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'Grim' wildfire season expected in county

February 2, 2016

By LILA FUJIMOTO - Staff Writer (lfujimoto@mauiNews.com) , The Maui News

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With forecasts calling for continued El Nino conditions and a dry winter across the state, researchers are anticipating a heightened wildfire season in the months ahead.

"This year, it's looking kind of grim as far as fire danger," said Clay Trauernicht, a wildland fire specialist at the College of Tropical Agriculture and Human Resources at the University of Hawaii-Manoa. "We have pretty significant drought conditions on Maui and the Big Island and it most likely will continue into the summer. You have increased risk of getting these large fires."

Trauernicht is co-author of a research paper published in "Pacific Science" that outlines the frequency of wildfires in the state.

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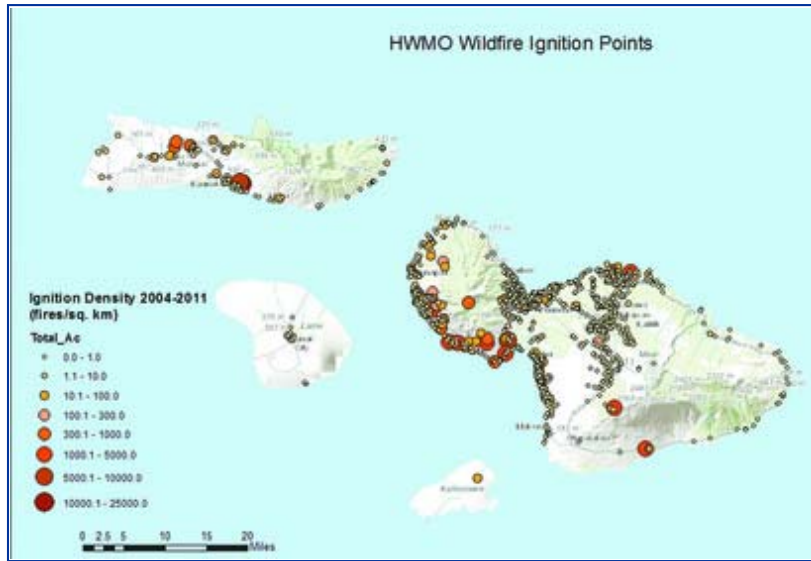
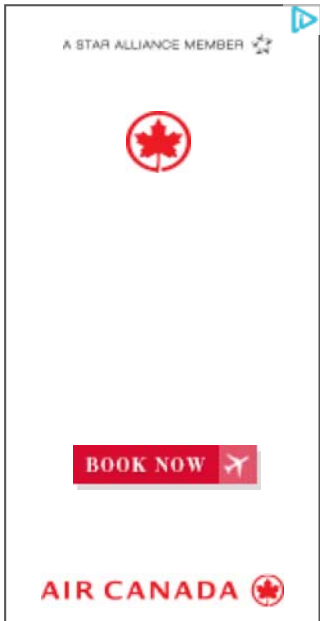
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Researchers, including Trauernicht's colleague Creighton Litton, drew from multiple sources to construct a 108-year fire history showing a more-than-fourfold increase in the area burned annually statewide in recent decades. The increase accompanied a decline of more than 60 percent in land under active grazing or cultivation - from approximately 2.6 million acres, or more than half the state's total land area in 1960, to 970,000 acres, according to the research.

"As areas go out of production, non-native grasslands take over," Trauernicht said. "They burn really easily and the fires tend to get big pretty quickly. The fire risk increases dramatically."

In West Maui, about 8,000 acres were taken out of pineapple cultivation in 2009 by Maui Land & Pineapple Co., Trauernicht noted.

The shutdown of the Hawaiian Commercial & Sugar Co. plantation by the end of the year would affect 36,000 acres in Upcountry and Central Maui.

"The fire departments are relying on the equipment and resources these plantations had," Trauernicht said. "Now they don't have those resources."

