

Federal forecast predicts fewer wildfires in West this year

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Published Monday, April 2, 2012

Forwarded to the *Applegater* by the U.S. Forest Service

This wildfire season should be far less eventful than last year's, but some parts of the West could still see a few large fires, according to the federal government's new wildfire outlook.

Areas that were hit hard during the summer of 2011, such as New Mexico and Texas, which both grappled with record-setting mega-blazes, will see somewhat of a reprieve this year as the La Niña oceanic phenomenon -- which influences atmospheric conditions across the country -- weakens and possibly shifts toward its opposite, El Niño. La Niña tends to bring unusually warm weather across much of the region, while El Niño generally creates cooler, wetter conditions overall.

But while several of last year's hot spots are likely to see less fire activity, other areas will be at greater risk in 2012, including the Front Range of the Rocky Mountains in Colorado, and the western plains of Kansas and Nebraska. Parts of Arizona, where 2011's massive Wallow fire scorched 538,000 acres in the eastern part of the state, also could burn this year, according to the latest outlook from the National Interagency Coordination Center, scheduled to be issued today. The outlook extends from April through June.

"Right now, the long-term projections suggest we're going to remain neutral or shift toward a weak El Niño," said Ed Delgado, the Forest Service's national predictive services program manager, who is based at the National Interagency Fire Center in Boise, Idaho. "This doesn't mean we won't see big fires, it just means that relative to historic numbers, we won't see the huge fire year like we did last year."

Colorado is already seeing evidence of that shift: In the past few weeks, several small wildfires have ignited south of Denver and in the state's eastern plains.

And even though La Niña is losing steam, which should spare much of the Southwest, the area's continued drought complicates matters. A few relatively small fires are also burning in southern New Mexico.

"We do foresee the next few months averaging out warmer and drier than usual," said Chuck Maxwell, a meteorologist in the Forest Service's Southwestern regional office in Albuquerque, N.M. "But we also expect some storms to come in and cool things off and bring some precipitation. Even one storm like that a week would take away entirely the sustained conditions of hot and dry that could make things really, really bad."

One major benefit of a weakening La Niña is that winds will be far weaker than they were last year, when strong gales fanned fires in the Southwest, helping to create "rolling vortexes" that rapidly consumed large swaths of dry forest.

"Last year were conditions you only see a few times in a year," Maxwell said. "The windy period usually lasts six to eight weeks, but instead it lasted four or five months."

While it's likely to be dry and warm in much of the Southwest, the lack of wind will make a big difference, he added.

"That's what makes fire so interesting," Maxwell said. "Because you can have dry conditions and drought and stuff like that, but if they're not persistent and you don't have wind to encourage it along, it's dramatically different. If the winds weren't so strong, those fires last summer wouldn't have been what they were."

Without strong winds to spread them, the fires that ignite this year are likely to be smaller, he added.

Fire risk this summer will depend in part on how wet of a spring the West will see, Delgado said.

"A lot of the fire season depends on what happens in March and April, when things green up," he said.

If the spring's new growth dries up over the summer, that will provide more fuel for a potential fire, he added.

Forest managers should be prepared for an unpredictable season, Maxwell said.

"Last year, it was very clear when it was going to happen and where, but this year it's much more complicated. ... It's going to be a challenge for us to know exactly where to put our resources and when," he said. "We probably will have some fires crop up and crank for a few days, and then get some moisture and see them die down. We're probably going to see some oddball stuff happen over the season."