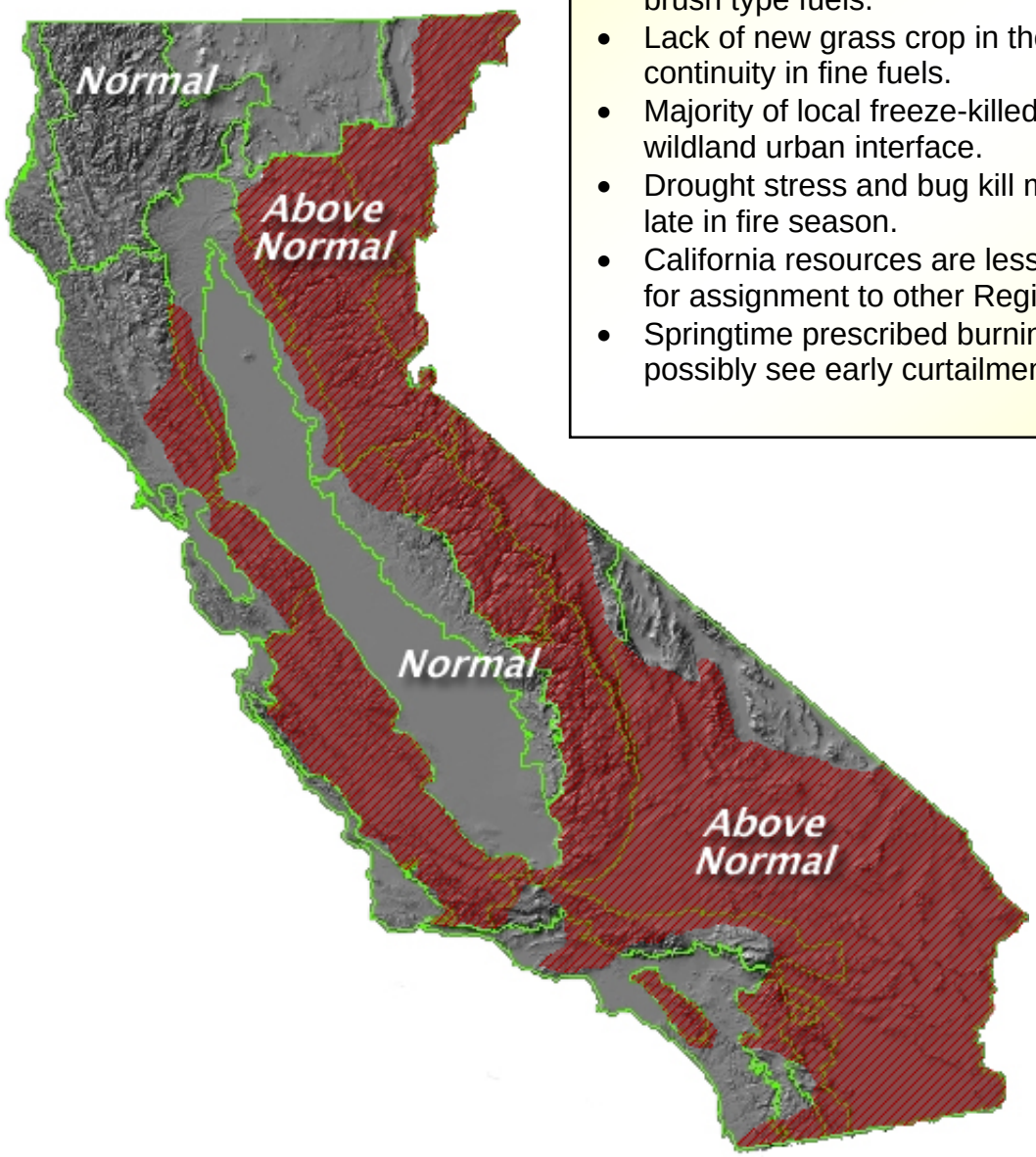
Preliminary 2007 California Fire Season Outlook

Executive Summary
April 26, 2007

- Earlier than normal start to fire season
- Abnormally dry fuels in the South due to absence of significant rainfall
- Below normal precipitation has led to lower then normal 1000 hour fuel moistures statewide.
- Fire activity could increase rapidly with any sudden drying and/or windy events, particularly in grass/ brush type fuels.
- Lack of new grass crop in the south will reduce continuity in fine fuels.
- Majority of local freeze-killed fuel areas are within wildland urban interface.
- Drought stress and bug kill may become factors by late in fire season.
- California resources are less likely to be available for assignment to other Regions.
- Springtime prescribed burning in the north could possibly see early curtailment.



