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Are we ready for fire season?

BY SANDY SHAFFER

As I write this, it's still chilly and raining; but by the time the *Applegater* is mailed out, we could be starting this year's Fire Season. The long-range weather prediction for our region is calling for another couple of weeks of below-average temperatures and normal precipitation. However, the three-month outlook through August indicates **normal** temperatures with **drier** than normal rainfall.

Since I never second-guess Mother Nature, I recently talked to some of our local experts about how they see our 2008 Fire Season shaping up. I included fire suppression and fire protection agency folks, a forest fuels expert and a weatherman (I love talking to these guys—I always learn something new!). Concerned about ubiquitous budget cut stories in the news, I started with our local fire resources: will we have enough fire staff trained, lookouts manned, engines and aircraft at the ready?

Dan Thorpe, ODF's (Oregon Department of Forestry) district forester for SW Oregon, is always great to talk to. As you may know, ODF provides fire protection for BLM-managed lands as well as private wildland fire protection (not structural protection, though—that's provided by Applegate Fire District #9, Williams Fire and Rural-Metro Fire Dept.). Dan said that a moderate increase in funding will allow ODF to have the same amount of protection as in the past few years: the same amount of firefighters, engines, bulldozers and aircraft. Some differences to note: there was very little turnover in firefighters, so this year's crews are more experienced (yea!). Also, the Tallowbox lookout will most likely not be manned this summer since the rebuilding is still ongoing; but Onion Mountain, Dutchman and Sexton Mountains will all be manned. And something refreshing to note about ODF: their fire budgeting allows for a carryover of unused fire suppression funds from one year to the next. Dan reported that our District saved a few hundred thousand dollars last year, so this was credited to this year's budget. Nice to know, in case our Fire Season is hotter than normal.

Natalie Simrell, BLM's Assistant Fire Management Officer, told me that even though BLM's fire management contract with ODF is up for renewal on July 1, it will remain the same this summer, with fire staff, aircraft and engine counts the same as last year. And, the Rogue River-Siskiyou National Forest's Aviation and Fire Staff Officer, MJ Harvie also confirmed that their engines, crews, prevention patrols, lookouts, Interagency Hotshot Crew, Regional Rappel Crew and two dispatch centers will also be staffed at last year's levels.

Mutual aid agreements among fire agencies are, of course, in place (we're so lucky here in SW Oregon to have agencies who work together!). I also verified that the infamous Medford tanker base will be open and operational to support multiple agency aircraft, including ODF's tankers in Medford and Redmond (they each will be "back

home" **every night** this summer, per Dan). Closer to home, Applegate's Fire Chief Brett Fillis told me the District has a few more volunteers this year, while equipment, staff and seasonal firefighters remain the same; but, we have a **new fire station** opening this month at the junction of Griffin Lane and Sterling Creek Road! So, seven stations now for our Applegate Fire District!

Given all that, I think fire resources look good for this summer; so what about the season's severity? Scott Lewis, weatherman for Channel 12 KDRV, informed me that there IS a difference between a forecast and an outlook, although most people don't distinguish between the two. He doesn't "do" outlooks, but turned me on to the National Weather Service's Climate Prediction Center, where I got those long-term temperature and precipitation outlooks. Our rainfall is average so far for the year (September through October), and the outlook is that we are not in danger of falling into a drought situation (unlike parts of California and Hawaii!) anytime soon.

The last, not least, but definitely most complicated item left in this analysis is the forest fuels themselves. Charley Martin is BLM's fire ecologist (and also a fire behavior analyst on national fire teams), and he shared with me a recent fuel moisture sample data set collected on May 19 for an area in the Grants Pass Resource Area that could be comparable to the Applegate. Fortunately Charley's a nice guy: he also interpreted the data for me!

Keep in mind that the 19th was the last of that five-day hot spell, and we've had considerable rain since then. I learned that the foliar (or live needle) moisture content is an indicator of how easily a conifer stand could initiate into, and sustain a crown fire; on May 19 they were very much average, at 120-140%. The large dead fuel moisture or 1,000-hour fuel moisture measurement on a south-slope location on May 19 was at 23%, which Charley would consider low. However, the average measurements between a north and a south slope location were average for May. Charley said that the rain we had in late May would add several percentage points of moisture back into the 1,000-hour fuels numbers, but that for each week of warm, dry weather, they will again drop 1-3% in moisture content.

And why is this important, you ask? The 1,000-hour fuels moisture content is a strong indicator of the degree of fire intensity one might expect. Below 18%, things are getting serious. As a point of reference, our area usually sees this measurement drop below 10% in the height of our hot weather in August or September. More rain, I say! I'll quit complaining of the cold, too.

But, to quote my father-in-law Bill, "it is what it is." All we, as humans who are sometimes responsible for starting wildfires, can do is to prepare our properties, our homes and our families. Are you ready for Fire Season?

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