

Wildfire season expected to be severe

By Nicole Montesano
Smoke Signals staff writer

Forecasters are expecting a sizzling summer with potential for significant wildfires this year. Grand Ronde fire officials said that they're prepared.

The National Interagency Fire Center issues monthly predictions for fire agencies. Its most recent prediction on Thursday, May 1, said the western United States is likely to see above normal temperatures and drier-than-normal conditions through August.

Tribal Fire Management and Protection Program Manager Andrew Puerini said in an email that he's expecting the season to be "probably not as significant as last year's record-setting fire season, but significant nonetheless."

He noted that "Oregon's snowpack above 5,000 feet in elevation remains at 130 to 160% of the median, which is good, and will likely result in a later start to fire season than we saw last year."

However, Puerini said, "It could also result in additional fuel loading, and when cured, increased fire danger. Washington was not as lucky with snowpack, so I would expect fire season to kick off earlier to the north of us."

Gov. Tina Kotek noted in an early May press briefing that "record-setting wildfire seasons across the west are getting longer and more devastating. What we know to be an 'average fire season' has long passed. ... We are preparing for what is likely to be an even more aggressive and increasingly difficult to control wildfire season this year."

Oregon Forestry Department lead meteorologist Pete Parsons, who provides three-month seasonal

Tribe offers defensible space assessments to help prepare

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The Oregon Fire Marshal's office conducts defensible space assessments for property owners and this year, the Grand Ronde Tribe is offering a defensible space program as well.

Tribal Resilience Officer Kaylene Barry said the Tribe's Emergency Services Department offers free assessments for homes and properties, and mitigation services for qualifying properties.

For information about the program, call Grand Ronde Emergency Services at 503-879-3473, or email kaylene.barry@grandronde.org.

Barry provided a list of suggestions to help reduce risk from wildfires:

- Keep roofs and gutters clean from leaves, conifer needles and other debris.
- Keep vegetation at least 5 feet from homes and other buildings.
- Remove bark mulch, deadwood and other debris from under eaves, and around and below decks and fences.
- Keep driveways clear of debris and obstructions, in compliance with height and width requirements and clearly mark road signs, bridges and culverts.
- Store small barbecue tanks at least 30 feet away from homes or in an outbuilding when not in use.
- Cover exterior attic vents, soffit vents and areas below decks and patios with 1/8 inch wire mesh. ■



Kaylene Barry

climate forecasts for the state Agriculture Department, said in his most recent forecast released on Thursday, May 15, that temperatures are likely to warm quickly and may hit triple digits by the end of June, with rainfall expected to be near or below average.

Parsons bases his forecasts on previous years with similar conditions and patterns over the course of each season.

July and August are also likely to be very hot, Parsons wrote in

his forecast and are typically very dry months in western Oregon. He noted there are likely to be drier-than-average conditions, with "heightened chances for lightning episodes to cause a significant number wildfire starts."

Locally, Puerini said, "Our area will have some risk of large wildfire, mostly in the month of August. Fire danger will increase during intermittent drying/drought, significant weather events, and from human ignitions. We trust the community to assist our team by not starting preventable fires during periods of high fire danger and especially during red flag warnings. The Reservation forest is a hub for recreation in our area and so we continue our efforts in seasonal wildfire patrols. The best way to communicate wildfire in our areas is to call 911."

After an unusually dry April, Tribal Natural Resources Manager Colby Drake said in an email that, "We are seeing slight drought conditions for western Oregon going

into the summer months. We are expecting more significant fire behavior and activity in the months of July and August."

Despite federal cuts, Drake said, "We are anticipating large project fire response to remain the same with all of our federal, state and Tribal partners. We may see some slower response times related to smaller fires but overall, response times should stay the same. We are hoping to see more opportunities for our Tribal crews as the federal crews seem to be more impacted by the federal cuts related to hiring. We also don't expect to see any changes in our dispatch process or with the Bureau of Indian Affairs Northwest Regional Office; they are keeping us very informed of how they have been impacted."

During Kotek's wildfire briefing, Oregon State Fire Marshal Mariana Ruiz-Temple said a state seasonal staffing grant is expected to enable local fire agencies to hire some 1,500 seasonal firefighters. Oregon Department of Forestry Deputy Director of Fire Operations Kyle Williams said his department is hiring more than 400 seasonal firefighters.

Kotek urged Oregonians to prepare ahead for fire season.

"Preparedness is going to help us reduce cost and impact to our communities, and now is the time to do that," she said.

Drake said the Tribe will be working on fire prevention as well.

"We expect to be able to participate and lead more prescribed and cultural burns within the local area with our partners," he said. "The (Tribal) fire protection program doesn't receive much funding from the BIA so that portion also hasn't been impacted."

Puerini noted that, "There is some concern with burn scars from the 2020 fires. With several seasons of regrowth, a lot of which is invasive weeds, there is a new, highly combustible fine fuel bed in these areas. New light fuels, downed trees and standing snags could mean difficult and dangerous suppression efforts in those areas when fires occur there. Some lightning and wind could create a mess in these areas. We will hope for the best and prepare for the worst." ■

Let's Create Defensible Space

CHECKLIST:

- Roofs and gutters are clean from leaves, conifer needles, and other debris. ■
- Flammable vegetation is removed from growing directly under the eaves. A minimum of five feet from the structure is recommended. ■
- eaves, conifer needles, deadwood, bark mulch, and other debris removed from the surface of, around, and below decks and fences. ■
- The driveway is accessible to first responders (e.g., clear of debris and obstructions; meets local height and width requirements; has clearly marked road signs, bridges, & culverts). ■
- Small BBQ tanks, not in use, are stored at least 30 feet away or in an outbuilding. ■
- Exterior attic vents, soffit vents, and areas below decks and patios are covered with 1/8" metal wire mesh. ■



For more information contact your local fire agency or reach out to our Defensible Space Program for more tips on how to protect yourself and your property this wildfire season.
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503-879-1701



On Fridays you will receive a message about mental health, a social emotional tip or a simple quote or message of encouragement.

Text JOIN to
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