



California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection/Contributed Photo, File
The National Interagency Fire Center in Boise, Idaho, predicts 2021 will be another above-average year for wildfire potential in the West.

In 2020, more than 10.3 million acres burned across the U.S., a record year and more than 50% higher than the 10-year average.

Haaland and Vilsack told reporters what their agencies are doing to gear up for the season.

The Department of the Interior's land management agencies and USDA are combining resources for a record-sized firefighting team for this time of year, including 15,000 firefighters, more than 500 helicopters, 91 single-engine airtankers, up to 34 airtankers, 360 pieces of heavy equipment and more than 1,600 engines.

These resources will supplement state and local forces.

Vilsack said USDA and the Interior Department staff have been identifying regions where they

think the highest fire risks are and pre-positioning people and supplies at those locations.

2021 will probably be better than 2020 in at least one way, said USDA staff. Firefighters who wanted to get vaccinated were able to do so this year, which could relieve some pressure surrounding COVID-19 protocols.

Firefighting last year was a nightmare, agency leaders said, because of social distancing and safety requirements related to COVID-19.

"It was incredibly stressful," said Patty Grantham, acting director of fire and aviation management at USDA's Forest Service.

Haaland of the Interior Department said her agency will seek to reduce wildfire risk by confronting climate change,

promoting strategic fuels management, investing in new science and technology, hiring personnel, empowering communities to help reduce fire risk and building stronger partnerships with native American tribes.

Vilsack said he's hopeful President Biden's American Jobs Plan will pass Congress. It would invest billions of dollars in forest restoration, fuels management and post-wildfire restoration.

But the Jobs Plan, also known as Biden's infrastructure package, is controversial and lacks bipartisan support because it would increase corporate taxes.

Regardless of what happens with the infrastructure plan, Vilsack said the Forest Service will request more money from Congress to fight wildfires.

Oregonians say U.S. economy is stacked deck

By **ZANE SPARLING**
Pamplin Media Group

SALEM — Life is unfair — especially when it comes to money.

Only one in five Oregonians says the economic system of the United States is fair for all, according to a new poll by the Oregon Values and Beliefs Center.

The public opinion non-profit's recent survey also found that nearly seven in 10 state residents rate Oregon's economy as middling-to-lousy, though the other three see things as good-to-great. That might not seem like much to crow about, but it's actually a sign of a sunnier outlook, compared to what polling figures showed when the end of the pandemic was nowhere in sight.

"This is an improvement from a September 2020 DHM Panel survey, when only two in 10 rated conditions as excellent," Oregon Values and Beliefs said in a briefing.

Residents are somewhat split on whether things are getting better, worse, or just plodding along, per the polling.

Even when examining conditions closer to home, where survey respondents are in general more likely to find a silver lining, only one-third gave a thumbs up when asked about the economy in their town.

"The cost to live in Oregon has become outrageous," said one survey respondent, identifying as a Republican woman living in suburban Clackamas County. "I think many have learned this and are planning to move out of the state or start an emergency fund."

OVBC conducted the online survey of 600 Oregonians, who were selected to be statistically representative of state demo-

graphics, in early April. The margin of error is 2% to 4% depending on the question. Here are the takeaways:

- 72% say the American economic system favors the rich and powerful, compared with 19% who believe it offers a fair shake and 8% who are unsure. Those earning less than \$50,000 annually (77%) were more likely to see a rigged deck, while a larger share of economic conservatives (34%) believe things are generally even.

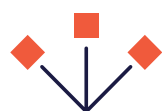
- Almost one third (30%) of Oregonians think the state economy is doing good or great, compared to 68% who gave it a poor grade and 2% who were unsure. Democrats (39%) are more likely to give the economy high marks, as are college grads (42%). The middle-aged (72%) and those with no education beyond a high school diploma (71%) were more likely to pan the economy.

- Slightly less than a quarter (22%) say Oregon's economy is improving, while 39% said it was trending toward equilibrium, 34% said it was getting worse and 4% were unsure. Rural residents (47%) were more likely to see the numbers turning red, while urbanites (31%) were in the black.

- About three in 10 (32%) say the economy is favorable in their town, but the majority (65%) said it's not, with the remaining 3% unsure. Those in the rural-to-suburban exurbs (57%) were more likely to say their community is successful than either town or country dwellers. In general, "exurbs" are urban centers unattached to a main metro area — think McMinnville — as opposed to a "suburb," such as Tigard.

How do we rebuild a better Oregon?

After a year of tremendous hardship, how do we rebuild a more interconnected, equitable, resilient Oregon? How do we help each other recover, rebuild, and restart our lives and businesses? How do we start listening to and considering each others' point-of-view? How do we inject opportunity, across the state so everyone has a chance to add to the greater good? **The answer — Together.** Join us as we learn and share how to rebuild a better Oregon, for all Oregonians.



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