

OFFICE OF THE GOVERNOR

136 State Capitol Building
Denver, Colorado 80203
(303) 866 - 2471
(303) 866 - 2003 fax



Bill Ritter, Jr.
Governor

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

FRIDAY, MAY 8, 2009

CONTACTS

Katherine Timm, 970.217.2874, katherine.timm@colostate.edu
Evan Dreyer, 720.350.8370, evan.dreyer@state.co.us

GOV. RITTER STRESSES VIGILANCE AND RESPONSIBILITY DURING THIS YEAR'S WILDFIRE SEASON

Ample spring moisture may have dampened fire risk along the Front Range and Eastern Plains, but lower-elevation areas of northwest Colorado will likely see an elevated risk of large wildfires this summer, Gov. Bill Ritter said at his annual wildfire briefing today.

The mountain pine beetle infestation sweeping across Colorado's high country also will continue to create large stands of dead and dying trees that are particularly susceptible to large fires during the hot and dry spells typical of Colorado summers, Gov. Ritter said.

"Wildland firefighters put themselves in harm's way every day to protect Colorado's citizens, communities and our important watersheds from wildfires," Gov. Ritter said. "Even in these difficult budgetary times, investing in forest health and community protection will remain one of my administration's top priorities."

During his briefing, the governor discussed the state's firefighting resources and asked Coloradans to be vigilant about preventing wildfires, especially in beetle-kill areas where red needles are still attached to trees. The combination of highly combustible red needles and the vast scale of the infestation create the potential for devastating fires.

As with all wildfires, the alignment of fuels, topography and weather will largely determine if wildfires occur in these areas.

"Working among dense standing and falling dead trees poses the greatest threat to firefighter safety in beetle-kill areas," said Jeff Jahnke, state forester and director of the Colorado State Forest Service. These conditions make walking dangerous in and around fires and even more difficult for firefighters to escape falling trees.

Standing and falling dead trees also pose a significant risk to those who recreate in these areas and present an additional fire hazard, so the governor and state forester urge all Coloradans and visitors to take precautions to avoid injury and prevent human-caused wildfires.

The fire forecast for Colorado's populated Front Range and Eastern Plains is average from May through September, due to a series of spring storms which broke a long dry spell this winter, but Colorado wildfire managers are warning against complacency.

The continued growth of residential development in the wildland-urban interface areas, and the unnaturally dense condition of many of Colorado's forests, mean that fires are always a potential risk.

The complex mosaic of homes and forests, coupled with the variable topography found across the state, puts firefighters at greater risk. In January of this year, the Olde Stage Fire in Boulder County burned approximately 1,800 acres, threatened 11,000 people and forced the evacuation of 1,000 homes. That event is a reminder that wildfires can occur in Colorado at any time of year.

Jahnke and Gov. Ritter today reminded landowners, communities and local governments to share the responsibility for wildfire prevention, mitigation and response.

"Wildfire does not recognize statistical probabilities or political boundaries, so we must never relax our efforts to prevent, prepare, mitigate and respond to such emergencies," Gov. Ritter said.

###