

Six Rivers forecasts ‘normal, above normal’ fire season

July 5, 2020



A “miracle May” level of rainfall saved a more dire forecast for the region’s fire season.

Jeff Tonkin of the Eureka National Weather Service gave the prognosis during a remote presentation to the public June 18 outlining the Six Rivers National Forest’s Gasquet Ranger District and Smith River National Recreation Area’s summer season.

Tonkin said the region was already in drought conditions heading into May when the fifth or sixth wettest May on record struck.

“We had a really nice, what I call a miracle May, in terms of precipitation,” Tonkin said. “That really, really helped with slowing down the fire season going into the summer.”

According to records the National Weather Service measures at the Del Norte County Regional Airport at Jack McNamara Field, 4.79 inches of rain fell in May, with 2.87 inches being the norm. By comparison, just

2.26 inches of rain fell in April, with 5.2 inches being the normal level.

Thus, Tonkin expects an above normal fire season, explaining that's actually a normal condition for Northern California that rarely gets rain during the summer months.

He then outlined the several factors that went into forecasting the summer fire season.

Temperatures so far through June 11 were only slightly above average, which usually run between 56 to 63 degrees April through June.

"That usually indicates the atmosphere is running a little drier than normal. But only a little bit," Tonkin said.

He reiterated much of Southwest Oregon and Northwest California are under a severe or extreme drought label, even accounting for rain the region received in May.

"We're still drier than normal. That's going to play into fire potential," Tonkin said.

By comparison he said the drought conditions are worse than last year, but not as bad as 2016-17.

Tonkin then said the four measures for to what fuels fires are all at or below average, including 100-hour fuel moisture levels (1- to 3-inch dead branches on the ground), larger dead fuels (4- to 8-inch branches), live fuel, and the energy release component, a combination measure of live and dead fuels.

He noted weather models show slightly above average temperatures for the summer and about normal rainfall, which is to say none for the region. The wildcard going into the fire season remains unforeseen thunderstorms, which he said is due to their unpredictability to forecast more than a week.

Tonkin said Predictive Services, in Boise, Id., then takes all the data to predict an overall fire potential across the nation. Locally, it equates to an above normal fire potential for the area, except for a sliver along the coast that remains normal through September. Then it becomes above normal, too, Tonkin explained, when coastal winds are likely to blow any fire westwards.

"One thing I want to note, though, with these charts, is that it might be a little alarming. 'Oh my gosh! We're going to have a high fire potential pretty much all the summer,'" Tonkin said. "But in all honesty, I don't remember any charts coming out for each summer where they didn't show a high fire potential for Northwest California. Because it's pretty much the nature of what we have here. It doesn't rain much after June. It will dry out, it will get hot."