

Despite rain, fire danger could be high

From staff and wire reports

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State and federal fire officials said Wednesday that lower elevations of Wyoming will likely face greater than average potential for wild fires this summer.

At their annual fire season outlook press conference in Cheyenne, officials said Wyoming's fire danger is moderate so far this season because of the wet, cold spring. But forecasters are predicting dry, hot weather in the state for July and August.

If that hot weather materializes, officials said lower elevations of the state could see increased fire risk.

"Basically, what we're looking at is below 7,500 feet, the predictions are for an above-average fire season," said Bill Crapser, Wyoming state forester. Grasses and other smaller fuels will likely dry out in lower areas, while fuels in higher elevations would likely stay wetter because of the state's healthy snowpack, he said.

Crapser said Weston and Converse counties have already imposed restrictions on open fires, including restrictions on fireworks and trash burning. He said he expects other counties may also impose similar restrictions after the July 4 holiday.

Campbell County fire chief Don Huber said the fire danger is low around the Gillette area because of the abundant moisture recently, but added that the grass is "growing like crazy right now."

If that tall grass dries out, it could create a potentially dangerous situation.

But Huber said the fire danger around the Gillette area shouldn't be elevated for at least "a few weeks," and could be delayed even more if it continues to rain.

While Huber said it's still early in the season and things are looking good, he remains cautiously optimistic about the coming months.

"Historically, August gets dry, so we'll have to wait and see," he said.

The fire danger is moderate for the Medicine Bow-Routt National Forest and Thunder Basin National Grasslands, said Tony Tezak, fire management officer for the areas.

However, Tezak said that the bark beetle epidemic has killed many trees in southern Wyoming. If fires start among the stands of dead trees, Tezak said they will be likely be larger than they would be if they started in healthy forests.

"That's one thing that separates our forest a little bit," he said. "A large amount of the forest is dead and dying."

Jeff Fedrizzi, state fire management officer for the U.S. Bureau of Land Management, said higher snow levels have given the state a bit of a break from fires so far this season. Traci Weaver, public information officer with the National Park Service, said homeowners should take steps to reduce the fire danger around their homes.

"There's never going to be enough resources to protect every home," she said.