Predicting our next fire season

Will this summer see scenes like this?

BLM's Predictive Services has predicted a normal fire season this coming summer. All this means is they see no indication that it will be an abnormally good fire season, as in few fires, or an abnormally bad fire season. Fred Svetz, Fire Weather Program Manager at the state BLM office, stressed such predictions are extremely difficult to make, but described what they look at when arriving at a prediction.

Some of the indicators have already happened. NOAA's Climate Prediction Center predicts Northeastern Nevada will not be in a drought, for the next three months anyway. In part, this is because we're experiencing a La Nina event, which typically means that far northern Nevada will have a little more rainfall than normal.

This winter has been wet and cool, meaning more moisture to grow abundant and taller grasses as fire fuel this spring. In addition, our last three summers have seen fewer than average wildfires, meaning the dead grass from prior years is also available to burn this summer.

Fred Svetz used statistics to look at this summer's fire season. During the last 30 years, only once has there been more than three consecutive years having fewer fires than normal. Since we have seen three consecutive years of fewer fires, statistically our good luck may be running out. Over the last 20 years, most fire seasons have been either good years, burning less than 100,000 acres or bad years, burning more than 500,000 acres. The BLM's prediction of a normal fire season is actually a statistical rare event.

Some indicators have not yet happened. Lots of spring rain means more new grass, especially cheatgrass, to dry out and add to this summer's fire fuel. A slow melting snow pack lasting into the summer can help keep pinon and juniper trees moist and harder to burn. A deep snow pack can pack down dry grass and make it more difficult to burn. Of course, a hot, dry summer can only make matters worse.

A factor impossible to predict is the ignition sources for this summer's wild fires. 80-90% of fire ignitions in Nevada come from summer lightning storms, and over 90% of our large wild fires have started from lightning. Last summer we had only a few days of lightning strikes and those days also contained rain and higher humidity, which meant fewer wild fires. This summer, if we get dry lighting on days of low relative humidity, watch out. Much depends on where these lightning strikes occur. A wild fire with lots of fuel in its path and room to run will grow much larger.

Another factor impossible to predict is whether we will have adequate firefighting assets available to quickly fight fires. It will be a matter of timing, if other areas of the West have large fires just before ours begin, those other fires may have drained off much of our available fire crews, engines and aircraft.

An Elko BLM employee recently joked that the only accurate fire season prediction is made in October, after it is over. All we can do now is take this prediction and wait to see what happens.

Elko Daily Free Press, “Nature Notes”, 2/4/2011