

Wildfires



Here are the members of the Montrose Office of the Colorado Division of Fire Prevention and Control: Travis Moore, left, JD Jimenez, Luke Odom, Mic Bugosh, Tyler Campbell, Clay Crosswhite, Mara Kalat, Stephen Winslow and Eric Lorvig. (Submitted photo/Luke Odom)

A wildfire is a force of nature that is nearly impossible to prevent and can be very difficult and costly to control. A wildfire in the right place, at the right time, can be a benefit by reducing grass, brush and trees that can fuel large and severe wildfires. But, fire in the wrong place and time can wipe out lives, homes and even entire communities.

We see wildfires on television and read about them in the newspaper. Usually, we only hear about the several fires that cause structural damage or take human lives, but we never realize just how many fires annually occur. In the United States, we average 73,000 wildfires annually that destroy 7 million acres and 2,600 structures. That's a lot more fire than I ever realized on an annual basis.

On May 1, 2016, a fire broke out in the Alberta city of Fort McMurray and was the costliest in Canadian history with 1600 structures destroyed and two fatalities. The fire caused an entire population of 90,000 people to be evacuated from their homes.

So far this year appears to start off very active. As

of the end of March, there have been a total of 12,176 wildfires that have consumed 2,102,202 acres. We have not even hit the fire season yet.

Nationally, 90 percent of all wildfires are human caused, such as being careless with a campfire or throwing cigarette butts out the window. The other 10 percent are natural caused, such as lightning.

Recently, the Posse completed its annual wild land fire fighting refresher course, which is an annual requirement. As a regular occurrence, we were called out to assist with a wildfire a day before our class. Seems to me the on-the-job training should be after the class but when Murphy, of Murphy's Law fame is on your team, you learn to expect the unexpected.

The course this year was taught by several of the members of the Colorado Division of Fire Prevention and Control office, here in Montrose. This unit is an interagency partner of the BLM (Bureau of Land Management), designed to assist other agencies in times of fire emergencies. The team here in Montrose is comprised of a 10-person

group attached to a helicopter module and a four-person Type 4 engine crew.

This team of firefighters can travel anywhere within the state to assist other agencies with wildfires, and even go to other states when the danger in Colorado is low. Luke Odom, who is the West Region Fire Management officer, heads the Office here up. After the class, I had a chance to speak with Luke.

"Colorado saw 1,190 wildfires reported during 2016. These fires consumed approximately 129,495 acres," said Odom.

Odom continued, "Fire causes here in Colorado do not match the national averages. Locally we find about 25 percent of the fires are human caused while 75 percent are from natural sources with lightning being the greatest."

I asked Odom about how citizens can help, and he stated, "Everyone needs to get involved with your local agencies. Volunteer fire departments, Sheriff's Posse, all of them are here to help. Have these folks come speak at your meetings and events. The key is to educate yourself and prepare your properties and families about the dangers of wildfires."

One organization everyone should become familiar with is the West Region Wildfire Council (WRWC). The WRWC promotes wildfire preparedness, prevention and mitigation education throughout Montrose and surrounding counties.

WRWC can help prepare your home and property for wildfire. They offer a free site visit and even have an available cost-share program to assist property owners with the cost associated with mitigation. Check out their website for more information at www.cowildfire.org.

This year, wildfire season seemed to kick off early. There are no real estimates available yet as to how bad a year it is going to be. Judging by some of the past years in Colorado, it would be wise to prepare now. Until next time, be careful and mindful of wildfire danger and see you on the trail.

Mark Rackay is a freelance writer who serves as a Director and Public Information Officer for the Montrose County Sheriff's Posse. For information about the Posse call 970-252-4033 (leave a message) or email info@mcspi.org



Tips From The Posse

By Mark Rackay

Spring in March, winter in April

Why is it good to get some winter weather in April?

That is because it can help make a better September harvest.

