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## Fire season in New Mexico off to early start

By [Ollie Reed Jr. / Journal Staff Writer](#)

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A fire lights up the Albuquerque bosque south of Tingley Beach in January. (Roberto E. Rosales/Albuquerque Journal)

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Fire season in New Mexico has no set dates. It picks its own time. This year, it has started early and is warming up.

Last week, state Forestry and National Forest Service fire crews battled the 125-acre Moon Mountain blaze near Ruidoso; state, federal and local crews worked to knock down the five-acre Hay Vega fire in Catron County near the Arizona border and a fire near Mayhill in Otero County charred three acres.

A blaze that started in the bosque in Socorro County on March 20 burned 300 acres over four days, and the Lone Tree Fire on March 21 burned 19 acres six miles northwest of Capitan in Lincoln County.

Micaela Hester, wildfire prevention coordinator for New Mexico State Forestry, which is responsible for fighting fires on state and private lands, said the agency is a lot busier now than it was at this time last year.



The Moon Mountain Fire crawled to within a mile east of Ruidoso and a mile and a half south of Ruidoso High School, an unsettling reminder of the threats posed by wildfires. (Courtesy of KOAT-TV)

“Last year by this time, we had 7,600 acres that had burned,” she said. “This year so far, we’ve had 45,000 acres and change burn. That’s a big jump. We are expecting an active, busy fire season. We expect the major cause to be abundant and dry fine fuels (grasses). They are delicate and dangerous.”

Talk to state and federal fire managers across New Mexico and you’ll get the same story every time. Last year’s above-normal wet weather fed the growth of lots of grasses that have dried out during the last few months of little to no moisture.

“That has led to an increase in fire,” Hester said. “We’ve had more than 130 so far this year.” Hector Madrid, fire management officer for the Bureau of Land Management in New Mexico, said winds have been more troublesome this year than they were last year when New Mexico was spared the strong, persistent winds that usually buffet the state during springtime.

“This year, we have had more wind events,” he said. “With these conditions – the large fuel buildup, the lack of precipitation, the wind – if we get the ignition, human-caused or lightning, it could be a pretty concerning season.”

This time last year, fire managers were anticipating a calmer-than-normal fire season due to predictions for a rainy spring and summer. And despite some arid stretches, that pretty much turned out to be the case. Last year was the fifth wettest in New Mexico weather history, and there were no monster fires.

In fact, among the biggest fires last year were those that were allowed to burn to enhance the overall health of the forest by reducing fuel loads, improving wildlife habitat and creating more resilient watersheds. These managed fires included the 18,500-acre Red Canyon Fire in the Cibola National Forest 27 miles southwest of Magdalena and the 2,500-acre Commissary Fire in the Santa Fe National Forest 13 miles east of Pecos.



A lightning strike on June 5, 2015, touched off the Commissary Fire in the Santa Fe National Forest, 13 miles east of Pecos. Because of exceptionally wet conditions last year, fire managers permitted the fire to burn for several weeks, allowing it to reduce fuel loads and improve the natural habitat as it moved slowly through 2,500 acres. Drier conditions this year may limit the opportunity for managed blazes. (Eddie Moore/Albuquerque Journal)

Forecasts for this year called for continued significant moisture through the winter and spring. But after a bout of heavy snow in late December, El Niño, the moisture-laden weather pattern caused by exceptionally warm sea surface temperatures in the Pacific, turned up its nose at New Mexico. Despite an outburst of snow and rain this past Thursday night and Friday morning, it has been very dry since the middle of January. That's making people nervous.

"We were hopeful in November and December when we were in the El Niño pattern," said Bea Day, fire management officer for the Cibola National Forest, which includes the Sandia, Manzanita and Manzano mountains. "But it has pulled out of here, and the snow is coming off (the mountains) real quick. Especially with these windy days, most of the moisture that is in the snow is not going to go into the ground. It is going to evaporate."

The wet weather that swept over the state Thursday and Friday helped firefighters keep Ruidoso's Moon Mountain Fire in check, but Day says that moisture alone will not alleviate the threat posed by the dried-out grasses spread over the state.

"I am hoping we get into the El Niño pattern again," she said. "But if things persist as they are, we are going to be in dire straits. We were hoping for a fire season that was not as critical. It's just not looking like that."

Robert Morales, fire manager since 2007 for the Carson and Santa Fe national forests in north-central New Mexico, also feels cheated by El Niño. But he has been around long enough to know that New Mexico's weather can be as unpredictable as a runaway fire.

"It could change overnight, or in two or three weeks," Morales said. "We could get a big snow in April."

Brent Wachter, fire weather meteorologist in the Albuquerque office of the National Weather Service, admits that his confidence in forecast models has been shaken.



“We certainly didn’t anticipate February and March being so dry,” he said.



A helicopter totes a bucket of water used in battling a small fire in the Sandia Mountains in April 2015. (Greg Sorber/Albuquerque Journal)

But Wachter said El Niño patterns are still present and the possibility continues to exist for “timely moisture intrusions” in New Mexico.

“Timely moisture intrusions is like having a wetting pattern every week and a half or two weeks,” he said. “Wetting patterns like that can punch holes in the heart of fire season. But if we don’t get it, the pucker factor for those fire managers will go up a bit. The game changer is having all that abundant fuel. We are starting to green up, but it is not offsetting the dead fuel out there.”

Winds, or, more to the point, lack of winds will be as important as precipitation as the fire season moves into the latter part of April and into much of May. Wachter said he thinks this year’s winds will be more normal than vicious.



Smoke from the Las Conchas Fire, which burned 156,593 acres of Santa Fe National Forest land in the summer of 2011, billows through Los Alamos Canyon. (Dean Hanson/Albuquerque Journal)

“If you throw the chicken bones out there, that’s what we see,” he said. “We are not looking at the kinds of wind that led to the big fires in 2011.” In 2011, the Las Conchas Fire burned 156,293 acres and the Donaldson Fire consumed 101,563 acres.

At this point, Wachter said the southwest part of the state, which includes the Gila National Forest, is the most vulnerable to fire because it is the driest part of the state.

“That is the area we will have to watch out for most,” he said.

But the fire season picks its spots just as it picks its dates. You never know when or where a fire will erupt. Fire managers stay prepared for the worst.

“We will be ready for whatever comes,” said Morales of the Lincoln and Carson national forests. “Whatever Mother Nature throws at us, we will be as ready as we can be.”

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