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This preliminary outlook is a product of the National Seasonal Assessment Workshop held April 24-26, 2007 in Boulder, CO. The interagency workshop brought together subject matter experts from climatology, fire weather meteorology, fuels, and fire danger. The outlook is based on past developments, current conditions, trends, and predictions for the next five months (May through September).

Objectives of the Executive Summary are to:

- Provide a prognosis of 2007 wildland fire potential in California, based on fuel conditions and available climate forecasts.
- Highlight concerns and key implications for management.
- Provide supporting documentation regarding weather and fuels information.
- Provide the framework for more comprehensive North Ops and South Ops outlooks by the end of June.

This executive summary should aid California wildland fire managers in 2007 fire season preparedness, and add preliminary insight. More detailed fire season outlooks, for both North and South Ops, will be available by the end of June. Those documents will give increased detail regarding all aspects of the coming fire season, and will have higher confidence levels. In addition to this outlook, the GACC Predictive Service Units at Riverside and Redding will issue detailed monthly assessments of fire weather and fire danger.

FIRE SEASON OVERVIEW:

South: With the absence of significant rainfall, fuels are exceptionally dry across much of the Geographic Area, especially for this time of the year. The resulting effects will be above normal fire potential for nearly the entire Area. The only exceptions will be areas near the coast, in addition to lower elevations near the San Joaquin Valley where a “near normal” fire season is expected. The winter freeze across the lower elevations of the district has caused some brush dieback, especially in and near the urban-wildland interface. This, combined with drought stress and bug kill, may lead to some extreme fire behavior later this summer. The only limiting factor to the potential severity of this season will be the fact that the new grass crop is lacking, which will result in less fuel loading and continuity among the finer types of fuels.

North: With the below normal precipitation and snowpack, the onset of this year’s fire season will be a little earlier than average in North Ops. The current and expected weather and fuel conditions will lead to above normal fire potential in primarily two areas. These are from the northern Sierra into northwest Nevada, and from the southeastern Mendocino NF down to the eastern SF Bay PSA.

SUPPORTING WEATHER AND FUELS INFORMATION:

Winter/ Spring weather to date: California went into the 2006-07 winter with an eastern Pacific El Nino pattern building toward borderline-moderate strength. However, the El Nino rapidly dissipated between December and early February. The winter season in California was drier than normal; in fact southern CA had one of the driest winters on record. Winter temperatures across California averaged slightly above normal, although there were significant December and January statewide cold snaps which produced local frost-kill in some live fuel species. Lack of significant precipitation, combined with the slightly warmer than normal temperatures, has resulted in below zero to much-below normal snowpack in the South, and below normal in the North.

Forecasts: Fire season temperatures are forecast to be at or above normal for the majority of the state's interior. We expect the warm temperature anomalies for North Ops to be greatest in the latter half of fire season. California fire season precipitation is forecast to remain at or below normal, with the North expected to have its lowest percentages of normal in the later months. Typically California experiences several thunderstorm outbreaks during the summer months. At this time long range forecasts do not suggest any significant deviation from this scenario. Late season foehn wind events, even of normal strength, could be more critical than usual due to the abnormally dry fuels. Forecast Confidence = 55% to 60%

Fuels Discussion: A severe January freeze caused significant dieback of native and non-native vegetation, especially in Ventura, Orange, and San Diego counties. Although a direct correlation between freeze kill and fire occurrence is not established, given the amount of newly killed fuels, large fires may result. There also seems to be a slight re-occurrence of bug kill among the timbered areas of the southernmost forests and drought stress is a further concern. Below normal rainfall and the slightly above normal temperatures in the North are leading to earlier-than-normal curing of grasses at lower elevations. This early curing of annual grasses, along with below normal live and dead fuel moistures, will lead to an earlier onset of fire season. Lower than average 1000 hour fuel moistures have been confirmed from both prescribed fires and early season wildfires. Prescribed burning opportunities started earlier in the year than normal, but an early start to the fire season could prematurely curtail burning operations.

Team Members at Boulder:

Tom Rolinski – Fire Weather Meteorologist, Riverside Interagency Fire Weather Center, USDI Bureau of Land Management

John Snook – Fire Weather Meteorologist, Redding Interagency Fire Weather Center, USDA Forest Service

Bruce Risher – Intelligence Coordinator, USDA Forest Service, Southern California Geographic Area Coordination Center

Mark Steele – Intelligence Officer, USDA Forest Service, Northern California Geographic area Coordination Center.

Russ Gripp – Technical help with NFDRS, WIMS, mapping

Tim Chavez, Pete Curran **Also contributing: Larry Hood**