



# Potential For Early Fire Season

Less precipitation and low snowpack in some areas create drier conditions

By Lauren Brown

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During the spring, it's always a roll of the dice to try and predict what the upcoming fire season might look like. Late season rains can help bail out a year that has been drier than usual. However, at this point local fire experts believe this fire season might start earlier than normal.

Jeff Rose, District Manager for the Burns Bureau of Land Management and a partner of the Harney County Wildfire Collaborative, said precipitation levels thus far vary across the district. "We're a little bit below normal in precipitation in some areas, to significantly below normal in some areas, especially where there is not a lot of snowpack," he said. In previous years, late spring rains have helped to mitigate the dry conditions. "This year, it's not lining up that way, so we could end up going into a pretty good dry period from this point forward," he said.

The numbers appear to bear this out. According to the Natural Resource Conservation Service the Oregon SNOWTEL Snow/Precipitation report for the Harney Basin as of April 20 shows that out of 12 sites, five sites in the basin are reporting a median snowpack of 74 percent of average. In addition, out of 12 sites, 10 sites are reporting a median overall precipitation of 79 percent.

This is positive from the standpoint that if there isn't a late burst of precipitation, there won't be explosive growth in plants creating fuel for later in the season, but negative in that there is still plenty of grass and potential fuel left over from last fire season. "It's the next two months that will be the next tell from what we're seeing, and they're not predicting a lot of moisture at this point," Rose said. "If I had to guess, I would say that we'll probably start up a little early this year, and the potential is to have a little longer fire season than we've had in the last couple years."



*Pictured: Brattain fire taken at dusk, September 2020.*

## Training and preparations

The permanent staff with the Burns Interagency Fire Zone have been attending trainings and readying equipment for the summer.

Burns Interagency Fire and Aviation Staff Officer Kim Valentine said pack tests and fire refresher courses are taking place for permanent staff as well as meetings to make sure communications and equipment

are in alignment. In addition, some staff have been sent to other states to assist with fire seasons that have already begun. "We have firefighters in Missouri and Minnesota helping out with their fire seasons," she said. "We're preparing here locally, but we're also helping the cause nationally."

Rose said it is important to look at fire seasons across the United States and look at how resources are utilized. For example, the Southwest's fire season usually begins before the Pacific Northwest. Then, when monsoon season hits the Southwest, the fires ease up. That is when the fire season here may intensify. "Our single-engine air tankers in the past have come out of the Southwest," Rose said. "They work the contract down there, and then when they're done and their

season's tailing, they'll come up here." If the fire season here begins earlier than expected, that could present a conflict regarding the use of resources.

The local Rural Fire Protection Associations (RFPAs) are also preparing for the upcoming season through online refresher courses.

Burns Interagency Fire Zone RFPA liaison Jacob Gear said the pandemic has forced the RFPAs to turn to online trainings, but that about 150 RFPA firefighters took those trainings last year, and 53 people have already taken those online refresher courses this year. "It's a great alternative, and I also think that we're going to continue to use an online option in the future for folks who can't make one of the in-person trainings," he said.

#### Education and firewise awareness

While most of the fires in the Harney Basin are lightning caused, the area has seen a definite uptick in visitors and recreators over the last year, perhaps as a result of being encouraged to spend more time outdoors due to the COVID-19 pandemic. "That just increases the potential for human-caused fires," Rose said.

Visitors who are unfamiliar with the area might not be as firewise as they should be. "We're already seeing increased numbers of visitors, especially on the south end," Valentine said. As a result, education campaigns focusing on prevention of human-caused fires are in the works.

Oregon's west side of the state endured a horrific fire season last year, and in response, Valentine said that the Harney County Fire Defense Board, which consists of chiefs from the Burns and Hines fire departments, members of the Burns Paiute Tribe and representatives from the Burns Interagency Fire Zone, are working on a campaign to help locals become more firewise and help their homes to be more defensible where wildfires are concerned.

#### New construction

Construction began last year on a new Fire and Fuels Office at the Forest Service compound in Hines. Valentine said the facility will be big enough to house all of the permanent and temporary staff, which will be about 130 people at the height of the fire season.

Valentine anticipates that because construction continued on schedule through the winter, the facility may be completed sometime this summer. "It is a great, brand new facility for our firefighters," she said. The new building is an interagency effort with the BLM, Forest Service and U.S. Fish & Wildlife all contributing funds to the new building. "That's unheard of," Valentine said. "But it proves that we can do it. It takes a lot of coordination, but it makes our dollars more efficient, and we are providing a quality space for our fire folks that is going to be awesome."

*This article is provided by High Desert Partnership; a Harney County nonprofit convening and supporting six collaboratives including the Harney County Wildlife Collaborative.*