Of course, this time of year we want that winter weather to be confined to the high altitudes only. But by slowing the snow-melt process up in the San Juan Mountains and in the West Elk Mountains, last Sunday's and Monday's cold temperatures and 2 feet of fresh snow up there are helpful.

This year's snowpack can then more gradually become the irrigation water that supplies the South Canal, the M&D Canal, and all of the other irrigation sources for each valley's sacks of onions, boxes of sweet corn and bags of potatoes for which Western Colorado is justly famous.

We eventually hope to have that melted snow as water for the homeowner's apple tree, the hay in the horse pasture, and even for paddle-boarding in the Uncompahgre River at the Montrose Water Park.

A rancher once pointed out to me what he had learned from his grandpa, who had first farmed and ranched in the Uncompahgre Valley many decades ago.

"You know," he said, "It's not just about the amount of snow that we get in the mountains. What matters a lot is the rate of melting of that snow. Winds can pack in the early winter snows more densely in the rocks. If so, the rate of melting is slowed



Outdoors

By John T. Unger

for more gradual release in the summer. That way we don't have it all turn to river water too soon in the spring, which could leave us with less water easing down the mountain streams when needed later in the summer."

Such a firsthand, multi-generational observation like that must represent one very valid element in the science and the art of reservoir and irrigation management. Predicting a specific region's mountain (and valley) weather more than three days in the future becomes very uncertain. To have to do so months into the future (so as to decide on dam water releases) has to be even more challenging.

To burn ditches or to back-country ski?

With weather such as we have had since the spring equinox, a weekend day's options are many and diverse. Someone remarked last week they had burned ditches one day here in the valley, and less than 24 hours later (and a 90-minute drive

from home) they were enjoying ski-touring in a full white-out storm of horizontally blowing snow in the high mountains.

In mid-March, equally appealing options had created the choices between mountain-biking in the Adobes versus skiing some fresh snow at one of the lift-served ski areas. How about pruning the landscape's shade trees versus a 65 degree run at 6 o'clock in the evening on Flat Top Road on the edge of town, needing only shirt, shorts and shoes?

More than a few road cyclists are preparing for the Memorial Day Iron Horse Challenge and other distance rides by riding 30 or 40 miles on the asphalt county roads between Montrose and Olathe. To do so, some of them have budgeted other pleasant weather hours for getting their "cool crops" (lettuce, chard, carrots, and radishes) into the warming soil in the raised beds of the backyard garden.

For those who have been anticipating seeking their corn in the corn-snow of skiing in spring conditions, it won't be long to wait. When this system of partially overcast skies does clear, the current higher angle of the sun will be bringing rapid warming to the high-altitude snowpack. Even a few minutes of direct sun softens the surface crust and allows some great skiing for a few hours.

Of course, extra alertness and awareness is needed in mountain sports when that happens. In both of the recent weekends,



Having used climbing skins to ascend a thousand vertical feet to timberline, Julie Barton, left, Amy Relnick and Pam East view peaks of the San Miguel Mountains in the changing light of a snowy April day. (Submitted photo/John T. Unger)

backcountry skiers, snowshoers, and cross-country skiers have skied beneath smooth, unbroken slopes on the routes out in the morning. These very same slopes a few hours later, even with less than an hour of direct sun, often show spontaneous slides known as the Loose Wet variety.

This type of avalanche, though not as often burying a person, can still push someone over a cliff band or into a terrain trap of trees. This heavy, loose, wet snow can also trigger a deeper layer of lubricated, warmed snow and become a bigger hazard.

Getting to know the

combinations of factors that lead to stability or instability in the snowpack can make us pleased that the sun comes out and softens the crust. Then we can meet that snow again in the summer when it has become liquid water for the trout in the stream and the tomato in the garden.

John T. Unger is a diplomate of the American Chiropractic Board of Sports Physicians, with over 25 years of practice in Montrose. He is grateful for last week's return of winter weather to the high mountains, and the beauty that comes with it. Ideas for future columns are welcomed at sportsdocunger.com.

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