

Fire season by the numbers? No way!

BY SANDY SHAFFER

On New Year's Day my husband handed me a spreadsheet he'd done that showed our rainfall for the past 14 years. He's a real numbers kind of guy and reports the weather for our location (Buncomweather.com). I had asked him how we were doing for the rain year, being that it *always* seemed to be raining this winter! So he gave me a file for the years 2001 to 2014 that showed monthly, rain-year (September 1 – August 31) and calendar-year totals, as well as averages for each of those categories.

Oddly, I had just finished filling in the ending dates for the past few fire seasons—adding on to a spreadsheet that I had received from my friends at the Oregon Department of Forestry years ago. I now have fire season start and end dates for southwest Oregon from 1967 to 2014.

Before I connect these two spreadsheets: *did you realize* that most of the time our fire season starts in the spring? Yup, out of 48 seasons, only seven times did our fire season start on or after June 21. We've had fire season start twice in April, 15 times in May, and three times on the first of July (the latest). The rest

were in June. And, fire season has ended five times in November, the latest being November 12 in 1987. The following year was a whopper fire season, starting April 18 (the earliest) and ending 199 days later on November 2 (the longest). Finally, our shortest fire season on record was in 2011, lasting only 97 days.

So, I started comparing our two spreadsheets, looking at just the 14 years that I had *both* sets of data. Do years with the most rain have the shortest fire seasons? What if more rain came in the spring, rather than in the winter? How does rainfall affect our summer fire season? I started by looking at the longest (168 days in 2001) and the shortest (97 days in 2011) fire seasons.

"Longest-season" 2001 had the lowest rain-year total by far, with only 11.26 inches (51.4 percent of the 14-year average) over the 12 months ending August 31. (Hubby's stats show a 21.89-inch average for our rain-year.) And, 2001's calendar-year rainfall was 14.4 percent below our average of 22.34 inches.

However, the "second-longest" fire season (at 163 days) in this 14-year period

had the *highest* rain-year totals with a whopping 33.17 inches! And the calendar-year rain was 27.81 inches, 24 percent above normal.

"Shortest-season" 2011 had the second-highest rain-year total of 29.92 inches! That's 36.7 percent higher than the 14-year average. The calendar-year rain for "shortest" 2011 was slightly above average. 2007 and 2013 tied for "second-shortest," but their numbers were inconclusive: one had the lowest annual and lower-than-average rain-year numbers while the other was close to Hubby's averages. Hence my humble look at precipitation statistics found no real correlation to fire season length.

So how are fire season decisions made, and by whom? Given our checkerboard landscape (state, federal and private land), indicators such as large-fuel moisture levels and conditions on federal forested lands are tracked. As the temperatures begin to rise in the spring and fine fuels dry out, weather patterns and forecasts are studied. Local land and fire agencies provide nonstop statistics to assist the *one* person who makes the decision of when to start our fire season.

Our "mere mortal" (ODF's Southwest Oregon District forester Dan Thorpe) considers local activities as he contemplates when to ban open burning and equipment operations. Are burn barrels still allowed?

Are industrial operations in the forest taking place? Are private debris burn piles escaping? Are neighboring districts such as Douglas and Klamath getting ready? And, is the US Forest Service gearing up on their higher-elevation lands?

Dan told me that initiating the first level of fire season restrictions can be good publicity: it gives private landowners a heads up that conditions are getting seriously dry, and also gives them a few days' notice to get the rest of their work completed.

In closing, a simple take-away as we look ahead to spring in the Applegate: whenever our fire season begins, the fine fuels around your home and driveway are the most important items to address. Leaves, tall grass and weeds all have the potential to allow your home to ignite if a wildfire erupts nearby—more so than trees! Stay on top of raking, weed whacking and mowing (even if you end up mowing twice!), so that you're in good shape when those final activity closures take effect for southwest Oregon.

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Author's Note: *In order to be consistent with the rest of Oregon and Northern California, the National Weather Service recently changed our local rain-year dates from September 1 through August 31 to October 1 through September 30.*

Wildland fire hazard fuel-reduction grants available

Believe it or not, fire season 2015 is already right around the corner. It seems like just last week that we all collectively sighed with relief that we made it through another fire season relatively unscathed. As we all wait for the rain and snow (that may or may not come) that we so desperately need, it's time to start planning for another potentially drought-stricken, smoke-filled summer.

The Oregon Department of Forestry (ODF) is offering a monetary incentive to help reduce the fire danger in and around your property. ODF is offering \$500 per acre of fuel-reduction work to reduce the potential impact of wildfire on your property.

This program is available in a large portion of the Applegate Valley, but unfortunately it is not available to all Applegate Valley residents. To find out if your property is within the eligible grant area, to ask questions, or to schedule a free/no obligation home wildfire risk assessment, please call Derick Price or Herb Johnson at 541-664-3328. Properties that are not eligible for grant funding are still eligible for the free/no obligation property risk assessment, so we encourage all Applegaters to call.

Although grants will be available through next winter, they are *not* available during fire season. *Now* is the time for fuel-reduction work on your property.

Become an Applegate Firewise Community

Did you know that there is a national recognition program active in Jackson and Josephine counties to identify neighborhoods that are taking an active role in fire prevention?

Firewise communities are recognized for taking a few simple steps that many rural landowners do on a regular basis. There are four easy steps to take before applying to becoming a Firewise Community:

1. Have a neighborhood-wide wildfire risk assessment done free of charge by the Oregon Department of Forestry.
2. Talk to your neighbors and select a few people (sparkplugs) for a neighborhood board and create an "action plan" based on the risk assessment.
3. Conduct a Firewise day or event.
4. Invest a minimum of \$2 per capita each year on a local Firewise action. Volunteer hours count as a monetary investment.

Submit an application with the state Firewise liaison. (ODF will typically handle the application after all other obligations have been met).

The key to a successful Firewise Community is community involvement.

If you think that your neighborhood should be a Firewise Community or have any questions, please call Derick Price, Herb Johnson, or Brian Ballou at the Oregon Department of Forestry at 541-664-3328 or visit www.firewise.org.

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