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ALERT FEATURED TOP STORY

What to expect this wildfire season in the mid-Willamette Valley

Maddie Pfeifer

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Burned trees outside of Detroit on Thursday, June 16.

Kylie Graham, Mid-Valley Media

Maddie Pfeifer

Despite **recent rains**, summer is around the corner, which means temperatures will be increasing, and the area will be getting drier.

Translation: Wildfire season is approaching.

Since the **devastation Oregon experienced in 2020**, wildfire season summons a sense of urgency. Local fire marshals and forest experts say the area's particularly wet spring doesn't mean wildfire season isn't a concern, and now is the time to prepare.

When she was young, said Albany Fire Department Deputy Fire Marshal Sandy Roberts, "we didn't expect to have sunny weather in June, especially the first part of June, but it hasn't been that way for 10-plus years."

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"What we're having at this very moment is going way back in history — 10, 20 years — we've come back to 'normal.' But does that mean that we're out of fire risk?"

"No, we're absolutely not."

On June 15, a burn ban went into effect in Linn and Benton counties. This is the typical time of year for a burn ban, which is generally in effect until October.

Although the official wildfire season hasn't started yet, fire marshals are urging community members to get ready.



A railroad trestle bridge near the Twin Oaks Mobile Home Park on Southwest Twin Oaks Circle in Corvallis caught fire early morning, Monday May 1. Repairs are ongoing.

Cody Mann

Wet spring doesn't diminish threat

Much of the state of Oregon has been experiencing a uniquely wet spring, which some hope will help with the upcoming wildfire season.

According to a report from the Northwest Interagency Coordination Center released June 1, temperatures in May throughout the state were cooler than normal, and much of the Pacific Northwest was wetter than usual. While the snowpack is declining rapidly, it remains “well above average” for late May, according to the report.

However, this doesn't mean wildfires aren't a concern.

Since the beginning of the year, temperatures have been above average at higher elevations and cooler than average in basins, according to NICC data. Drought is still an issue throughout much of the state, with 11 counties in Oregon experiencing a drought. Drought is expected to persist in much of the state through the end of August.

Although Linn and Benton counties may not experience the effects of drought like other counties, wildfires are still a threat.

Wildland Fire Supervisor for the Oregon Department of Forestry Chad Calderwood said the rain in the mid-Willamette Valley may delay the start of fire season, but it also creates its own problems.

Calderwood, who is based out of Sweet Home, said vegetation could be an issue this season. The rain aids in growth and with more growth, there's more potential fuel.

“But with all that growth, it can take quite some time for fuels to dry out,” Calderwood said. “August and September are going to be above normal temperatures, below normal precipitation. So summer just sounds like it's just getting a little bit of a later start.”

He added that as the vegetation grows and people start to knock it down, the machinery they use, such as lawn mowers and tractors, can cause fires if not cleaned out properly.

“The rain has put off the fire season by about three weeks,” Lebanon Fire District Deputy Fire Marshal Candace Hedding said. “It's allowing a lot of watering of the plants and all the underbrush, so we're going to have a lot of green underbrush that's growing like crazy right now. We will see some of the effects of that later on in the fire season and probably into next year.”

The mid-Willamette Valley

Although some areas of Linn and Benton counties may not have a lot of experience evacuating from wildfires, that doesn't mean the entire mid-Willamette Valley isn't affected.

“One thing I've always said, especially when I'm responding to a wildland fire as a public information officer, is that what happens in one community affects all of us,” Roberts said.

“We saw that with the **2020 wildland fires**. What happened at the Santiam Canyon affected Albany. It was 22 miles away from us, and we felt the effects whether it was family members who were impacted, whether it was ash in our pets’ water bowls, or on our house. We felt the effects.”

Linn and Benton counties are both in fairly favorable positions when it comes to wildfire season compared to other parts of the state. Benton County in particular has the benefit of being closer to the coast.

“Historically, the Corvallis Fire District and its surrounding areas of Benton County, is in a great location with nightly moisture coming in from the Pacific Ocean,” Corvallis Fire Department Fire Marshal Jonathon Jones said in a statement to Mid-Valley Media. “The surrounding forests are considered healthy and well managed by OSU and private owners.”

Jones added Benton County is at a “much lower risk from wildfire than other areas in the state.”

Another one of the benefits of the local area, fire marshals say, is the mutual aid agreement among area departments.

For example, when Corvallis Fire maxes its resources and needs more firefighters, Albany Fire will respond. When Albany firefighters are moved up to Corvallis, Lebanon will cover Albany’s calls.

“It's an incredible place to be and to live because you know you're getting quick coverage of fire suppression and medical service,” Roberts said. “Corvallis, Albany and Lebanon all run our own ambulance service. It's not a private company, so we are within six to seven minutes of responding to your emergency 911 call.”

Local agencies also take part in different exercises and trainings to prepare for the season. Corvallis Fire Chief Ben Janes said key responders in Benton County will practice a joint response.

“The exercise includes the Sheriff’s Office, Corvallis police, 911 dispatch, OSU Public Safety, Good Samaritan and other community partners to ensure we’re all on the same page in both wildfire response and evacuation coordination,” Janes said in a statement.

This year, there will be even more hands on deck for wildfire season.

Hedding said the Lebanon Fire Department has received a \$35,000 grant from the state to boost staffing levels during wildfire season.

“It’s going to enable them to increase on-duty capacity throughout the season at the local level for quick mobilizations at local, regional and state conflagrations,” Hedding said. “With more firefighters, it’s going to help keep fires small before impacting large communities.”

