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GOV. RITTER SAYS COLORADO FACES AVERAGE FIRE RISK

Expected dry summer in Northwest Colorado poses greatest threat

Gov. Bill Ritter, the state forester and other officials said today that thanks to a wetter-than-usual spring, Colorado faces an average fire season. Northwest Colorado, however, is expected to experience a dry summer and could see a more severe fire season than elsewhere.

“The 2010 fire season outlook is better than we’ve seen in recent years,” Gov. Ritter said. “Overall, we’re looking at average fire potential for the entire Rocky Mountain area. But we cannot let our guard down. We need to continue working across all levels of government with local homeowners, businesses and communities, to prevent a catastrophic wildfire -- and be fully prepared in case there is one.”

Gov. Ritter said a recent \$40 million commitment by the U.S. Forest Service to support the removal of beetle-kill and other hazardous trees across Colorado and the Rocky Mountain region will be a tremendous help. The governor also stressed the need for long-term plans to restore Colorado’s public and private forests.

“We need to aggressively seek out economic opportunities that will reduce the cost of this work, such as converting some of our beetle-killed trees into biofuels and then into electricity,” Gov. Ritter said.

Colorado State Forest Service Director Jeff Jahnke reminded Coloradans living in fire-prone areas that they are responsible for managing vegetation and accumulations of fire-prone materials like brush and wood piles to help protect their property and the safety of firefighters.

“A home and associated property often represent the single biggest investment a person has,” Jahnke said. “Our foresters can provide expert advice on how to protect a home from wildfire while improving the health of the surrounding forest.”

After a relatively quiet 2009 fire season, a predicted dry July and August in the state’s northwest region may present the necessary conditions for large fires, according to the Colorado State Forest Service.

There has been abundant spring moisture in northern Colorado, which has reduced the risk of large early-season fires across the state’s most populated regions.

Another fire risk is the pine beetle infestation, which is leaving large stands of trees with dead red needles that with summer hot spells could quickly ratchet up fire potential.

The pine beetle infestation is creating a new kind of threat to public safety. As the roots of beetle-killed trees decay in the coming years, falling trees will pose an increasing and potentially serious risk to those who recreate in these areas.

The governor and state forester urged all Coloradans and visitors to take sensible precautions to avoid injury, to obey camp and trail closures while hazard tree removal proceeds and to remain vigilant about reducing the potential for human-caused fires.

Other highlights of the briefing:

- Colorado's 2009 fire season was less active than average, with fewer acres burned than in most of the fire seasons of the past decade.
- Colorado's four largest wildfires burned 3,583 acres in 2009, costing \$750,000, destroying four structures and threatening an additional 720 structures.
- Near-normal precipitation during the winter helped reduce the number and size of 2010 spring grass fires compared with the 2008 and 2009 seasons.
- April moisture has alleviated concerns for above-normal early-season fire potential.
- The continued growth of residential development into areas with unnaturally dense forests creates an ongoing risk of destructive fires in the wildland-urban interface.
- As always, weather, topography and fuel conditions will largely determine where and when wildfires occur.

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