

Monthly Message from the Chief

August 2010

Are we there yet?

I'm talking about fire season; a term that has fostered much discussion, especially lately. When is it? Does it ever really start or end in California? Is it OK to use the term fire season?

Over the past several weeks, I've seen and heard it mentioned in the news that "Fire season is finally here," or "Fire season is heating up."



The existence of fire season depends on where you are in the state any given year. I find it helpful to remind people that, if one could slide California to the other coast, it would stretch from the tip of Cape Cod to south of Charleston, South Carolina. The change in elevation here is from 282 feet below sea-level in Death Valley to 14,494 feet at the peak of Mt. Whitney. When it heats up in our inland valleys and deserts during the summer months, people on the coast turn up their heaters. Additionally, the many different types of vegetation that grow in this state lend to it being unparalleled in its diverse potential for wildfire.

Fire season has different meanings for different people for different reasons.

Historically, we have had wildfires that burned with persistence from spring through fall...the period our Mediterranean Climate grants us warmer and drier conditions that draw moisture from the vegetation covering our wildlands. That isn't to say wildfires can't occur at other times. Wildland fires requiring suppression have occurred in every month of the year in most parts of the state; however, it is the historical occurrence that has led to the establishment of the four fire seasons assigned to our units in a document known as the Blue Book. These fire seasons and peak fire seasons within them are designated in the Blue Book to reflect the number of resources necessary to deal with the historical occurrence of wildfires. Not surprisingly, the longest seasons are assigned to the most southern units. These seasons are established as baselines, if you will, but we adjust the number of resources prepared to immediately respond to emergencies based on operational need. Our changing climate may require us to rethink how we budget for staffing. Historical trends may not be the appropriate determination of staffing needs in the very near future. Half of the 20 largest fires in our state's recorded history have occurred since 2003.

In the past, the declaration of fire season was an annual event in every unit. Is a declaration of fire season necessary? I don't believe so. Every year the change in

conditions is gradual; some years it's more gradual than others. It's not like Major League Baseball, which starts when the first pitch is thrown out, as it was on April 4 this year. Even the end of baseball season isn't absolute, although we know it will end between October 31 and November 4 this year. That's a much smaller window than I would care to forecast for the end of any fire season in any part of our state.

As much as anything, the use of the term fire season is useful for making the public aware of the annual increase in wildfire potential. Wildfire Awareness Week occurs annually in California the first full week of May, but we all know there have been many years when wildfires have raged well before then. This year in the Tahoe Basin an awareness week was observed the first full week of July. It makes sense for that area, because the risk there typically occurs later. It is also the best time to reach the most people, as many seasonal residents tend to be in the area during that time.

What makes a bad fire season? Our efforts to inform the public regarding impending hazardous fire conditions this spring were challenged, because we had more rainfall than in the past four years. Our responsibility to the public is to give them the scientific facts as we know them, and how to limit their exposure to the harm that wildfires can cause. It was pointed out that fewer acres typically burned during fire seasons following higher than average rain seasons. Ironically, the year of the fewest acres burned in California's modern history is also the year of its most devastating fire in terms of life and property loss, the Tunnel Fire in the Oakland hills, October 20, 1991, which only burned about 1,600 acres.

All it takes is one bad day!

Every spring we are asked to forecast how bad fire season is going to be. One of our former chief officers once told me, "Only fools and newcomers predict fire season!" I never forgot that, and I don't do it. Any year can be a bad year, if you are the one impacted by wildfire.

That said, predictive services regarding meteorological and fuel conditions has improved greatly in the 39 years I've been in this business. We use those services for planning, but every year we need to be aware that we have to be prepared for that one bad day. Long term forecasting of wind conditions is more difficult than temperature or precipitation, and forecasting lightning potential is even harder. Add fuel conditions to the mix, and you can see how difficult it is to predict the fire seasons of a state that has an annual drought that varies in length from year to year.

A number of excellent predictive service products are available at the following sites:

Northern California - <http://gacc.nifc.gov/oncc/predictive/index.htm>

Southern California - <http://gacc.nifc.gov/oscc/predictive/index.htm>

So, yes, there is a fire season where you live in California. Every year is different; some years it never ends in some parts, but it's a pretty safe bet that every August we're in it.

Rest assured that CAL FIRE will continue to be prepared to combat wildfire in California and keep the public informed on how to be fire safe year round...especially before and during the fire season where you live.



Del Walters
Director