

No word to define this year's fire season

By Tesmond Hurd and William Reed, Jr.

How does one sum up this summer's fire conditions, the lack of snow the previous winter, and the short, yet heavy rainfalls this month? You don't. Atmosphere phenomena, known as weather, has been leaving dramatic effects on the areas across the Western United States, including Oregon, but mostly Eastern Oregon. Currently seven Oregon counties have been declared officially drought by Governor Kate Brown, including Baker County, while eight others are in the application process.

Snow can still be seen covering the Wallowas including the infamous avalanche slide path on Burger Butte in the Catherine Creek area. In the latest release of the *Oregon Basin Outlook Report* from NRCS, areas in Union, Baker, and Wallowa County received "30-60 percent below typical peak [snow] levels" and winter precipitation fell mostly as rain. Any snow was mostly confined to elevations at or above 6000 feet.

"The Northwest is facing a complicated set-up to fire season," reads a press release from the National Interagency Fire Center in Boise, Idaho.

An onset of ongoing shift and adjusting low pressure trough over the Intermountain Northwest during mid-May brought an onset unsettled rain showers and thunderstorms. Heavy rainfall was recorded at times bringing the moisture need to minimize heightening fire danger. Various places in the Blue Mountains, despite the rain, still had dry 100-hour fuels and dry soil.

"The abrupt rains we had during the last few weeks will render little use as the ground has had minimal time to absorb the moisture--which is why flash flooding has been occurring," said Tesmond Hurd, Chief Operations Officer of La Grande Weather Service. "We've been busy forecasting and tracking thunderstorm activity, which we'll likely have to continue to do over the summer."

On May 21, various fire resources and other associated agencies gathered at Eastern Oregon University for a fire simulation put on by Oregon Department of Forestry. The simulation allowed for the agencies to get an idea on how to collaborate if a large wildfire struck the local region.

"We want to be prepared if a wildfire occurs," said La Grande Unit Forester Mark Jacques, Oregon Department of Forestry. "2013 and 2014 were back to back the worst wildfire seasons Oregon has experienced."

Despite the welcomed scattered rain showers and thunderstorms that have occurred periodically throughout May, the Climate Prediction Center 30 and 90 day forecasts for June, July and August are still expecting above average temperatures with at or slightly below normal precipitation. El Nino conditions have developed in the equatorial Pacific and are expected to persist into Fall. This is particularly important because dry conditions are linked to El Nino anomalies since the Pacific Jet takes on a more zonal (west to east) pattern resulting in an amplified storm track for southern California and the southwest United States leaving the Pacific Northwest generally being dominated by areas of high pressure.

“Due to these prolonged periods of dry weather, the fuels necessary for fire weather development are able to cure and become quite volatile, especially when a short or long-wave eventually breaks down the ridge,” says Billy Reed, a research meteorologist at La Grande Weather Service.

If ample moisture is accompanying the passing short or long-wave troughs, elevated thunderstorms may develop which could pose a risk for lightning to ignite the fuels. These conditions will likely lead to another year of elevated fire weather conditions.