

Wildfire dangers increase with high winds, lack of moisture

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Wildfire danger is increasing with high winds, dry grass and low humidities.
Credit: Kay Ledbetter

Dry winds, heavy grass and brush growth, and numerous ignition sources should prompt homeowners and landowners alike to take time now to prepare before the flames of a wildfire are at their back door, said a Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service specialist.

"Folks might be wanting to get their lawn mowers out to keep the dry grass around their homes short, and ranchers will need to be checking their water supplies and [fire](#) suppression equipment," said Dr. Ted McCollum, AgriLife Extension beef cattle specialist in Amarillo.

Record rainfalls in 2015 boosted the growth of a heavy fuel load going into the winter, much like the situation that occurred in March 2006, when an estimated 700,000 acres burned in 14 different grass fires in the Panhandle alone, McCollum said.

The Texas A&M Forest Service daily reports of fires throughout January came with either no fires or only small fires most days across the state. In February, the numbers of fires and the acreage have grown as the grass and brush have dried down and the winds have picked up.

Potter County had a 1,750-acre fire on Feb. 1; Hall County saw a 300-acre fire a few days later. More recently, firefighters fought fire on almost 4,000 acres in Hartley County, 2,100 acres in Knox County and 330 acres in Montague County, according to the reports.



Many fires start along roadways from passing motorists. Credit: Kay Ledbetter

Outdoor burn bans are beginning to be implemented, and the forecast for fire danger increases when the winds increase, McCollum said. The Panhandle, South Plains and Rolling Plains are seeing moderate to extreme fire danger depending on the daily wind and humidity expected.

He said the winds are expected to be high across the High Plains in the coming weeks and the conditions are right for wildfires to start with any ignition source, the primary one of those being motorists who throw their cigarettes out along the highway or drag chains that cause sparks.

Those ranchers and landowners bordering any roadway, particularly,

need to be out tending their fire breaks along their fence lines and checking water tanks and other firefighting equipment to make sure they are in working order, he said.

Some other specific actions [homeowners](#) and [landowners](#) can be taking now are:

- Develop an escape or evacuation plan. The evacuation plan should include how to transport animals and livestock that may be in danger.
- Place fire extinguishers in all barns, vehicles and tractors. Check extinguishers periodically for charge. Discard damaged or used fire extinguishers.
- Keep barns and buildings clean of trash and other combustible materials such as hay, lumber and empty feed sacks. Keep outside areas clear of high grass, weeds and other debris.
- Make sure your farm has an adequate water supply, such as an irrigation ditch, a water tank or a pond.
- Park tractors and implements away from combustible materials such as hay stacks and fuel storage containers.
- Keep aboveground fuel storage tanks at least 40 feet from buildings.

McCollum said when the higher winds start whipping power lines and electrical sources above heavy growths of grass and brush, conditions are such that any spark could start a [wildfire](#). Any locations where an electrical source is present, such as oil and gas well pumps, should be checked to ensure the lines cannot swing into contact with one another and create a spark.

More information: For a complete list of wildfire-related documents concerning preparation, mitigation and recovery, go to: texashelp.tamu.edu/004-natural/fires.php

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