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Lands director: Low snowpack, low firefighter staffing as Idaho heads into summer

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Only a tiny speck of snow remains atop the foothills above Eagle on Tuesday, May 20. Idaho's once-healthy snowpack has melted at a faster rate than expected, according to state officials.

According to state officials, Idaho's once-healthy snowpack has melted at a faster rate than expected, leaving the foothills above the Treasure Valley drier than normal on Tuesday, May 20. Southern Idaho has strong reservoir storage still, which may be good news for farmers, ranchers, fishers and boaters, according to Idaho Department of Water Resources hydrologist David Hoekema.

State firefighting staffing is low heading into the summer, and Idaho's once-healthy snowpack is melting at a faster rate than expected, state officials said Tuesday.

"Preparedness is improving, but staffing remains a challenge for us," Idaho Department of Lands Director Dustin Miller told the Idaho Board of Land Commissioners.

He said that between 40% and 60% of the department's engines are expected to be fully staffed with seasonal firefighters and resource foreman positions. Miller said that the state has a fleet of 50 fire engines, including five new "strategic engines" that will move around to improve capacity for initial attacks on fires.

Of those, 26 engines will be completely staffed with fully qualified engine bosses for seven-day-a-week coverage once the summer and fire season are underway, Miller said.

He said the interest in firefighting "isn't what it was 20 years ago."

He thanked the Legislature for approving \$1.25 million for one-time bonuses for wildland firefighters.

The state's new Eastern Idaho Fire Protection District has had its new boundaries approved and hired 10 seasonal firefighters, Miller said.

Federal agencies, which manage nearly two-thirds of Idaho's land mass, are also facing staffing issues. Gov. Brad Little asked Miller what the director was hearing from the state's federal partners.

Widespread layoffs and programs incentivizing federal workers to leave — spearheaded by the new Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE) led by billionaire Elon Musk — have reduced the workforce at the U.S. Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management.

Miller said most of those actions didn't affect firefighters, but many of their typical support staff are no longer there. Those employees had participated in incident management teams, and some were also certified to step into firefighting roles in times of high need.

"I think that's going to be a critical gap for the Forest Service and BLM to deal with this year," Miller said. "But in terms of initial attack capacity, we've been told that we can expect the same levels, same kind of response."

Water supply and weather outlook

As of May, the state is sitting at "normal" wildfire potential, but that is expected to rise to "above normal" as the summer wears on, especially in North Idaho, Miller said. Preliminary forecasting expects June to bring above-average temperatures and below-average precipitation, which together will raise fire risk.

Idaho's snowpack had started the spring with high levels, but much of that is melting quicker than anticipated, according to nearly all the water and weather specialists who spoke at Tuesday's Idaho Department of Water Resources water supply meeting.

David Hoekema, Idaho Department of Water Resources hydrologist, said that April and the first half of May were drier and warmer than normal, which has led to faster melting than expected, according to notes from the meeting.

Southern Idaho has strong reservoir storage still, which may be good news for farmers, ranchers, fishers and boaters, he said.

Troy Lindquist, from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration National Weather Service, also echoed that it had been a dry spring. East Idaho may see warmer temperatures this week, he said, but long-range forecasts show a potentially dry, hot summer around the state June through August.

So far this year, state firefighters have responded to 43 fires that burned about 41 acres, Miller told land board members Tuesday. Most of that activity was caused by spring debris and grass burning, he said.

IDL this year so far sent firefighters to help in seven other states: California, Texas, North Dakota, North Carolina, South Carolina, Nebraska and Missouri.

“It really seems like we’re sending people out earlier and earlier, in terms of resources, both aerial and ground resources,” Miller said.

Miller said that he would provide a more comprehensive outlook at the land board’s June meeting.

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