

# Abundant grass fuels fire risk this summer

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CHEYENNE, Wyo. -- Abundant grass growth resulting from a wet spring and early summer could pose a serious fire risk in Wyoming's grasslands as the state enters the dry season, fire and natural resource officials said.

Grass is taller than it has been in the past eight to 10 years, particularly in southeast Wyoming.

Parts of the southeast have received more than 150 percent of their historical averages for moisture in the past three months, said Steve Gray, state climatologist. Southeast Wyoming is now entering what's typically its driest time in July and August.

Laramie County Fire District 2 spokesman Lew Simpson said the grass in his county has dried to the point that it could easily burn. Grasses 3- to 4-feet tall may be green on the bottom, but the top half has become dry in the past few days.

"It's kind of a double-edged sword. It's good because we've had the moisture, but unfortunately the result is increased growth of the grasslands," Simpson said. "I would say we're kind of at a critical point where any type of spark or flame can take off on this stuff and we have the potential for a very serious wildfire situation."

Simpson said his department advises people living in the grassland to clear at least a 30-foot break around their structures. That means keeping the grass mowed short and removing any wood or brush within the break.

"I say that's a minimum, but we'd like to have it even further than that," Simpson said, "because with the winds and embers that will fly, it's possible to get beyond that."

Mike Lindahl, Natrona County fire inspector, said the wet season has been welcome news for the farmers and ranchers growing crops such as hay and alfalfa. But the dry grass does bring added fire danger. Tall grass contributed to a 10-acre fire that was started by a downed power line in central-eastern Natrona County on Tuesday.

"Grass is our primary carrier of fire, and with all the moisture we've definitely got a lot of grass," Lindahl said. "If it doesn't happen this year, we've got another strong potential next year, because next year we'll have a big accumulation of dead grass."

Officials say the presence of invasive cheatgrass, which dries out earlier than native grasses, contributes to the fire risk.

"Cheatgrass greens up in what's the spring here and then is dead and dried out by the time we go into our dry season, and that can in some areas really increase the fire danger," Gray said.

Ryan Amundson, a Wheatland-based habitat extension biologist for the Wyoming Game and Fish Department, said grassland fires could potentially be a danger to dry-land wheat crops, but timing could work in the wheat farmers' favor. Most southeast Wyoming wheat farmers will harvest at the end of July or beginning of August, before fire conditions become most dangerous.

As for irrigation farmers, their fields are green enough that they shouldn't catch fire, Amundson said. Amundson said he's seen farmers and ranchers bailing their grass for the first time in many years, simply because there's more of it. Some also have opened small patches to grazing to help keep the grass down, he said.

Gray said grassland fires are a part of the ecosystem, just like forest fires.

"Grasslands are very much evolved with fire, and that's a natural part of these systems," he said.