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Bluestem Breezes
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Red Flag Warnings & Fire Weather Watches

Warnings and watches provided by the National Weather Service are only helpful if we as citizens understand their meaning. In Kansas, we feel we are seasoned veterans when it comes to severe thunderstorm or tornado warnings and watches. But, there are additional threats which also occur far too close to home – fire dangers.

This isn't merely a farmer and rancher dilemma. As was proven in Alma not so long ago, grass fires impact rural areas as well as cities.

K-State and Kansas Forest Service specialists Mary Knapp, Christopher Redmond, and Jason Hartman detail red flag warnings and fire weather watches:

Winter forecasts often include winter storm or blizzard warnings. Lately, the National Weather Service (NWS) weather forecasts have included a different type of warning: Red Flag Warnings and Fire Weather Watches.

A Red Flag Warning is issued for critical fire danger, and signifies that those weather conditions are occurring, or will occur shortly. These critical weather conditions consist of a combination of strong winds, low relative humidity, and warm temperatures – all which make fire suppression very challenging. Thresholds for these warnings vary by your local associated NWS forecast office (Topeka office, 20% relative humidity, sustained winds 20 mph/gusts 25mph).

A Fire Weather Watch is issued in advance of critical fire danger. These Watches signify the forecasted possibility of critical fire weather occurring in the next 24-48 hours. Some offices issue these more than others. These Watches are meant to provide you advance notice so that you can take proper precautions and/or make better decisions based upon these forecasts.

Generally, these weather conditions create an atmosphere with explosive fire growth potential. Any spark has the potential to create a large fire that will resist typical suppression efforts. Use appropriate caution, such as avoiding outdoor burning, watching for hot exhaust systems over grass, and extra care with welding or anything that might create sparks.

Note that these Warnings/Watches only occur when fuels (material that burns such as grass, leaves, cedars, etc.) are able to efficiently carry fire. During the winter, our grasses are dormant and dead. This provides an ample fuel for fire to easily carry. Therefore, most often these alerts occur between the months of October – May, until the spring rains arrive to drive grass growth again. This doesn't mean that the fire weather potential isn't there the remaining months. During periods of drought, grasses can become dormant and carry fire. These particular situations are more difficult to forecast in advance. Reports of fire carrying exceptionally well and being difficult to suppress are critical to the forecast process.

If you feel these conditions are occurring, don't hesitate to contact your local office and spread that information: Wabaunsee County Emergency Management (785-765-2662), Wabaunsee County Sheriff's Office (785-765-2217).

For additional information, visit the Extension Office (215 Kansas, Courthouse, Alma; kamayer@ksu.edu; 765-3821). For Bluestem Breezes archives, check out wabaunsee.ksu.edu.