

Officials prepare for long, hard fire season

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With reduced staff and precipitation, fire officials with Six Rivers National Forest are preparing for a long, hard fire season.

During a Tuesday Del Norte County Board of Supervisors meeting, Jeff Marszal, district ranger of Six Rivers' Gasquet district, highlighted last year's tumultuous fire season, including the Slater Fire, which burned more than 150,000 acres in Del Norte and Humboldt counties and forced residents in Gasquet to evacuate.

Marszal said the Slater Fire demonstrated "extreme and unprecedented" fire behavior, making it difficult to deal with. Additionally, staff and other resources were spread thin because of several other large wildfires across the state – a problem forest officials will likely face again this year.

"We are going to be short across the region," said Duane Franklin, fire supervisor of the Gasquet district.

Franklin said the staffing issues are due to competition with other fire services and other higher paying jobs. He said the forest service will be operating with one less fire engine and water tender worker this year.

However, the district-hosted hotshot crew is fully staffed, although they can be pulled to other larger fires across the West.

All in all, the district is down about 20% in staff and resources, according to Marszal.

What's more, the fire season has come early this year due to low precipitation.

"We're really dry this year, if anybody has traveled up the Smith River this year, you'll notice it's low, like it's in August low conditions, which is really kind of scary," said Franklin.

Franklin said fire conditions are about a month and half ahead of schedule. Recently, a fire in Orleans burned 30 acres. Franklin said that fire was unusual because it started around 6:30 p.m. Typically, fires start between 2-5 p.m. As of press time, fire danger in the Gasquet/Smith River National Recreation Area District is high.

Despite the challenges of this year's season, Marszal said the forest service will be proactive in fire treatment, and will be prioritizing protecting residences and major infrastructure, such Highway 199 and the Collier Tunnel, should a fire break out.

Marzal said communication with the public will be another top priority.

"The Slater Fire last year...illustrated that these kinds of events, if managed properly, actually strengthen and build relationships," said Marzal. "Mark my words, we will do everything we can to keep these fires small and manageable in 2021."