

The art – and science – of forecasting wildfires

By Kate Schimel, High Country News

In the midst of fighting a wildfire, predicting the future is a matter of tracking invisible forces: gust fronts, storms, air columns. While firefighters battle the flames on the ground, fire experts look for signs that the weather or the wildfire might shift. They follow storm tracks, watch weather models and study the fire's path.

Their attempts at prediction begin even before the first plume of smoke rises. In regional centers around the West, forecasters determine the risk of wildfire and brief fire managers on where they should have teams ready to go.

For the Rocky Mountains, that task falls to Tim Mathewson, a 20-year veteran of weather forecasting. "It's a tough science," Mathewson said. "There's a lot of ingredients that help determine whether there's a big fire today."

For example, in 2012, much of the Rocky Mountain region was dry. Figuring out where a chance ignition might blow up into a large-scale fire was tricky. At one point, teams were staged and ready to go in four of the five states Mathewson watches.

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