

Prepare for potentially record-breaking fire season

By Harrison Raine
Writers on the Range

For the 2021 fire season, the writing is on the wall. The West, despite a few days of intense winter, is far drier than it was leading up to last year's record-breaking fires.

As a hotshot crewmember, the reality of what's to come fills me with two distinct thoughts: money and dread. With my financial stability tied to overtime pay, I know that my pockets will be full when I am laid off next winter. But the unrelenting fires that stand between now and then make me nervous.

I also know that I am not alone. Across the West, people in homes and communities are filled with anxiety as they look at dry timber and brown hillsides that are usually white this time of year. For them, when the air fills with smoke, there won't be any fire paychecks, just a prolonged sense of uncertainty.

Drought levels often serve as a good indicator of the fires to come, and things are far worse now than they were in the build-up to 2020. Rich Tinker, an author of the U.S. Drought Monitor at the Climate Prediction Center, told me, "In 2020, the highest we got to anywhere, was a D2 — Severe Drought. Now we are looking at D3 — D4 — Extreme and Exceptional Drought across much of the West and almost all of the Southwest."

When Nick Nauslar, a fire meteorologist at the National Interagency Fire Center, talks about the fire season to come, he's particularly blunt: "The deck is stacked against us. I fully expect a busier season than normal across the Southwest."

For Tinker and Nauslar, the areas of concern primarily encompass the Four Corners states of Utah, Colorado, New Mexico and Arizona. When you put together light snowpack, dry fuels and high temperatures, every wildland firefighter knows what that means.

In my time as wildland firefighter, the question I get asked again and again is whether I am ever scared. The answer to this question is "yes," but not in the life-or-death sense in which it's asked.

There are far more constant threats than the flames themselves. Smoke, for one. Carbon emissions, for another.

I think I'm worried most by the knowledge that damage from these wildfires affects the health of millions of people, and that the large wildfires

of today are ensuring even bigger ones in the future. Everyone should be concerned about this reality, not just those of us on the fire line.

Wildfires and their management are known by some researchers as a "wicked problem," where no optimal solution exists. For decades, forest managers were convinced that suppressing all fires was the answer. But we've known for a while now how misplaced those beliefs were, even as many agencies cling to that failed strategy of a century ago.

Jerry Williams, former fire and aviation director for the U.S. Forest Service, puts it best about our stubborn wrongheadedness: "Every year we set a new record, we invest more in (fire) suppression, invest less in mitigation and wonder why we're not getting on top of it." If someone who directed the largest wildland firefighting force in the world makes this statement, it's probably time to try something else.

What we need are policies and programs that address wildfires in ways beyond just putting fires out. This Spring, Colorado showed that it's willing to learn from last season's pain when Gov. Jared Polis and state legislators from both sides of the aisle released a series of bills aimed at wildfire mitigation, not only wildfire suppression.

These bills are exciting for several reasons such as: allocation of millions for forest health projects and grants for communities and individual homeowners to carry out their own hazard reduction projects. Also there is an attempt to seek out incentives for markets to address fuel mitigation through biomass energy.

The millions the state spends now on restoring forests and hardening homes pale in comparison to the costs of firefighting and rebuilding homes. Every dollar spent on prevention saves \$17 in suppression costs, according to a report commissioned by former Utah Gov. Gary R. Herbert.

There is also a bill to allow former inmates with firefighting experience to seek future employment with the state, which will help ensure a consistent workforce.

I hope the federal government is taking notes.

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