

Early fire season a concern as Valley temperatures increase

By Brittany Jacob

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FRESNO, Calif. (KFSN) -- With Central California reaching near-record temperatures, fire officials are preparing to start weed clearing ahead of the dangerous wildfire season.

Action News Chief Meteorologist Kevin Musso says that trees and other plant life are stressed as we enter our third consecutive year of drought.

We've also seen little rain, periods of strong winds and now high temperatures.

It's a perfect recipe to dry out grass fields, which CAL FIRE Atwater City Fire Battalion Chief Robert Ayuso says is an indicator that fire season is near.

"They tend to spark pretty quickly and we have fast-running vegetation fires that we're unable to get ahead of because of the heat, humidities and that sort of thing," he said.

CAL FIRE is warning residents to be proactive when it comes to being fire ready. They hope to see the public out plowing and mowing fields.

"As citizens of the state of California, if we can all team up and maintain our properties, it will definitely reduce the risk and hazard of a high-fire hazard in the area," Ayuso said.

Merced Fire Department's Chief Derek Parker says whether you live in rural communities or the city, be aware of your surroundings.

"What is next to your house? What is readily available to burn? It may be cardboard stacks, it may be dead dry grass. But keeping a good clear area that is not just reserved for being in the foothills," he said.

Merced's fire crews are also preparing for wildfire season with refresher training on using newer equipment in high temperatures.

They are even educating the public using social media.

"Social media has been great for us," Parker said. "We've been able to go out and message what to do, but also what not to do."

Expert says California fire season could start early as May due to heatwaves, drought

Grass fires normally start in June, but the natural fuel in our grass may be ready to catch fire as early as May, he explained.

By Dustin Dorsey

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SAN JOSE, Calif. -- Plenty of residents went out to enjoy the beautiful record-breaking weather across the Bay Area Tuesday, but climate scientists were not necessarily enjoying the warm temps.

One wildfire expert believes hot days like today could lead to an increased risk of fire danger.

March 2022 in the Bay Area feels more like a taste of summer with temperatures in the 70s and 80s and record highs falling across the region.

It made for a perfect day to go enjoy the sunshine.

"The human body likes warm and sunny skies," San Jose resident Chris Mulcaster said. "This is one of the days that we've had this week that's been nice. It's great, the rain is not as desirable as the sunshine that's for sure."

Well, don't tell that to anyone following the drought and climate closely.

While, it's true, it feels good to soak in some Vitamin D, SJSU Wildfire Interdisciplinary Research Center's Professor Craig Clements says these record temperatures are actually not good for our environment.

"Any of these heatwaves that we have so early in spring helps dry out the fuel. So, it could actually cause our fire danger to increase earlier than we typically would see in the late-spring, early-summer," Clements said.

We have been enjoying beautiful green hillsides in the area, but more days like today could turn that green to brown.

In fact, Clements says plants are drying out, or "curing," about a month sooner than they did last year.

Grass fires normally start in June, but he says the natural fuel may be ready to catch fire as early as May.

"Most of the big fires actually do start in grass," Clements said. "Grass fuels burn very hot, very easily, and then they can carry up into the shrubs and to the forest. So, we could actually potentially see more fires because of our early curing of the grasses."

So what's the magic cure to this curing? Well, rain of course.

It has been a historically dry winter, but Clements said some late spring rain would go a long way.

Otherwise, it may be another rough summer for wildfires.

"The outlook is looking pretty grim in terms of what we should expect for next season," Clements said.

"Given the fact that we're in this severe drought, our grass is already curing this early in the season, fuel moisture are below normal across Northern California, we could actually probably say we're going to have a pretty busy June in terms of fires."

So, days like these are nice, but here's to hoping for some rain.