

Sierra fire crews on guard despite long, wet spring

By John Holland, Sacramento Bee

Clifford Parker was on patrol when all hell broke loose near Highway 50 in September 1992.

He was working as a recreation technician in the Eldorado National Forest when the Cleveland fire erupted. It would grow to 22,485 acres over 13 days.

“I have never witnessed anything so devastatingly powerful either before or since,” Parker, now a Modesto-area resident, recalled in an e-mail this month. He told of how pine trees “popped and exploded as the moisture from within was released with the thunderous roar of lightning cracking.”

Yet again, the Sierra Nevada had caught fire. At times, a single fire has brought tremendous losses – 280 homes destroyed or damaged in the 2007 Angora fire in South Lake Tahoe, a 145,980-acre expanse of timber and brush burned in the Stanislaus complex fire of 1987.

The Sierra fires have not killed a lot of people, unlike the 25 lost in the Oakland hills blaze of 1991 or the 15 in a San Diego County fire in 2003.

But foresters and fire officials warn that it can happen. They point to the many homes mixed into the woods, the poor roads in some places and state budget cuts that have shrunk Cal Fire engine crews to three from four this year.

Then there’s all that grass and woody fuel, drying more slowly this year because of the cool, wet spring, but drying nonetheless.

“We have uncharacteristic fuel loads, so when fire does enter

the ecosystem, there are hotter temperatures, longer flame lengths and greater environmental consequences,” said Bob Mion, communications director for the California Forestry Association.

The Sacramento-based group represents timber industry people who would like to increase logging to help reduce the fuel.

Forest thinning has support from many environmentalists and Sierra residents. They might differ on the total volume or how many big trees to leave, but they agree that the woods need to better resist fires.

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