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ALERT TOP STORY

Officials expecting difficult wildfire season in Coconino County, northern Arizona

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Skyler Lofgren, wildland fire supervisor for the Flagstaff Fire Department, stands in the ignition point of the Babbitt Fire in this 2018 file photo.

Jake Bacon, Arizona Daily Sun file

Northern Arizona leaders and Coconino County officials are preparing for what is expected to be a tough wildfire season this summer.

A difficult season is expected largely because of much lower levels of precipitation over the last year.

Brian Kilmowski, with the National Weather Service office in Bellemont, told the Coconino County Board of Supervisors this week that from October of last year, the county has seen only between 50 and 80% of the normal precipitation they would expect depending on location.

“As you know, we had a pitiful monsoon last year, a very dry fall and, really, only since January have we started to receive the precipitation we would expect,” Kilmowski said. “The precipitation we’ve received from the start of the new year in January has certainly helped things from getting much worse, but it's really not doing much to improve the situation at this time.”

Kilmowski added: “We’re really much worse off than we were last year.”

Flagstaff, he said, has actually gotten fairly lucky in comparison to other parts of the county in terms of the amount of precipitation received. The forests above the Mogollon Rim have almost received the normal level of snowfall that could be expected in a year.

County Emergency Management Director Wes Dison told the Board of Supervisors this week that the fire season has already begun.

“In all reality, we are really in wildfire season from an operational perspective, we are paying very close attention already. The traditional fire season is really a thing of the past,” Dison said. “We are watching the weather very closely, we are watching all the indices.”

Kilmowski said lack of precipitation is likely to continue. Based on the current precipitation outlooks, it looks like the next few months could be both dryer and warmer than normal -- in line with what the current La Nina weather phenomenon predicts.

And based on those predictions and the current state of the forest, Kilmowski said the fire risk outlooks are showing a higher-than-normal risk of wildfire south of the rim from May on and a higher risk of wildfire across the entire state by June.

Arthur Gonzales, with the Kaibab National Forest, agreed with Kilmowski's assessment and added that based on their data tracking precipitation levels across both the Coconino and Kaibab national forests, 14 of the last 17 months have been below average precipitation levels.

Nonetheless, Gonzales said the recent snows do help.

Gonzales said the recent string of snowstorms has help by pushing off the start of the drying trend forests experience as the region moved into the summer. And as long as that drying trend is postponed, the shorter the fire season becomes.

"There's not going to be a storm that brings us out of the [precipitation] deficit; our only hope at this point is that we get these well-timed storms that we're seeing today that just continue to delay and stall this drying trend, that will take us into the peak of fire season," Gonzales said.

Gonzales said even if the area does get a decent monsoon season, unlike last year's "nonsoon," the region is likely to see about three extremely dry and fire-prone months before those rains can come.

That means fire restrictions are likely, Gonzales said.

That said, it's unlikely that there will be a statewide ban on campfires this year.

Last year, a statewide ban was implemented as agencies did everything they could to prevent having to respond to large fires during the COVID-19 pandemic.

James Pettit, with the Coconino National Forest, said part of those COVID-related policies last year was to attack aggressively all fires, whether they started naturally or were human caused.

Local farms adapt to historic hot and dry weather blowing into October

This year, that is changing, Pettit said. With concerns over COVID diminished, Pettit said their approach to naturally caused fires is returning to normal.

Often, if it is deemed safe, the forest service will simply manage a naturally caused fire to help restore the forest rather than working to contain it.

In preparation for this fire season, on the Coconino National Forest there are 12 fire engines, three hotshot crews stationed locally, two fire and fuel management teams, four water trucks and two bulldozers.

On the Kaibab National Forest south of Grand Canyon, there are six engines ready for the season. Additionally, two engines can be pulled from the Grand Canyon National Park. A helicopter, a fire and fuel management team, one water truck and two bulldozers are also stationed on the southern Kaibab.

On the Kaibab north of the canyon, the agency has four engines and one they can pull from the national park, one bulldozer, one water truck and a small fire and fuels management team.

