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CORONAVIRUS

How Can California Fight Wildfires in the Middle of a Pandemic? In a Few Months, We'll Likely Find Out

**LISTEN** 4 minBy [Danielle Venton](#) 

Apr 20



CAL FIRE personnel in personal protective equipment due to the

No one knows exactly how this coming fire season will shake out, but experts and fire officials agree the COVID-19 pandemic will make an already hard job much tougher.

Fire agencies and emergency managers are now planning how they'll fight wildfires, issue evacuation orders, set up shelters and handle power shutoffs in the face of the massive challenge of simultaneously coping with a highly infectious disease.

'We've never fought a fire in a pandemic.'

"We've never fought fire in a pandemic," said **Jim Whittington**, an expert in wildland fire response. "We don't have any sort of lessons from [the flu pandemic of] 1918. So this is going to be a learning experience, and we're going to have to err on the side of firefighter and public safety. And we recognize that there's probably going to be some Catch-22s in our future."

One of the biggest impacts could be a strain on the mutual aid system. In normal times, agencies provide support to each other during disasters. But when the crisis is so widespread, that system could become strained.

If first responders or their families become sick, or if they are tied up in emergency

medical services, then agencies will struggle to maintain peak staffing, and they will be less able to share resources. If a paramedic assigned to a fire engine has to help with the COVID-19 response, for example, "Well, then the engine can't go to the fire," said Christopher Godley, director of emergency management for Sonoma County.

"Jurisdictions simply may not have the resources to share with each other like they have in years past. And that was the great success story of our Kincade fire response last year."

The Kincade Fire ignited in a remote region of Sonoma County on Oct. 23, 2019, threatened the town of Windsor, and prompted the largest evacuation orders in the history of the county.

"There was an army of firefighters and law enforcement that came into the county to address that fire," Godley said. "That may be a real challenge this season."

Forecast for an Uncertain Year

The most recent predictive **report** for wildfire conditions, issued April 1 by the National Interagency Fire Center, forecasts normal Northern California wildfire potential in May and June, but above normal in July. The northern part of the state has seen only about half its average **rainfall**, and the **Sierra**

Nevada snowpack sits at about 60 percent of normal.

(Southern California has gotten 100 percent of normal rainfall and has a forecast of below average fire potential.)

But historically, California's most destructive fires have come in the late summer and fall, too far out to forecast.

What the response to the inevitable conflagrations to come will look like depends on what **phase of the pandemic** California is experiencing. That depends upon a host of factors that are currently unknown. Transmissions may die down in the summer, as seasonal colds do. Perhaps more testing and therapies will be available. Or, coronavirus cases could surge. In that case, emergency managers would have to decide how best to balance the health and safety of the public and fire responders amid competing disasters.

What's already known is that the business of firefighting creates a lot of opportunities for sickness to spread.

"The thing about fire suppression is it's an activity where you're frankly just right on top of people," said **Scott Stephens**, a fire science

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researcher at UC Berkeley. "You know, you work as a crew. The crew trains together. The crew actually lives together, generally in a bunkhouse."

Groups within the National Interagency Fire Center are drafting plans for how federal agencies, like the U.S. Forest Service and the Bureau of Land Management, will fight fires. The **plan** for the Eastern region of the U.S., which has an earlier fire season than the West, has already been released.



Jim Whittington @JimWhitti... · Apr 10, 2020 

The Eastern Area published the first detailed wildland fire guidance for COVID-19 on Wednesday. Here's a thread of first impressions. 1/gacc.nifc.gov/eacc/eacg/docu...



Jim Whittington
@JimWhittington

The first item that jumps out is what has been talked about since the pandemic started: we will treat crews/modules as one--essentially a family--and there will be limited to no contact with others. This minimizes exposure & assists with isolation and contact tracing. 2/



Key points include treating different crews, or "modules," as units that would not eat, sleep or mix with their counterparts. Firefighters might stay in their own tents, rather than in a bunkhouse, and eat military-style M.R.E.s with their own group, rather than mixing with other crews. The planners also expect to rely more heavily this year on aircraft and local resources, and less on interstate assistance.

These plans should be considered “living documents” that will be updated “as we collectively learn more about our new operating environment with COVID-19,” states an April 9 **memo** from the group coordinating wildfire-fighting strategy among Interior Department agencies, “We are entering into uncharted territory.”

The plan for the Western region is due to be released by the end of April.

The U.S. Forest Service says it will seek to minimize travel to other geographic areas, and that it will emphasize social distancing by unit. Large fire camps, with hundreds or thousands of firefighters living together, “will not be the norm any longer,” said a spokesperson in an email.



