

Posted on: Sunday, May 16, 2010

Fire officials urge caution as wildfire season nears

By **Suzanne Roig**
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Coming off the driest rainy season in Hawai'i in more than half a century, firefighters are gearing up for a busy wildfire season.

The wildfire season has the potential to damage homes, destroy native species and injure firefighters, Honolulu Fire Chief Ken Silva said.

"We're very cautious about this year," Silva said last week. "We're cognizant of the low rainfall and want to make sure the public is notified. There is the potential for wildland fires."

Combining with the lack of rainfall are extreme drought conditions on the Big Island and Maui, and firefighters are raising the alarm for caution as the state heads into wildfire season June through September. Officials say residents can expect more "red flag" warning days, a warning system for dry conditions that could produce wildfires, said Ray Tanabe, warning coordination meteorologist with the National Weather Service.

Fire officials and other emergency response agencies from police to the U.S. Army Garrison Hawai'i trotted out their wildfire tools last week to remind the public that it will take a concerted effort to prevent wildfires.

Cigarette smokers shouldn't toss cigarette butts and no one should have bonfires in forested areas, Silva said.

These warnings need to be heeded, Tanabe said. This year most Leeward rain gauge sites received rainfall that was 25 percent to 50 percent below

the norm for a rainy season. Parts of Maui and the Big Island are experiencing extreme drought conditions that are among the worst in the country, according to the U.S. Drought Monitor.

"The sooner we get out to a wildfire, the sooner we can put that fire out and the more natural resources we can save," said Federal Fire Department Battalion Chief Victor Flint.

During the wildfire that burned through Waiialua in 2007, 98 percent of the native hibiscus plants, the state flower, were lost. Restoring the native flora falls upon the U.S. Army Garrison Hawai'i, which protects endangered species throughout the island in addition to the 36,000 acres on the western, central and northern portions of the island as part of its mission.

"Wildland fires are one of the largest threats to endangered species," said Michelle Mansker, a U.S. Army Garrison Hawai'i natural resources program manager. "There are about 100 endangered species in Hawai'i and we're out protecting them."

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Firefighters Dale Alejandro, front, and Chris Wamberg describe a truck outfitted to fight wildfires at the Honolulu Fire Department's training center.

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O'AHU WILDFIRES

2010* 175

2009 530

2008 420

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Source: Honolulu Fire Department



Michelle Mansker helps monitor and protect O'ahu's natural resources for U.S. Army Garrison Hawai'i.

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