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Western states may face bad fire season

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DENVER, Jan. 30 (UPI) -- Colorado and other western states are facing the potential of another bad wildfire season due to lingering drought and less than average snowpack in the mountains this winter, a weather forecaster said Thursday.

"There is a potential of having fuels a little bit drier and the snowpack depleting earlier than what would be normal, and that does have the potential of bringing up a bad fire season," said John Januzzi, meteorologist in charge of the National Weather Service office in Boise, Idaho.

Januzzi works with the National Interagency Fire Center in Boise which issued an outlook this month predicting an above-normal fire season for the interior western states because of the long-term drought that persists across most of the region.

The outlook for February through April calls for above normal temperatures and below normal precipitation over the Pacific Northwest, Northern Rockies, portions of the Great Lakes and the Ohio River Valley.

The higher temperatures means the mountain snowpack, a major water source in the mountain west, may be depleted earlier than usual, which could increase the danger of fire in forests and grasslands, Januzzi said.

The El Nino is expected to move storm systems through Southern California, Arizona, New Mexico, and West Texas, but not offer much relief to the northern states in the West, the forecaster said.

Last year, more than 73,000 wildfires burned 7.2 million acres in the United States, most of them in the western states, according to the Boise center. There were 23 firefighters killed in the firefighting effort that cost millions of dollars.

Colorado saw the worst wildfire season in its history, with more than 900,000 acres and 235 homes destroyed. Nine firefighters were killed.

Fire danger signs are already posted this year in the Colorado foothills and the state may be headed for another dangerous fire season.

Federal and state forestry experts told a legislative committee Wednesday that the fire season might begin earlier than last year, according to The Rocky Mountain News. The season usually begins in May but the Snaking Fire broke out nearly Bailey on April 23 last year.

"This was an epic year last year," U.S. Forest Service Regional Forester Rick Cables told the House and Senate Agriculture Committees.

"I wish I could think this next year will be better. But I've got to tell you, with warm dry winds all winter long and a snowpack that is 75 percent of normal, we're staring down the sights of a very, very difficult fire season - another one."

Cables and other officials urged the legislators to support government programs to reduce the risk of wildfires by thinning and controlled burns.

James Bedwell, U.S. Forest supervisor for Arapahoe and Roosevelt national forests and Pawnee National Grasslands, said they need more money to carry out the programs though.

"The biggest impediment we're looking at right now is funding," he said. "We may not be able to implement the national fire plan to an even higher degree or percent than we had because the resources aren't available."

The U.S. Forest Service is looking at a 12-percent reduction in funding from what it had last year, according to testimony before the committee.

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