

# Historic fire season ends this week in Texas, but officials brace for worse

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The unprecedented Texas fire season that incinerated 3.97 million acres, destroyed 2,909 homes and killed 10 people, including four firefighters, officially ends Tuesday.

The bad news is that the next burning season starts Wednesday and, with a historic drought expected to persist at least through May, state fire officials are already concerned about Round Two.

"It's a very ominous future that we have out there. Things are bad, but they are forecast to get worse," said Tom Boggus, director of the Texas Forest Service, which coordinated the response to the 28,385 fires.

State climatologist John Nielsen-Gammon expects the drought to be exacerbated by a drier- and warmer-than-normal winter.

"I think it will be hard for most of the state to recover from the drought since we are so far in the hole right now," he said.

The drought depleted grass fuels, but dead trees, particularly junipers in West and Central Texas, will be a complicating factor next year, said Tom Spencer, director of predictive services for the Forest Service.

"We are anticipating that this next winter-spring season could be a very active one," he said. "The dead junipers are going to be a real concern -- they will make bigger, hotter fires."

This season's epic fires rampaged across the Lone Star State, from the Piney Woods of East Texas to the grasslands of the Panhandle and the desert mountains of West Texas, testing virtually all of the state's 1,800 volunteer fire departments.

Fires even flared near downtown Houston and not far from the state Capitol in Austin.

## By the numbers

Here's a look at the Texas wildfire season, from Nov. 15, 2010, through Nov. 6, 2011:

3.97 million: Acres burned

\$500 million: Estimated property damage

\$333 million: Estimated cost of fighting the fires

\$97 million: Cost of timber burned in East Texas

28,385: Number of fires

38,252: Number of homes saved

2,909: Number of homes lost

2,785: Other structures lost

13,925: Out-of-state personnel who helped fight the fires

16,808: Aircraft flight hours

34 million: Gallons of water and retardant used in flights

1,800: Volunteer fire departments in Texas

10: Fatalities (six civilians, four firefighters)

Sources: Texas Forest Service, Insurance Council of Texas

All those places could be in the hot seat again when winter and spring winds start to howl, Spencer said.

"There really isn't anyplace in Texas that is not going to be a concern," he said. "Because of the drought, everyplace is going to be at risk."

## **Burning money**

The fires caused an estimated \$500 million in damage, including \$250 million just from the massive Bastrop Complex fires over Labor Day weekend, according to Mark Hanna of the Insurance Council of Texas.

"I think that's a very conservative number on the low side. Some of our carriers in rural areas just got clobbered," Hanna said.

The budget of the 400-employee Forest Service got walloped by the blazes and state budget cuts. It was appropriated \$117.7 million for fiscal 2010-11. That was reduced to \$83 million for 2012-13, according to the agency.

An additional \$81 million was appropriated during this year's legislative session and \$40 million was added in the summer special session, Boggus said, noting that FEMA will also be reimbursing \$44 million.

The latest estimate for the total cost of fighting the fires is \$333 million, he said. "It has blown my budget out of the water," Boggus said. "We're looking at \$150 million to \$160 million over budget."

However you look at it, the 2011 fire season was unparalleled, he said.

"You pick a parameter -- it was historic. We're going on almost a year of solid 24-7 firefighting. We had one day a couple of weeks ago when we didn't have any requests for state assistance -- that was the first time in over 250 days."

## **Texas Firestorms**

A "perfect storm" of conditions set the stage for the monumental burning season, Boggus said.

First, Tropical Storm Hermine and Hurricane Alex inundated much of Texas with late summer rains in 2010, which spurred lush vegetation. Then the drought settled in during October and turned grasslands into tinderboxes. Next up were powerful spring winds, followed by the state's hottest and driest summer ever.

It was a cookbook for calamity.

"We had fuel so historically dry that it made fire behavior very intense -- like the Bastrop Complex and the Possum Kingdom fire. We had things happening that folks who had been in the fire business for 50 years said they had never seen anything like it," Boggus said.

Particularly dangerous outbreaks -- dubbed Texas Firestorms -- exploded on eight days this year, including April 15, when the Possum Kingdom fires burned about 148,000 acres, 166 homes and 95 percent of Possum Kingdom State Park.

All told, the eight firestorms fueled 616 fires that devoured 871,470 acres and 268 structures.

Only 10 such outbreaks had occurred in the previous five years, said Greg Murdoch, a National Weather Service meteorologist in Midland, adding that research on the pattern started in 2006.

Officially called a Southern Plains Wildfire Outbreak, the weather pattern is characterized by a volatile convergence of strong winds from the surface to the upper jet stream, high temperatures and extremely low humidity.

"April just went crazy with six firestorms, which was unprecedented," Murdoch said, adding that eight of the 18 recorded firestorms have occurred in that month.

"Bad things happen in April in Texas," he said, referring to wildfires as well as severe thunderstorms and tornadoes.

The outbreaks can occur in a vast area that includes Oklahoma and stretches west from Fort Worth, south to San Angelo and through Midland and Odessa, and north across the Panhandle.

The firestorms, driven by surface winds of 50 to 65 mph, can blow up from late December through May, Murdoch said.

The pattern can be identified from one to four days in advance, and the early warning paid off this year, said Texas Fire Chief Mark Stanford, who is responsible for the Forest Service's strategic operations.

"In the 2005-2006 fire season, we had 22 civilian fatalities. By comparison, this year six civilians lost their life. It's helping us put out the alerts and get people evacuated," he said. "People are becoming more aware of the dangers."

Stanford, who has been in the fire business for 32 years, said it is shocking how fast the firestorms can gobble up the landscape.

"The most astonishing thing was the rate of speed; they were going 4 mph to 5 mph. Those fires become a force of nature. They are like a tornado -- firefighters can't stop those fires. You go defensive and get people out of the way," he said.

## **Volunteer heroes**

More than 38,000 homes were saved, and Boggus gives primary credit to volunteer firefighters for beating back the flames.

"The volunteers are heroes in my book. They are the reason why we only had six civilian fatalities," he said of the departments that respond to nearly 90 percent of the fires in Texas.

Boggus also credits the agency's partnership with the U.S. Forest Service and 49 other state forest agencies that poured manpower and resources into Texas.

"This year, we had 13,925 personnel from all across the nation helping us. It was critical," Boggus said.

That's the sort of cooperation the country should be proud of, Stanford said. "We've been talking quite a bit about our IOUs," he said.

Despite a momentary lull provided by fall rains, the Forest Service hasn't "stood down" like in years past.

"We're keeping more air resources in the state than we ever have. At any point, at any time, we still have areas that could have catastrophic fires," Boggus said.

He hopes Texans have the same mindset and are working to clear "defensible space" around their homes.

"We all know it's coming again. We're trying to stay ready and keep 25 million Texans ready."

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