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Despite several grass fires that erupted near Silver City this spring and the discovery of four lightning-caused fires in the Gila National Forest this month, the summer wildfire season is off to a slow start. That does not mean, however, that firefighters and officials aren't preparing for an active season.

When a grass fire was detected late Wednesday afternoon, firefighters with four agencies responded and quickly contained the blaze.

According to Tony Garcia, acting Silver City Fire Department chief, he fire was caused when a camper lost control of a campfire. Information was not available on whether charges will be filed.

The blaze burned almost 10 acres two miles southeast of Tyrone. Firefighters from the Silver City Fire Department responded, and were joined by personnel from the Tyrone Volunteer Fire Department, New Mexico Forestry Division and U.S. Forest Service. The fire jumped a line on its western edge, but lower, evening temperatures and weakening winds helped firefighters contain it.

Dan Ware, a spokesman for the New Mexico Forestry Division, on Wednesday said conditions are lining up for an active season.

"We're prepared as we're going to be," he said. "We're starting to see that the potential is there for some really good fires. The only missing ingredient is fire."

Ware identified two factors that might lead to additional fires in southwest New Mexico: dry lightning and fireworks.

"It continues to be real dry down in the southwest," he said. "You'll start to see those thunderclouds pop up, and drop lots of lightning and very little moisture."

Jack Dickey, New Mexico Forestry's fire management officer for the Socorro District, which includes Grant County, echoed those concerns.

"Right now, we've got kind of a mixed situation as far as fire conditions," Dickey told the Daily Press. "With hotter and drier weather occurring now, the green fuels we had before are now drying out, and we're starting to see some dry thunderstorms.

"I think we could be moving into a period where we can see some more activity."

Lance Tripoli, a National Weather Service meteorologist, said the same conditions that are drying out the foliage are also leading to the dry lightning.

“It doesn’t take much moisture with such strong heat to create those thunderstorms,” he said. “When you do get a thunderstorm, the base is pretty high, and the area below the clouds is very dry.”

Relief, in the form of monsoonal thunderstorms, should arrive in mid July, according to Tripoli. He said several factors influence the precise arrival of the regular showers.

“It’s coming in fits and starts,” Tripoli said. “The pattern that sets up the southeast winds is trying to establish itself in the form of high pressure over the Gulf of Mexico and the southeastern United States.”

He also said a low pressure system needs to stabilize over the hottest deserts of southern California and western Arizona.

“The air is so much hotter than the area around it that it will rise, and draw more air into southern California,” Tripoli said. “When that happens, that flow will combine with the southeastern winds from the Gulf of Mexico and draw moisture further westward. That means moisture will spread all across New Mexico.”

While natural causes are threatening to keep firefighters busy this summer, Ware said his greatest fear is fireworks.

“People are going to think about all the wet weather we had this spring and winter,” he said, “and subconsciously be less careful with fireworks than they need to be.

“Even if there not any restrictions, fireworks can still cause a big fire.”

Loretta Benavidez, USFS fire information officer, confirmed there are no restrictions in effect on the Gila National Forest. She did say that fireworks are always prohibited on Forest Service land.

According to Benavidez, the Forest Service is preparing for fire season, even while personnel monitor four fires for wildland use. She said smokejumpers based at the Grant Count Airport recently completed a proficiency jump near Signal Peak.

“It’s something they have to do every year,” Benavidez said.

Four lightning-caused fires in the Gila National Forest are being managed for fuel reduction and wildland use, and total 3,494 acres burned to date. The largest, the 1,826-acre Granite Fire, is burning about 20 miles south of Winston.

“As fire managers, we evaluate all possibilities to manage fires,” Fred Hernandez, GNF fire management officer, said. “There are often several candidate fires that we decide to manage for resource benefits and we proceed with this strategy only if they meet specific management criteria.”

According to a news release, some of the objectives for this type of fire are “recycling nutrients back into the soil; creating a mosaic vegetation

pattern that improves wildlife habitat; eliminating heavy fuel accumulations; regulating insects and disease levels; and improved conditions for some plant species to regenerate.”

Last year, 2,600 wildfires in New Mexico charred more than 607,000 acres — including 83,000 in the Gila National Forest — and suppression costs for the state totaled more than \$15 million.

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