

Fire season comes early to California

By AP

After months of warning that drought-stricken California is facing a potentially devastating wildfire season, officials are telling residents it's time to get serious about clearing brush from backyards, creating evacuation plans and exercising caution with equipment that can throw sparks.

CalFire declared fire season open in most of Northern California on Monday and planned to extend the designation to the rest of the North State next week. That is about a month earlier than normal and a reflection of the kindling-like conditions on moisture-deprived hillsides and in forests packed with dead greenery, agency spokesman Daniel Berlant said Saturday.

The official start of the fire season means staffing levels will remain at their peak and firefighting aircraft on standby until the heightened danger subsides, he said.

In Southern California, the fire season is already underway because the agency never ended the one that started in 2013, Berlant said.

State fire officials have been gearing up since January by slowly adding more temporary firefighters in the central and northern parts of California.

State water managers conducted their final survey of the Sierra Nevada snowpack on May 1 and found it was at 18 percent of average for the date. The snowpack accounts for about one-third of the state's water.

"There is no doubt that the drought has left the grasses and

the brush very dry and that has really set the stage for a very busy fire season," Berlant said.

CalFire crews already have responded to nearly 1,300 wildfires across the state in 2014, more than twice as many as usual for this time of year.

Inspectors have started visiting fire-prone areas to remind property owners to remove branches, weeds and leaves from around their homes, but not to use lawn mowers, trimmers or power tools that could ignite a blaze after 10am.