Calderwood said something that makes this area unique is the public’s support and commitment to prevention.

“The people are perceptive and understand the dangers involved,” he said. “Even more with the 2020 fire season, I think that opened up a lot of people’s eyes a little bit more knowing that a fire can come through here. The public has been a great support in the help of the reduction of fires.”

Compared to previous years

The 2020 wildfire season is the one that comes to mind to most Oregonians when preparing for this year. But will this year be anything like that? Experts say probably not, but it’s hard to predict.

“We’re more temperate here traditionally,” Roberts said. “Where we see a difference is when we have an east wind event, which is what 2020 was. We expect east winds most years, but not to that extent. We had a lot of fires happening during the wind event which just changed everything.”

Calderwood said experts predicted the 2020 fire storm and winds several days in advance, but that didn't make it any easier to fight the fires.

“It was a winter storm that produced itself in the summer. Our east winds are Chinook winds, they're drier winds,” he said. “They drop the humidity down. Temperatures go up, the winds increase and it usually puts us into a critical fire danger, and it happens very fast.”

Calderwood predicts this season will mirror the 2011 Oregon wildfire season. He recalled that 2011 had a later start to the summer, but the threat of fire was still there. He said it's important to not get complacent during the spring, even if it's wetter than normal.

Beware late summer

With summer weather starting later this year, August and September are predicted to have the highest risk of wildfires.

The NICC report says the risk of outbreaks of large, costly fires should remain at normal levels across most of the Pacific Northwest this month. In July, the risk will increase and expand to central Washington, southwest Oregon and southeast Oregon.

In August, the elevated risk will expand to include more of southwest Oregon and central Washington. Dry conditions should continue through September with strong east winds becoming more likely from the Cascade Crest.

Fire marshals say weather events like intense winds or lightning can exacerbate the threat.

“I think we should prepare for the worst. We should always be prepared for it,” Hedding said. “It's hard to predict what is going to happen. I don't think anybody predicted that we would get what we had in 2020.”

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A changing mindset

The 2020 wildfire season was a wake-up call for community members, according to fire officials, shifting the public's mindset in Linn and Benton counties.

"It was so close to home in 2020," Hedding said. "We were sucked in with all the smoke from the area. I think it really hit home with a lot of people because it was just right in sight."

Calderwood said the public has been great about actively taking steps to prevent fires.

"The public is awesome as far as fire prevention and notifying us and getting in touch with us and asking what the conditions are," he said. "They've been really good about that, especially here in Linn County. We just ask that people just think ahead a little bit."

Protecting your home

With wildfire season getting a later start than normal, now is the time to prepare for the season, fire marshals say.

“I think complacency is the big key,” Calderwood said. “People are in a rush sometimes to just get things done and aren’t thinking about the conditions we're in and mistakes happen.”

Fortunately, there are plenty of steps community members can take to protect themselves and their homes, and most local fire agencies will do a home inspection/assessment for community members.

“This is a good time of year for all community members to look at their personal preparedness plans, home resilience, and also do some research,” Corvallis Emergency Planning Manager Dave Busby said in a statement.

One of the main factors to keep in mind is defensible spaces. Defensible space is the buffer between your home and the wildland around it. This may include grass, mulch, shrubs, trees or more. Embers finding particularly flammable points on a house is what leads to problems.

“What it's looking for are those ignition points on the house. If we have pine needles in our gutter, bam,” she said. “It's looking for the vegetation around our house, and by August a lot of us let our grass die and we don't water it. So there are beautiful ignition points within the home.”

The key to protecting a home from a fire is keeping flammable material away from it. There are three home ignition zones. The immediate zone is 0 to 5 feet from the house, the intermediate zone is 5 to 30 feet from the house and the extended zone is 30 to 100 feet from the house.

Homeowners should limit the amount of flammable vegetation in the three zones and should opt for gravel instead of flammable mulch in the immediate zone.

Other tips for homeowners include:

- Trim branches that hang over the home, porch and deck.
- Clean the gutters.
- Get fire resistant plants.
- Space out trees throughout the property.
- Check on roof and attic vents to ensure embers can't enter.
- Consider replacing roofing material with metal, concrete, or clay tiles.
- Don't store flammable material underneath your deck or porch.
- Use fire-resistant siding like brick, plaster or stucco.
- Use dual-pane tempered glass windows.

It's also important to make sure emergency responders have access to the house and a water supply. Driveways should be at least 12 feet wide with a vertical clearance of 15 feet high.

Emergency notifications, resources

This wildfire season, signing up for emergency notifications is key. Linn and Benton county residents can **sign up for Linn-Benton** at <https://bit.ly/3n0o1YS> from which local sheriff's offices will issue evacuation notices.

Fire marshals say it's critical to have a **household evacuation plan** in place. Know where to exit the home and where to go after. Have a **"go bag"** ready with anything you may need in the event you have to leave your home.

Residents should be aware of the **different evacuation notices**: Be ready (Level 1), Be set (Level 2) and GO (Level 3).

Additional resources regarding wildfire prevention, evacuation tips, current fire restrictions and more can be found through the **Oregon Department of Forestry**.

The city of Corvallis will be holding a **community wildfire and evacuation webinar** June 28 from 6:30 to 8 p.m. Community members can **register for the event** online through the city's website.

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Maddie Pfeifer covers public safety for Mid-Valley Media. She can be contacted at 541-812-6091 or **Madison.Pfeifer@lee.net**. Follow her on Twitter via @maddiepfeifer_

By Maddie Pfeifer

Reporter
