



A Warmer than Average Summer Expected in the Harney Basin

The goal is to be as prepared as possible well ahead of the upcoming wildfire season.

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By Scott Barton

Spring is a beautiful time of year in the Harney Basin. Wildflowers are in full bloom in the rolling hills of the sagebrush steppe. Wet meadows are full of water, and riparian zones are as green as they'll be all year. Migratory birds are returning from their southerly winter climes. New signs of life abound. While spring has arrived in all its splendor, it won't be long until summer is here to stay.

A Quick Transition from Spring to Summer

As Harney County residents have surely noticed, the winter and early spring were abnormally cool and saw significant precipitation. "A much cooler spring let snow stay longer than average this year," says BLM Burns District Manager, Jeff Rose. "There is still some snow in protected areas as of late May." Extended snowpack spells good news for a couple of reasons. First, it will help plants grow a little later into the summer. Second, the added moisture could help shorten the fire season on the front end.

Rose remains cautious though. He adds that "the effects of more moisture will likely be gone by early July." Looking ahead to the coming months, long-term weather models are calling for a warmer and drier summer, notably June through August. Even more, the Harney Basin has already seen more thunderstorm activity than it typically does this early.



Preparation is Key

"Our preparation for the coming fire season begins right after the previous one," says Rose. In the fall, a full review takes place of what went well and what didn't for the fire season. Partners come together again early in the spring to update each other on new happenings for the coming season. In these meetings everything from new personnel, equipment, policies and procedures, and predictions is discussed. The goal is to be as prepared as possible well ahead of

the upcoming wildfire season.

Pictured: A scene from the 2021 lightning caused Bootleg Fire which burned more than 400,000 acres. Photo source, Associated Press.

A Multi-Faceted Effort

In rural areas like Harney County, working together is imperative to prepare for wildfire season. With such vast tracts of land, and resources being miles away in many cases, collaboration is a must.



In Harney County, wildfire preparation and response falls into the hands of many different groups. They include Rangeland Fire Protection Associations (RFPAs), the Burns Interagency Fire Zone, the Harney County Wildfire Collaborative (HCWC), the BLM, United States Forest Service, private landowners, and numerous other local, state, and federal agencies.

Of note for the 2023 fire season is the addition of a new RFPA. Over the winter, the North Harney RFPA was born. This group will cover areas east of Burns and Hines bordering the Lone Pine and Crane RFPAs.

While the work of all the partners is vital to successful wildfire preparation and response, Rose is quick to point out the work done with the HCWC. "The HCWC helps us to coordinate and adjust the BLM's actions to not only meet the bureau's mission, but to help our neighbors and partner agencies achieve their goals and objectives."

He adds that "having the ability to bring projects and ideas to landowners, land managers, and interested people helps everyone make better decisions related to fire and overall land management."

Education Plays an Important Role

Rose insists that "the fire prevention philosophy and message has come a long way." That's been due in large part to Shyanne Slate and Derek Shoun of the BLM and Forest Service who have worked tirelessly to educate landowners and common citizens about wildfire prevention and mitigation.

Years ago, the educational message was largely focused on helping people prevent wildfires. It's now evolved into a more comprehensive message that encompasses a host of actions that people can take to not only prevent wildfires, but learn how to more responsibly live in country where wildfires occur.

What Does the Wildfire Forecast Look Like for 2023?

This is a question that Rose gets on a daily basis. The simple answer is that there is no simple answer. "The severity of the fire season is difficult to predict because it is so strongly influenced by a complex set of variables. They include short and long-term weather, plant growth (fuel loads), and a number of other factors."

Ryan Hussey, District Fire Management Officer with the U.S. Forest Service shared this about some of the factors being experienced this spring as prescribed fires are implemented in the southern Malheur National Forest: "Do not let the above average snowpack from last winter fool you. While performing prescribed burning activities this spring it was observed that the fire behavior was more active than in years past. The snowpack did allow for moderate to heavy growth of annual grasses in the timber compared to last year, but the low fuel moisture content of the timber litter allowed for that to be overridden and fire behavior and consumption was surprisingly higher than anticipated."

Every year conditions are hot and dry in July and August, no matter what conditions were like the previous winter and spring. The reality is that every day between late June and the middle of September, the potential exists for a large wildfire to start.

Final Thoughts

Wildfire season is unpredictable, and every one is different from the one before. The good news for the residents of Harney County is that local, state, and federal groups, landowners, and collaboratives are working together to be as prepared as possible in the event that a wildfire starts. In the meantime, it's incumbent on landowners, residents, and recreationists to do their part in practicing fire safety and responsibility.

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

