

Federal government looking at unprecedented fire season

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As much of the nation prepares for what could be a disastrous fire season, Oregon Senator Ron Wyden is urging local residents to be watchdogs in an effort to protect communities from major blazes.

During a conference call with the media Saturday, Wyden said people in neighborhoods across Oregon and the western part of the nation could stop the biggest threats before they start.

“Folks that are out in the community, when they see any signs like dropped matches, burns in their neighborhoods, the really important thing for people to do is not take but a minute and call the local fire officials. What the public can say is we can be the watchdogs over some of these threats.”

Wyden said it important for every person to play a role this year, saying he expects the fire season to be unprecedented. Because of the threat, Wyden has been working closely with the Biden administration, the U.S. Forest Service and others to come up with a plan to handle the potential of a fire season no one has seen before.

“For several weeks, I have been working very closely with the White House and the Forest Service to make sure they are prepared to deal with the unprecedented fire season in the west,” Wyden said. “Specifically, the danger of multiple big fires, infernos, taking place simultaneously across the western states. The fires are going to stress local, state and federal resources to the breaking point unless we are prepared. Millions of

westerners this morning are collectively holding their breath about the prospect of one of these infernos ripping through their town.”

Wyden said after his continued discussions in D.C., he expects announcements to be made this week outlining federal plans for the fire season.

“I expect the Biden administration will have more to say publicly about this threat, this grave threat, in the next few days,” Wyden said. “I’ve been raising this in public hearings and private conversations every single day.”

While Wyden said he has not seen the White House plan, he expects the federal government to explain how it might fight multiple large fires at one time.

“Specifically, what I think we’ll hear is about making sure there are personnel available in the west to fight multiple fires, the big fires, at the same time,” he said. “The reason I emphasize this is because this is a departure from the past. Usually, we have one big fire, and other western states will chip in for the state that was hit the hardest. Now, we’re talking about something that’s unprecedented, which is big fires simultaneously throughout the west.”

Wyden said during a recent public hearing, the Forest Service admitted it could be a very difficult year.

“Vicki Christiansen, the head of the Forest Service, said she felt resources are already at the breaking point,” Wyden said. “What we’re going to hear about this week is make sure there’s more personnel available to fight multiple fires at the same time, there’s equipment to back that up and that local, state and federal firefighters are going to be tightly coordinated in order to deal with this.”

In addition to more firefighters, Wyden said more funding will be needed.

“I do believe it’s going to take additional resources to deal with this especially grave situation, the possibility of fires all over the west at the same time,” he said. “I expect this will take additional resources.”

Wyden said there are two fronts where the threat of dangerous fires must be attacked. The first is have firefighters and equipment available when blazes erupt. The second is an effort to thin out millions of acres of forest that are a tinderbox right now. Wyden said it will cost up to \$20 billion to thin out the forest, which will ease the threat in the long run.

“Right now, my biggest concern is it is so dry,” he said.