

# Calif. on edge as peak fire season looms

By Sam Stanton, Sacramento Bee

In recent months, as California officials started to calculate the fire danger posed by the state's prolonged and historic drought, they tucked an extra \$23 million into the CalFire emergency wildfire budget for the fiscal year that began July 1, bringing its total to \$209 million.

By July 6 – just days into the fiscal year – the agency already had spent \$13.9 million battling two major blazes, and is now bracing for one of the longest and most difficult fire seasons in memory.

“That’s just the first week, and we still have 51 more weeks to go,” said Daniel Berlant, spokesman for CalFire. “We’re not even to the peak of the fire season yet.”

Berlant and top fire officials have been warning for months that the state faces serious peril from wildland fires this year, as the drought – stretching into a third year – has sucked dry much of the state's brush lands and forests more quickly than in years with more normal precipitation levels.

After it became evident over the winter that California was facing its worst drought in a generation, officials began taking extraordinary steps to prepare for the fire season. Even as Gov. Jerry Brown declared a drought emergency in mid-January, Cal Fire was hiring seasonal firefighters in the north state, a move that typically occurs in May.

Normally, CalFire would hire 2,400 seasonal firefighters to handle blazes statewide, but this year increased that staffing to 2,700. The department also took a number of other steps to prepare for a potentially catastrophic fire season, including

awarding a \$5.4 million contract for a DC-7 air tanker that already has been deployed to the Monticello and Butts fires and augments CalFire's fleet of 50 aircraft.

President Obama on Tuesday sent a letter to Congress seeking a \$615 million emergency appropriation request to fund firefighting efforts; California is expected to ask for the bulk of the federal reimbursements, given predictions for where wildland fires are most likely in coming months.

The latest map from the National Interagency Fire Center in Boise shows that forecasters believe California, Nevada and Oregon face the gravest threats.

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