

# Early start to western wildfire season likely

By BRAD CARLSON  
Capital Press

BOISE — Drought and low snowpacks in the West likely mean an early start to wildfire season, meteorologists at the National Interagency Fire Center predict.

“Due to below-average, and in some cases record-low, snowpack from the Sierra into the Oregon Cascades, we are anticipating an early and active start to fire season,” said Nick Nauslar, a fire meteorologist at the center in Boise.

The risk of large wildland fires will be above normal in parts of Central Oregon



Nick Nauslar

from April to June. Nauslar said extreme to exceptional drought, and low snowfall and snowpack, are factors.

The Fire Center’s Predictive Services unit said in an April 1 report that above-normal potential for large fires is expected in Central Oregon through June before expanding into Washington and southwest Oregon in July. Nearly normal potential is expected in the rest of the Northwest into July.

March brought near-normal temperatures to the Northwest, and more consistent rain and snow to western Washington, parts of eastern Washington, and northern Oregon.

Drought continues in central and southwest Oregon and much of eastern Oregon, where precipitation has stayed below normal for more than a year. April precipitation is expected to be above normal in western Washington and northeast Oregon, and below average elsewhere in the region, the report said.

Near-term risk in the Great Basin is mixed, fire forecast-

ers said. Major long-term drought has improved but remains across much of the area. Above-normal precipitation in late fall and early winter could have increased the likelihood that the crop of grasses and other fine fuels got bigger from western Nevada into southern Idaho.

But recent drier conditions stunted some of the grass growth, so shorter grass overall will limit the risk at lower elevations.

Forecasters said the Great Basin fire potential is expected to remain normal through April and increase in May and June. Weak storms are likely to move through in

April and drier, warmer conditions are expected headed into fire season. Early snowmelt likely will lead to a faster start to fire season in higher terrain from May through July.

Large-fire risk in the Northern Rockies should remain normal through May.

In June, risk could be above normal if spring rains do not come and temperatures are higher than outlooks suggest, the report said. The La Nina weather pattern has helped snow-water equivalents stay near or above normal for most of northern Idaho and Montana west of the Continental Divide.

Risk in Northern California is expected to be normal in April, and above normal in May in the San Francisco Bay, mid-coast-Mendocino and Sacramento Valley-foot-hill areas. Above-normal risk is forecast at most elevations in June and July.

Southern California’s risk of large wildfires is expected to be normal to slightly below normal through July. Live-fuel moisture is well above normal but is starting to decrease, several weeks earlier than usual, the report said. Below-normal precipitation since January worsened the drought, and the Sierra snow-pack is 50-60% of average.

## Wildfire-damaged ranges mean less public land for Western cattle to graze

By SIERRA DAWN McCLAIN  
Capital Press

Though drought is top-of-mind for many cattle ranchers, there’s another factor limiting forage availability in 2022: Some public rangelands were so damaged in the West’s 2020-2021 wildfires that they can’t yet be grazed again at full capacity.

“People are scrambling for grass, and it’s tough — really tough,” said Matt McElligott, president-elect and public lands committee chair of the Oregon Cattlemen’s Association.



Dave Daley

Jack Hanson, California rancher and chairman on the Public Lands Council, said producers with cattle on grasslands owned by the U.S. Bureau of Land Management will have to deal with drought, but they’re likely better off than those with U.S. Forest Service allotments that burned.

Dave Daley, California rancher and chairman of National Cattlemen’s Beef Association’s Federal Lands Committee, is among those still suffering from 2020’s fires.

September of 2020, the Bear Fire tore through the Plumas National Forest, scorching Daley’s range. Partly because of thick forest fuels, the fire burned intensely.

“This is not a two-to-three-year recovery,” he said. “This could be generational, long-term damage.”

Daley’s cattle could not graze the area in 2021, and he said the range still “doesn’t look good.”

This spring, Daley and Forest Service range conservationists will determine



Mateusz Perkowski/Capital Press File

Rancher Matt McElligott raises cattle near North Powder, Ore.

how many head of cattle can graze based on forage and ecosystem recovery. Daley has reduced his herd from 800 to 500 head and may sell more cattle.

Daley said he’s frustrated with how slow-moving the federal government is at restoring burned land. A year and a half after the fire, the Plumas National Forest is still littered with trees.

“All that dead timber could become fuel for fire again,” said Daley. “(The Forest Service’s) ability to move quickly in a catastrophic situation doesn’t exist. I don’t blame the individuals in the Forest Service, but the bureaucracy is so huge.”

In southeast Washington’s Blue Mountains, cattle rancher Sam Ledgerwood faces similar challenges after the Lick Creek Fire burned his Forest Service allotment in 2021, halving the number of cattle that can graze there.

Ledgerwood’s family used that allotment for 37 years, so watching it burn was devastating.

“I don’t own it, but it’s a part of me,” he said.

Ledgerwood must now find pasture for 200 cow-calf pairs. He’s trying to get another permit.

“It’s nerve-wracking,” said Ledgerwood.

Public records confirm wildfires have significantly impacted Western grazing permits.

