

Calif. drought makes wildfires year-round threat

By Ellen Knickmeyer, AP

Big wildfires have burned almost four times as many California acres as usual so far this winter, a sign of wildfire danger growing higher still as the state moves into its fourth year of drought.

The high fire risk from the drought means the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection is maintaining its highest level ever of seasonal firefighters straight through the winter, statewide. The department also will go up to peak summertime staffing as soon as early June, four to six weeks earlier than normal, fire chief Ken Pimlott said.

“It’s changing the dynamic, absolutely,” Pimlott said by telephone, referring to the near-statewide drought. “The conditions are absolutely ripe” for a big year for wildfires.

California, with its Mediterranean climate of winter rain and snow and dry summers, normally experiences winter as the offseason for fighting firefighters. A normal year lays down a blanket of snow in the Sierra Nevada that melts through the spring, helping keep grass and shrubs too wet to burn. In a normal year, winter wildfires will burn no more than a dozen acres or so before flickering out, department spokesman Daniel Berlant said.

This year, fires keep burning, due to tinder-dry fuel, Berlant said. In a normal year, large wildfires in areas under his department’s jurisdiction will have burned 800 acres by this time of year. This winter, it’s 3,200 acres, and counting.

Southern California long has had winter wildfires. This year, so has Northern California, including even foggy, forested

Humboldt County, which gets more than 4 feet of rain in a non-drought year. "In some of the wettest places in the country, we were having 300-, 400-acre fires," Pimlott said.

And in Central California, a wildfire burning entirely above what would have been the Sierra Nevada snowline burned 7,000 acres and 40 homes – in early February.

"It pretty much burned the same at 4,000 feet all the way up to 8,000 feet," said Bennet Milloy, a department firefighter paramedic, and spokesman, who was at the scene of that fire, which broke out Feb. 6 in the eastern Sierras.

At the scene of that winter wildfire, "there was almost no snowpack, just a light dusting of snow," Milloy recalled. With no grass, given the drought, the wildfire jumped from bush to bush, which were "pre-cured and dried and ready to burn," Milloy said.

The drought, and a warming climate here, has had firefighters battling larger-than-usual wildfires for years now. Half of the state's largest wildfires on record occurred since 2000, Berlant said.

At peak staffing later this year, the state forestry department will have more than 300 fire engines stationed around the state. With the drought, the state also has added a fourth person to each fire-engine's normal three-person crew. The state will bring additional firefighters and aircraft on line as well, Pimlott said.