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#RT @CAL_FIRE: We go to work for you. Please, if you can, stay home for us. Although progress is being made, now is not the time to lessen our efforts to physically distance and stop the spread. #StayHomeSaveLives



♡ 48 10:36 AM - Apr 15, 2020



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How to Keep Firefighters Safe?

The state fire agency, CalFire, is in the process of bringing on its seasonal workforce of about 2,600. Trainings and recertifications are continuing, with some added distance between participants. Some trainings have moved online.

"We used to bring them into large classrooms and do it that way. Of course, we cannot do that anymore," said Scott McLean, CalFire's

deputy communications chief. Firefighters are learning in smaller groups, in larger spaces outdoors, or online, he said. "So you'll see more classes, less people in them."

How will fire season be different this year for the agency? Will CalFire use large base camps when incidents erupt?

"We're not naive to the situation by any means," said McClean. "Every incident is going to be different on how and what the needs are going to be, especially for the logistical support of the firefighters."

Safety officers, McLean says, will ensure that CDC guidelines for distancing and disinfection will be met.

"A common phrase in our department, or in departments working on a wildland fire, is 'Keep your dime.' That means stay 10 feet apart," said McLean. "That refers to the safety aspect of using tools" like chainsaws, he said. Those practices "are already ingrained into our way of doing business."

Still, fire camps are notoriously locations where firefighters get sick. "**Camp crud**" is the insider name for a respiratory illness with cough, usually attributed to a combination of infectious agents and lung irritation from smoke and dust. The worry that smoke exposure will put firefighters at

extra risk if they contract the coronavirus may lead incident commanders to request fewer crews on the ground.

While an increased focus on initial attack and using air resources may help slow a fire or reduce its intensity, says Stephens, "they all have to be put out by ground crews. You just don't dump water on something and say you're done."

Even if the number of firefighters assigned to a fire can be reduced, "there's very few, I would say, great options, because of just the nature of firefighting. [...] I'm afraid the virus will have an impact on firefighting people."

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Evacuation and Power Shutoffs in the Time of COVID-19

Firefighting is most effective when neighborhoods are evacuated early. But what would evacuations look like during a pandemic?

It's not clear how evacuation orders will intersect with requirements to isolate at home, should those directives still be in effect.

"We've not fleshed it out fully," said Sonoma County's Godley "but the thought is...you should not be going to stay with your [extended] family or friends because you may be putting them at risk. or they may be putting you at risk."

Already the Red Cross is planning to make more shelters available so that evacuees have a greater amount of space. Upon entering, people would be screened for the virus, ideally with a rapid test instead of a simple assessment of possible symptoms. Separate areas will be set up for those requiring isolation.

Last fire season, PG&E shut off power multiple times to millions of Californians during periods of high wildfire-risk. Last week, a large group of counties, cities and other organizations filed a motion before the state public utilities commission asking it to direct utilities to be more deliberate in the frequency and scope of the shutoffs, and to analyze their effect on hospitals with COVID-19 patients. Godley said the utilities should "make sure they're doing everything they can" to keep the power running at medical facilities and to provide alternate power sources, if possible, for places caring for vulnerable populations.

Managing Expectations

Jim Whittington, the wildland fire response expert, is concerned that some fire agencies aren't preparing people for the complexity of fighting fires during this pandemic.

"I think one of the big things that is going to be tough for the agencies to do is to go out and have conversations with stakeholders, elected officials and the public," he said, "and start changing some expectations about what fire season is going to look like."

Whatever it looks like, it's a safe bet it won't be what Californians have come to expect.

Whittington envisions tensions arising if fire managers do not deploy as many ground resources as they normally would or allow forested land to burn that in other years might have been saved.

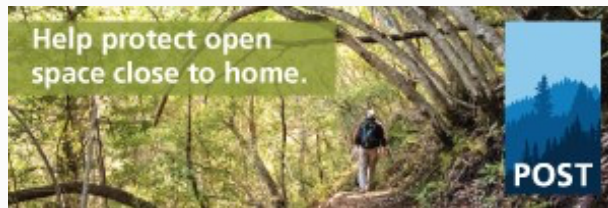
"I think one of the issues might be that we get into a tough fire situation and people, say their expectations are one thing, but the fire incident commander and the hierarchy is going to react in a different way.

"I think there's some folks that are working on that. But I'm not sure that these things have been pushed out to the public yet."

A **statement** issued April 1 from the Western Fire Chiefs Association counsels fire managers to begin communicating that we face a difficult season ahead.

“Yes, it will be lonely at the top, because we may be going way from the standard firefighting performance norms,” it said. “The first step in addressing response is to prepare the policy makers, public and our troops. All parties need to be made aware that their historical response performance expectations may not occur during the near future and the sooner they hear this, the better.”

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