

The combination of a lack of moisture, consistent high winds and dry air masses may increase the danger of wildfires across Nebraska this year.

Dry, windy days—an average of nine days with winds over 40 mph in the first weeks of the year—have been recorded and newspaper reports of wildfires burning and threatening homes and property have been common.

Recent snowfall has been welcome, but the outlook is still a concern, especially considering wind trends so far in 2014.

“Most of Nebraska has recorded less than a quarter- inch of rainfall in January and, without significant snow cover to compress fire fuel materials such as grass and other vegetation, the wind can quickly and easily carry a spark across a yard or field,” said Casey McCoy, Nebraska Forest Service wildland fire training manager.

According to Shawn Jacobs, meteorologist with the National Weather Service Weather Forecast Office in North Platte, average sustained wind speeds are higher so far than any year since 2009 and wind gusts meeting red flag warning criteria are up more than 30 percent this year.

“Considering the atmosphere usually decouples at night and the wind goes calm, it’s pretty impressive for January,” Jacobs said.

After a record-breaking year in 2012 and record low numbers of wildland fires reported in 2013, 2014 appears to be shaping up as a busy one for Nebraska’s fire departments. Fire has historically proven to be a valuable tool in land management, but under the conditions that exist in Nebraska so far this year, it can be a nuisance at best, a deadly threat at worst. Unfortunately, each year thousands of acres and millions of dollars are lost to careless burning practices. The Nebraska Forest Service urges Nebraskans to be careful with fire and offers these tips:

- Check local, county or state laws on open burning. Nebraska has a full-time burn ban that can only be waived by obtaining a permit from the local fire department.
- Check weather conditions and forecasts, not just for the day of the burn but for the days following the burn and be flexible. If weather conditions are unfavorable or forecast to be unfavorable, one of the hardest decisions you might need to make is to postpone burning to a later date.
- Look up, look down and look around. Protect buildings and fences and watch out for power poles, power lines and tree branches.
- Build a firebreak to contain a fire in the area to be burned. Even if your burn is just a small brush pile, reduce or remove the grass and other fuel around it. Leave at least 30 feet of separation between your burn and homes, outbuildings and other structures.
- Keep firefighting tools, such as rakes, shovels and garden hoses close at hand for small fires. Discs, plows and large sprayers are needed for large fires. Have plenty of help.
- Remember, fires can grow extremely fast. A small fire can rapidly become a raging wildfire with a gust of wind. If a fire appears to be getting away, call your fire department immediately. Never leave a fire unattended; check it multiple times after it appears to be out.
- Burn piles can hold heat for weeks as they continue to consume remaining fuel. If the forecast includes dry conditions and wind, check any piles burned recently to ensure there is no heat remaining. Pour water on it, stir the ashes and pour more water on it.
- Be certain all burning materials such as fireplace ashes and cigarettes are completely out

before moving them outside.

- Be very careful with anything that can create a heat source such as welding or cutting equipment. One small spark outdoors on a windy day can lead to a fast moving fire.

Nebraska's more than 14,000 career and volunteer firefighters are the state's primary wildland fire suppression force.

"These dedicated members of the community are your neighbors, friends and fellow farmers and ranchers," McCoy said.

"One careless mistake can result in many hours away from jobs and families for them. They willingly put themselves in harm's way with no expectation of anything in return, so please keep them in mind the next time the wind picks up and Nebraska fuels are primed to burn," he said.