

Growing fire shows potential for explosive Northwest season

18 July 2018, by Gillian Flaccus



In this Tuesday, July 17, 2018 photo, the Central Point fire burns along Biddle Road in Central Point, Ore. The Emergency Conflagration Act announced early Wednesday allows the Oregon fire marshal to mobilize resources from around the state to protect homes. (Jamie Lusch/The Medford Mail Tribune via AP)

A fast-moving grass fire fueled by gusting winds in the Pacific Northwest has forced dozens of households to evacuate and prompted Oregon Gov. Kate Brown to declare an emergency Wednesday.

The flames near the city of The Dalles started Tuesday and expanded overnight to more than 45 square miles (117 kilometers), bringing back memories of a devastating wildfire last summer that chewed through a scenic area further west in the Columbia River Gorge.

The blaze in the rural farming area about 80 miles (130 kilometers) east of Portland doesn't bode well for a Pacific Northwest [fire](#) season that's expected to be worse than normal, with drought conditions in many areas and above-average temperatures forecast through September, the center said. One home has been destroyed.

It comes as other states across the American West, including California and Colorado, have struggled with massive blazes that have torn through land gripped by drought.

In Oregon, very low humidity, high temperatures and winds gusting up to 30 mph (48 kph) made the flames explosive in thin grasses, said Robin DeMario, a spokeswoman for the Northwest Interagency Coordination Center.

"These light fuels go up very quickly," she said. "The grassy stalks are very dry, they have lost the moisture in those stalks, and so if a fire start begins, we call it 'flashy fuels' because it burns very fast and very hot."



In this Tuesday, July 17, 2018 photo, firefighters respond to a wildfire in Central Point, Ore. The Emergency Conflagration Act announced early Wednesday allows the Oregon fire marshal to mobilize resources from around the state to protect homes. (Jamie Lusch/The Medford Mail Tribune via AP)

The Columbia River Gorge separating Oregon and Washington is still recovering from a wildfire last year that scorched 75 square miles (194 square kilometers), ravaged popular hiking trails and marred stunning vistas.

It burned in the western end that's home to the Columbia River Gorge National Scenic Area, which attracts more than 3 million tourists a year and holds North America's largest concentration of waterfalls.

The landscape further east along the river transitions to grasslands and flat, open vistas dotted with wheat fields—where the fire was burning Wednesday.

Elsewhere in the state, several fires started by lightning over the weekend burned as temperatures flirted with triple digits.



In this Tuesday, July 17, 2018 photo, a wildfire burns off of Biddle Road in Central Point, Ore. The Emergency Conflagration Act announced early Wednesday allows the Oregon fire marshal to mobilize resources from around the state to protect homes. (Jamie Lusch/The Medford Mail Tribune via AP)

One in southern Oregon forced two houses to evacuate and 31 more homeowners to get ready to flee Wednesday after the flames spread near the California border.

Another blaze about 200 miles (322 kilometers) east of Portland got tamped down after farmers and ranchers used their heavy equipment to help create lines to contain the flames. Some fences and horse corrals burned, but no homes were lost, said Melissa Ross, Morrow County Sheriff's Office spokeswoman.

"In some instances, it was very close (and) if not for all those who turned out to help, the end of this story would have been very different," she said.

Elsewhere in the Pacific Northwest, a small fire near Spokane Valley, Washington, prompted evacuation notices for 700 homes. Several homes caught fire, according to Spokane Valley Fire Department spokeswoman Melanie Rose. Officials said at least one structure had been completely destroyed.



This Sunday, July 15, 2018 image from video provided by Sierra Fire Watch shows a large fire and smoke plume rising over an area northwest of Yosemite National Park as the Ferguson fire continues to spread in California's Sierra Nevada. The U.S. Forest Service said Wednesday morning, July 18, 2018 the blaze is 27 square miles (70 square kilometers) and is just 5 percent contained. More than 1,800 firefighters are battling the blaze in Mariposa County that started Friday, July 13. (Sierra Fire Watch via AP)

In California, a deadly forest fire was spreading west of Yosemite National Park, keeping a key route into the park shut down during tourist season and forcing communities to evacuate. But the park's trails, campgrounds, restaurants and lodges are open, though smoke is polluting the air and limiting visibility.

More than 1,800 firefighters are battling the blaze that started Friday and now spans 27 square miles (70 square kilometers), the U.S. Forest Service said.

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