

New Mexico braces for early start to wildfire season

By **Andy Stiny**, *The New Mexican*

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New Mexico is getting much-needed moisture this week, but the long-range forecast for the state remains the same: below-normal precipitation, continued drought and worsening wildfire danger.

That forecast has federal and state forest managers preparing for an early start to the spring fire season.

"We are anticipating fire season to come early due to dry conditions out there, and the current weather forecast doesn't lend itself to a lot of moisture in the coming weeks," said Bruce Hill, public information officer for the Santa Fe National Forest.

In higher elevations, the snowpack is far below normal. In the Rio Grande Basin, which encompasses the Sangre de Cristo Mountains, snowpack is 19 percent of normal. Across the state, snowpack stands at 13 percent of the 30-year trend.

The Forest Service is calling in firefighting crews two to three weeks earlier than it typically does for the spring fire season. Hotshot crews, who are experienced firefighters, and firefighting aircraft also are being called in early, said Bill King, a fire management officer for the Santa Fe and Carson National Forests.

The Carson Hotshot crew, which is based in Taos but has wildland firefighters from outside the area, starts March 18, and the Santa Fe crew begins work April 1, King said. A small, water-dropping helicopter will be put on contract a month early and be ready April 1.

"We are fully staffed this year," said King, with 10 fire engines available on the Santa Fe forest and six for the Carson.

"Right now we are evaluating conditions. The Santa Fe (forest) will dry out faster than the Carson," he said. "We can bolster our resources as we might need them."

Air tankers, capable of dropping large volumes of water and fire retardant, will be available earlier, as well as a heavy helicopter for water drops, but there is no firm date, King said.

Greg Hesch of the state Forestry Division said the agency also is expecting an early start to the spring wildfire season and that it could be the state's worst in a decade.

The Forestry Division is training extra firefighters throughout the state, he said.

King said additional federal money could be requested if needed to fund firefighting. That request would go to the Forest Service Southwestern Regional Office in Albuquerque.

"But there might be a lot of competition (among various national forests) for those severity funds," King said.

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Local crews with the U.S. Forest Service worked the Hondito Fire in May 2017. The lightning-caused wildfire was allowed to grow to thousands of acres in the Tres Piedras area, a project only feasible because of ample moisture and a lack of fires elsewhere in the country.
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