

Fire danger likely to be high this summer because of dry winter

By Jeff DeLong, Reno Gazette-Journal

Nevada's worsening drought conditions and already kiln-dry vegetation should combine for extreme fire danger over the coming summer, a wildfire forecaster said.

More than 600,000 acres of Nevada terrain is expected to be scorched this fire season, Fred Svetz, manager of the Western Great Basin Predictive Services Center, reported last week during a 2012 climate conference at Reno's Desert Research Institute.

For all intents and purposes, the danger is already here.

"We have conditions that are very much like fire season right now," Svetz said. "We have some exceptionally dry and high fire potential conditions. While we are just barely into spring ... we're seeing fire potential we would normally see in the middle of the season."

The forecast likely comes as no particular surprise to residents of the Reno area after two rare winter wildfires hit in November and January, together burning 5,000 acres and destroying more than 50 homes. Before the Jan. 19 Washoe Drive Fire, which burned 3,100-plus acres, the largest fire to burn in the Western Great Basin in January was only 32 acres in size, Svetz said

The winter was exceptionally dry, with an April 1 Sierra snowpack measured at only a little more than half of what it should be. Significant storms in March helped improve what was an even worse situation but were "too little, too late as far

as drought is concerned," Svetz said. Most of Northern Nevada and the Sierra are now in a state of severe drought, according to the U.S. Drought Monitor.

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