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BRUSH WITH DISASTER

The state's wildland firefighters need more resources to keep up with blazes

By Timothy Hurley
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Bedeveled by a deepening drought and hit by a couple of major out-of-season brush fires, the state burned through its budget for fighting wildland fires in February, four months before the end of the fiscal year.

Now, unless funds appear from other sources, the state agency responsible for fire suppression across more than 1.6 million acres might have to raid other forestry and wildlife programs if there's a need to respond to additional fires in Hawaii's wilderness, officials said.

Chances are pretty good that will happen. Hawaii is in the grip of one of the strongest El Nino weather patterns ever recorded, which means the winter drought is likely to persist well into spring and possibly right up to the start of the dry summer season.

Please see **FIRES**, A7



Some of the equipment is dated back to the '70s. It's so old we have to call Mexico to order parts."

Rob Hauff
Fire management officer,
state Division of Forestry
and Wildlife

17,000

ACRES BURNED PER YEAR
OVER THE PAST DECADE

1.6 MILLION

ACRES THE STATE DIVISION OF FORESTRY
AND WILDLIFE OVERSEES

\$500,000

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DEPLETED 3 TIMES IN THE PAST 6 YEARS

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FIRES

Continued from A1

"We knew this was going to be a bad fire season," said Rob Hauff, the state Division of Forestry and Wildlife's fire management officer.

El Nino notwithstanding, this is the third time in the last six years that the state's \$500,000 firefighting budget was depleted before the end of the fiscal year. In 2010 a single large wildfire on the slopes of Mauna Kea wiped out all of the fire suppression money.

Officials say budget-busting fire years are becoming common phenomena that reflect the growing number of acres being burned across the islands.

Experts say both the frequency and size of wildfires have steadily grown in recent decades as changing weather patterns and invading fire-prone, non-native grasses and shrubs have put Hawaii's forests and natural areas at greater risk of fire.

Data from a recent Hawaii Wildfire Management Organization study indicate that the average acres burned each year in Hawaii has climbed by 400 percent over the past century.

The study also shows that an average of more than 17,000 acres has burned each year over the past decade, with some years exceeding even the most fire-prone Western states.

In fact, a greater percentage of Hawaii is under high risk of wildfire than any of the other 16 westernmost states, according to an assessment by the Council of Western State Foresters.

Despite the growing danger of wildfires here, state funding for wildfire suppression has not changed in decades. Neither has the gear, much of which is old and worn.

"Some of the equipment is dated back to the '70s. It's so old we have to call Mexico to order parts," Hauff said.

In response to a plea for modern equipment, the state Legislature last year approved \$2.5 million for new trucks and off-road equipment and supplies for next year and \$2.2 million for the following year. But that still leaves the division more than \$5 million short of having fully updated firefighting gear, Hauff said.

In a move to beef up the annual fire suppression budget, Gov. David Ige is asking lawmakers for \$800,000 in his proposed state budget for the coming fiscal year.

As for this year, the Division of Forestry and Wildlife's share of the governor's recently released 5 percent budget restriction is being held back to help with potential new wildfires, Hauff said.

The money might also help underwrite the costs associated with last month's 5,500-acre Kahikini fire on the leeward side of Maui, which put the division's wildfire budget in the hole.

With the National Weather Service warning that drought conditions will likely continue and even intensify across the state through the summer, Hawaii will be relying on its "militia" firefighting force to battle any fires that threaten the state's wilderness.

In Hawaii there are no full-time wildland firefighters, no locally based, highly mobile hot-shot teams exclusively dedicated to fighting fires in rugged terrain. The state's wildland firefighters are the 100 or so men and women who work for the Division of Forestry and Wildlife, all of whom have "day jobs" managing and protecting watersheds, native ecosystems and cultural resources, and managing outdoor recreation.

When a wildfire in a state wilderness area is reported, the employees drop what they are doing and put on their other hat — the state of Hawaii fire helmet.

Hauff, whose "other job" is managing forest pests, said that even he and the handful of division administrators on Oahu pitch in when their workforce mobilizes against a wildfire.

"We're very short-staffed," he said.

That might not be encouraging news going into an extended period of drought that likely will affect even the wettest regions of Hawaii.

Already, leeward areas of Maui and Hawaii island are under severe drought, and Hawaii County this month put out a list of 10 suspicious brush fires while asking for help in finding out who started them.

What makes this particular dry spell especially dangerous is that lots of El Nino-generated summer rain — the wettest dry season in 30 years — led to an excess growth of grass and shrubs, which are now drying out and baking into a crisp fuel ideal for fires.

The last time El Nino was this powerful was in 1997-1998. During that period more than 37,000 acres in Hawaii were consumed by fire, including a 13,000-acre blaze on Molokai and a number of large fires in the Puna area, one of the wettest regions of Hawaii island.

This fiscal year got off to a bad start when sizable brush fires took off on Hawaii island, Oahu and Kauai in July and August, eating up more than half the state's firefighting budget, which also pays for overtime, meals, contracts for equipment, helicopters and more, officials said.

The first of two large wildfires that blackened thousands of acres last month obliterated the remaining funds. The 775-acre Puuanahulu fire on Hawaii island cost \$130,000, Hauff said, while the Kahikini fire on Maui cost an estimated \$120,000.

Hauff said that if there's any money left over at the end of the year, those funds typically go to preventive measures, such as establishing firebreaks, reducing fuels and improving access to wilderness areas.

Clay Trauernicht, extension fire specialist with the University of Hawaii at Manoa, said the state needs to provide more realistic funding levels to help protect the state's natural areas in the face of a rapidly growing wildfire threat.

Non-native, fire-prone grasses and shrubs dominate abandoned agricultural lands and have now replaced native ecosystems across a quarter of the state, he said.

With the state's firefighting budget increasingly devoured by suppression, pre-fire management suffers, Trauernicht said, yet that's where the state can get more value for its dollars.

Cutting firebreaks, reducing vegetation and brush, and working with landowners to provide access for water and vehicles help to minimize the size of fires, their impacts and their potential danger to firefighters, he said.

"It can make a huge difference, for example, to get a firetruck in some place," Trauernicht said. Post-fire measures, including erosion control and replanting in burned areas, also help to reduce the immediate impacts of wildfires.

Trauernicht said the state should consider establishing a full-time team dedicated solely to wildfires. Not only would it improve the division's initial response, but the team could also conduct pre- and post-fire activities when not responding to fires, he said.