**How the coronavirus pandemic is crippling California's efforts to prevent catastrophic wildfires**

**Kurtis Alexander, SF Chronicle, March 26, 2020**

California’s ability to prepare for a dry and potentially dangerous fire season this year is being crippled as the coronavirus pandemic prompts fire agencies across the West to cancel or delay programs aimed at preventing catastrophic wildfire.

From clearing out undergrowth in forests to training firefighters to tamp out flames, local, state and federal fire forces are trying to move forward within new social distancing guidelines, as well as with potentially sick employees, but that’s making their work harder and sometimes impossible to do.

The U.S. Forest Service, which oversees more than half of California’s wildlands, announced last week that it was suspending all prescribed burns, one of the most effective tools for increasing California’s resiliency to fire. The state’s Cal Fire agency, meanwhile, says it won’t halt its vegetation management activities — at least at this point — but it is rethinking how, when and where they’re done.

Spring fire preparations are considered vital to readying California for the warmer, drier summer and fall. Wildfire experts worry that disruptions caused by the coronavirus outbreak will not only increase the fire threat in the coming months but also sap momentum from a yearslong effort to make sure the state can weather the types of mega-fires recently seen in Butte County and Wine Country.

“If we don’t increase prescribed fire, restoration thinning and managed wildfire, we will never get out of our current forest problems,” said Scott Stephens, a professor of fire science at UC Berkeley. “Suspending prescribed fire further puts us in a hole in terms of long-term activities to increase forest resilience to climate change, wildfire and drought.”

Officials with the U.S. Forest Service, which oversees the nation’s largest firefighting force, said they were halting their burn program indefinitely so that communities wouldn’t have to deal with smoke during new shelter-in-place orders as well as for the safety of employees. About 5,000 Forest Service firefighters work in California.

Those conducting prescribed burns routinely travel in groups to burn sites, often across long distances. The work itself is done in crews of up to 20 members. Health experts have advised people to stay at least 6 feet away from others to prevent spread of the highly contagious coronavirus, and the White House has issued guidelines discouraging gatherings of more than

The suspension of the burn program comes as the federal government, in concert with states like California, was beginning to initiate new, aggressive goals for prescribed fire in response to deadly blazes like the 2018 Camp Fire, which killed 85 people. Such infernos have helped put a spotlight on the perilous, overgrown condition of the nation’s forests, and burning off the thick brush and dead trees has proved a cost-effective solution.

“A lot of people were looking forward to this year being a ramping up of prescribed fire,” said Malcolm North, a professor of plant sciences at UC Davis who works with the U.S. Forest Service in the Sierra Nevada. “My concern now is that we’re going to be more reactive to fire than proactive.”

In response to the pandemic, the U.S. Forest Service has also called off in-person fire training through at least April 3 and canceled meetings where planning and risk assessment is done for fire season.

Like many businesses, the federal agency has moved many work discussions and training sessions online. However, surveying the landscape for fire danger and learning how to drive a fire engine are tough to do via Zoom.

“Training that cannot be done virtually will either be conducted in smaller groups or a waiver may be given until the training can be completed at a later date,” said Jonathan Groveman, spokesman for the Pacific Southwest Region of the Forest Service, in a statement to The Chronicle.

The biggest challenge may lie ahead as making adjustments, including social distancing, only gets harder come fire season. It’s a reality that fire officials have just begun to ponder.

The big wildfires that burn in California typically draw hundreds, if not thousands, of firefighters into densely packed tent cities, where they work, eat and sleep together for weeks. Norovirus outbreaks are common, and the more severe coronavirus would probably find ripe breeding grounds there.

If the virus continues to spread, as many medical experts expect, some firefighters might be too sick to make it to the front lines. Already, local fire departments have begun to report that some of their employees are infected by the virus or showing symptoms of the corresponding illness, COVID-19.

“The thing I worry about is firefighter health and wellness,” said Kelly Martin, the recently retired chief of Yosemite National Park’s fire program. “Our firefighting workforce is already stretched to the max in terms of the year-to-year response to these large fires where whole communities are being destroyed. The firefighters are already seeing a toll.”

Martin advises that residents in rural and wooded areas prepare for a less robust response from fire agencies this year. She encourages more home hardening for wildfire and clearing more vegetation around houses.

“Don’t always count on the helicopters and the air tankers and the firefighters to be there,” she said.

In Grass Valley (Nevada County), a community in the Sierra foothills that has come together in recent years to address the area’s high fire risk, residents are trying to continue neighborhood fire-prevention work despite the obstacles posed by the coronavirus.

“We’re not going to have our April meeting, and we don’t know about May,” said Susan Rogers, 68, an organizing member of the Nevada County Coalition of Firewise Communities. “But we can put stuff on our website and link people to it. That’s how we’ll keep people updated for now.”

Officials at Cal Fire say they’re also continuing to help communities get prepared. They don’t plan to stop their house-to-house safety inspections, which they do thousands of each spring, nor curtail the work of crews that trim trees and cut fire breaks around homes.

Cal Fire’s academies for new and seasonal firefighters will go on as well. The agency expects to have close to 7,000 total firefighters at work during peak season.

“We don’t know what’s going to happen, but rest assured, we will respond accordingly,” said Scott McLean, spokesman for Cal Fire. “That is our job.”

Kurtis Alexander is a San Francisco Chronicle staff writer. Email: [kalexander@sfchronicle.com](mailto:kalexander@sfchronicle.com) Twitter: [@kurtisalexander](https://twitter.com/kurtisalexander)