According to Robert Garcia, the Forest Service’s Pacific Northwest regional range and wild horse program manager, in 2021, wildfires in Oregon burned inside or on boundaries of 480,846 acres of Forest Service grazing allotments.

The Bootleg and Cougar Peak wildfires also damaged infrastructure, including 197 miles of fence. The Forest Service has received funding for fencing materials, but ranchers say rebuilding is slow. Garcia said his program is working toward a more streamlined process to “establish fencing repair contracts more quickly after fires.”

Fires have also reduced California forage, said Randy Moore, Forest Ser-

vice chief.

In 2020, 14% of the state’s active allotments and 12% of active allotment acres burned.

In 2021, 21% of active grazing allotments and 10% of acres burned.

Rangeland conservationists are currently deciding what can be grazed again at what capacity.

Suzanne Flory, Forest Service spokeswoman, said although some areas require an automatic two-year rest period, allotments generally aren’t taken out of use post-wildfire.

“We just reduce the number of livestock that’s authorized to graze them,” she said. They approve full numbers again “once we see evidence that we’ve reached pre-fire resource conditions.”

Industry leaders predict ranchers will sell many cattle at auction this spring due to limited forage.

“If you hear of anyone with grass, let me know,” joked Hanson, California rancher. “I’m sure it’s going to be a pretty dramatic season for folks.”

## USDA expands feed assistance

By CAROL RYAN DUMAS  
Capital Press

Livestock ranchers are welcoming USDA’s expansion of emergency assistance to producers for forage losses due to severe drought or wildfire in 2021.

The new Emergency Livestock Relief Program provides additional relief payments for increases in supplemental feed costs in 2021, according to the Farm Service Agency.

Ranchers who have approved applications through the 2021 Livestock Forage Disaster program will soon begin receiving the additional relief payments. Those producers are not required to submit an application for payment, but they must have several forms on file with FSA.

FSA received more than 100,000 applications totaling nearly \$670 million in payments to livestock producers under the Livestock Forage Disaster program for the 2021 program year.

The Emergency Livestock Relief Program will supplement those payments.

USDA also announced that in addition to covering a portion of the cost to haul supplemental feed to livestock, it will cover a portion of the cost to haul livestock to feed through the Emergency Assistance for Livestock, Honeybees and Farm-raised Fish Program.

National Cattlemen’s Beef Association and the Public Lands Council requested the inclusion of coverage for moving livestock to feed in a letter to FSA in November.

“We are appreciative that the USDA Farm Service Agency listened to requests from producers who are suffering through the continued impact of

multiple years of unprecedented drought and skyrocketing input costs,” said Allison Rivera, NCBA executive director of government affairs.

NCBA and PLC are also grateful for the efforts of Sen. John Thune’s office, which worked with ranchers to provide further flexibility within the program, she said.

“As cattle producers continue to navigate challenges associated with drought, it is critical to ensure they have the resources necessary for their businesses to remain viable, while giving the highest quality care to their livestock,” she said.

Western ranchers experience daily the devastation caused by one of the most extreme droughts in recent years, said Kaitlynn Glover, executive director of PLC and NCBA natural resources.

“From increased risk of catastrophic wildfire to lack of sufficient grazing lands, producers are facing difficult decisions when it comes to herd management,” she said.

“This announcement comes at a critical time, and we are appreciative of both FSA and Senator Thune for prioritizing the needs of cattle producers,” she said.

The emergency assistance program originally covered the cost of moving feed to livestock. But for cattle producers, hauling livestock to other feed sources that are not easily moved — such as beet tops or corn stalks — is often a more efficient and economical method, NCBA and PLC said in the November letter to FSA.

More information on feed assistance programs can be found at: <https://www.farmers.gov>.

## Linn-Benton student named Agriculture Future of America Ambassador

By GEORGE PLAVEN  
Capital Press

ALBANY, Ore. — Linn-Benton Community College student Gracie Krahn has been selected as an ambassador with the nonprofit Agriculture Future of America.

As an AFA ambassador, Krahn will engage with aribusiness leaders, campus faculty and fellow students to foster engagement and innovation in food, agriculture and natural resources.

“I am eager to build relationships with staff, students and agriculture professionals while advocating for AFA,” Krahn said in a press release. “AFA is somewhat unknown on the West Coast, which leaves room for growth opportunities.”

Based in Kansas City, Mo., AFA is dedicated to developing the next gen-

eration of leaders in agriculture. The ambassador program’s main responsibility is to promote the AFA on college campuses and in local communities.

Krahn was one of 32 AFA ambassadors chosen through a competi-

tive application and interview process. Her family has a small dairy farm in Albany, Ore., and Krahn is now double-majoring in agriculture communication and political science at LBCC.

It was after participating in the AFA’s Policy

Institute that Krahn said she realized her passion for politics.

“I changed to a double major after my experience. AFA has already had a positive influence on my future,” she said.

AFA ambassadors serve for one year. According to

the group, AFA has provided more than 24,000 leader development expe-

riences to students at more than 200 colleges and universities in 43 states.



Gracie Krahn

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