Over the years, HC&S employees have helped firefighters extinguish fires, including unscheduled cane fires. "They know how to manage

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fires from the cane burning," Trauernicht said.

Some of the data for the study were gathered by the nonprofit Hawaii Wildfire Management Organization, based on the Big Island. The organization has worked with the Maui Fire Department, state Division of Forestry and Wildlife and National Park Service to develop a West Maui Community Wildfire Protection Plan. A similar plan is being developed for South Maui.

In the past decade, more than 1,000 fires have burned over 20,000 acres statewide, according to the research.

"The vast majority of these fires are less than 5 acres, usually less than an acre," Trauernicht said. "Ninety-five percent of them would be small, but there's a handful of fires that happen every year, pretty much on every island, and they're large fires, over 100 acres."

While the size of fires in the state may not seem significant compared to large wildfires in California and other western states, the burned acreage is comparable with the western United States when measured as a percentage of total state land area, Trauernicht said.

"We're on par with the western United States," he said. "And on some years, we're burning a greater percentage."

In the 12 western-most states, the area burned by wildfires averages 0.5 percent of total land area, Trauernicht said. "On bad years on Maui, it's 1 percent of the land area. That's big."

"On our bad years when we're getting 40,000 to 50,000 acres burning, that's over 1 percent of state land area," he said. "That's a level where you don't really see that kind of percentage even in these western states that are kind of renowned for these really big fires."

From 2001 to 2012 in Maui County, statistics show that the percentage of land burned exceeded 1 percent in three years - 2006 when 7,812.7 acres burned, 2007 when 7,970.65 acres burned and 2009 when 7,893.46 acres were blackened by fire.

While most wildfires have been on Maui, some large fires have occurred on Molokai. In 2009, six fires consumed 7,800.65 acres on Molokai, accounting for nearly all of the wildfire area in the county that year.

Lanai recorded the fewest fires, ranging from one to four annually.

Unlike on the Mainland, few fires are started by lightning strikes in the state, Trauernicht said, and research shows 99 percent are caused by human activity, based on the frequency of fires starting in developed areas.

On Maui, "the largest fires tend to be centered around the West Maui corridor past Lahaina," Trauernicht said. "That's where most of your large fires happen."

Trauernicht said large fires also have ignited in Kula and East Maui.

As for the ignition points where the fires start, "they are happening in the most densely populated areas," Trauernicht said. "Kahului, Kihei and West Maui all have pretty high ignition densities. Even in Paia, there's a fairly high ignition density."

He said that the number of fires hasn't varied greatly from year to year, ranging from 99 to 192 in Maui County from 2001 to 2012.

"That number doesn't change, but when you get these dry conditions combined with low rains and humidity, this year we're kind of worried," Trauernicht said. "The best evidence we have is it's tied to drought."

He said a fire that started Jan. 21 and burned about 200 acres in Maalaea wasn't typical for this time of year, noting that wildfires usually occur between June and September.

The National Weather Service has predicted that the state could see widespread moderate drought this year connected with El Nino conditions.

A partnership of the College of Tropical Agriculture and Human Resources at the University of Hawaii, the Hawaii Wildfire Management Organization and the U.S. Forest Service Institute of Pacific Island Forestry has tried to increase public awareness about preventing wildfires.

"We have been working with local fire response agencies to try to get the word out," Trauernicht said. "We know you get larger fires when you have drought conditions and we know that almost all of our fires are human-started. By targeting public awareness and education, we're hoping to try to make a dent in it."

Preventive measures include taking precautions when lighting

campfires, making sure brush is cleared around barbecues, cutting back overgrown brush and other fuel for fires and cutting firebreaks.

"One of the important messages is just for people to realize the burden that wildfires place on our agencies," including county fire departments and state foresters, Trauernicht said.

"They're the ones bearing the brunt of this," he said. "By increasing awareness in the public, maybe we can prevent the number of fires that are starting.

"It can cost hundreds of thousands of dollars in a single incident. It's an enormous economic burden, as well as a threat to the safety of our firefighters."

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