

NIFC News

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October Fire Risk Highest in California, Pacific Northwest

California and the Pacific Northwest face higher-than-normal wildfire risk in October, according to the Predictive Services office at the National Interagency Fire Center (NIFC) in Boise, Idaho.

Parts of the Upper Midwest also remain at risk of above-normal wildfire activity, although the potential there should fade as fall progresses.

Continued dryness is the primary reason for the higher-than-normal risk, according to Ed Delgado, predictive services manager at NIFC.

“The West stayed dry in September. Less than 25 percent of the normal precipitation fell during the month along the West Coast,” he said. “The same ridge of high pressure that has dominated recently is still in place. It may be mid-October before weather more typical of fall returns to the West.”

Dry weather means dry fuels and they’re abundant in California, Oregon and Washington, said Jeremy Sullens, NIFC wildland fire analyst.

“Normally at this time of the year, all the indices we use to measure the condition of fuels are rapidly declining,” Sullens said. “This year, we’re seeing a much slower decline in the indices. The declines we’re seeing are mostly in response to longer and colder nights, and not the usual fall precipitation. There is a good supply of burnable fuels left in much of California and the Pacific Northwest.”

As of October 48,258 fires have burned 8.8 million acres in 2012. Those figures compare to the ten-year averages of 62,557 fires that burned 6.6 million acres.

Conditions are trending toward a weak El Nino weather pattern. El Nino is a periodic event characterized by warm-water conditions in the Pacific Ocean. Generally, an El Nino pattern means drier conditions in the northern tier of the United States, and above-average precipitation in the southern part of the country.

“It’s too early to say how strong or weak the El Nino will be, but it can affect fire activity in the country,” Delgado said.

In the meantime, the western fire season continues to linger.

“Fire season will slowly fade across much of the West this fall,” Sullens said.

