

Every day is fire season in drought-era California, experts say

By Harriet
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In drought-era California, does “fire season” mean anything?

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Traditionally, the scorching, parched autumn was the period of greatest concern about wildfires, but experts say that after four desiccated years almost every day in the Golden State can be considered fire season.

[California faces 'Dust Bowl'-like conditions amid drought, says climate tracker](#)

Fire agencies in Santa Barbara County and other parts of the Central Coast are moving next week to increased levels of staffing and greater numbers of fire engines, bulldozers and air tankers available for dispatch. Before the drought, this ramp-up often occurred at the end of May or June, said Santa Barbara County Fire Capt. Dave Zaniboni. His department has already battled 70 small fires this year and sees no reason to hold off.

“Unfortunately, this is the new normal,” Zaniboni said.

At the state level, some Cal Fire units started adding additional firefighters in March, said public information officer Lynne Tolmachoff. She noted that with the drought, “off-season” in firefighting has less significance than in previous years.

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Since January, Cal Fire has responded to 640 fires, more than twice the number in similar periods in pre-drought years, Tolmachoff said. The year-round fires led the agency to keep 70 fire engines working over the winter compared with the 10 on off-season duty in normal years, she said.

Many Cal Fire crews are spending this weekend in Amador County training with the California National Guard. The training occurs annually, but Tolmachoff said it has extra urgency this year because Cal Fire calls on the guard for backup when it is battling multiple fires, a situation the drought makes more likely.

Jet Propulsion Laboratory climatologist Bill Patzert said that with high temperatures and dry vegetation, the West “is primed for fire” and rainstorms are unlikely before November.

“The drought is not going to get any better between now and the fall,” Patzert said. “We are in an incendiary situation.”

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