

## Winter rains bring good, bad news for later

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### Fire season is delayed, but new weeds offer more fuel

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The region's record-setting rains this winter mean good news – and bad news – for the upcoming fire season, according to firefighters and other experts.

The good news is that our waterlogged environment is going to take longer than usual to dry out, which could push the start of the official fire season into early or mid-summer.

The bad news is that all that rain is contributing to a bumper crop of wild grasses, which could fuel a spate of grass fires once all that greenery has turned brown.

Yet the brush that fuels most of Southern California's wildfires should still be drawing in moisture through May or June, and the thousands of drought-stricken and bug-infested trees should be too soaked to ignite for months.

The official fire season each year starts when state fire officials decide the fuel conditions and weather are ripe for wildfires to begin – typically in midspring. It's the date used to rehire seasonal firefighters and reopen fire stations closed during the winter.

Lindbergh Field has recorded 21.06 inches of rainfall to date, making this season the third wettest in San Diego history – with four months left to go.

The last time it rained more than this, the Nazis were overrunning Europe and the United States was on the verge of entering World War II.

Significantly higher totals have fallen in the mountains, and several daily rainfall records have been set.

"This has been an extraordinarily wet year," said John O'Leary, a geography professor at San Diego State University. "The vegetation is going to be well-hydrated well into summer."

Other areas of California are too waterlogged at this point even to evaluate the fire threat, but San Diego County is in good shape.

For now.

"The amount of rainfall catch-up in Southern California and in San Diego definitely have helped put a dent in the drought," said Jim Wright, deputy chief of the California Department of Forestry.

That doesn't let the county completely off the hook where fires are concerned. Once the summer heat and dry winds arrive, the bumper crop of vegetation could mean trouble.

"In wet years, believe it or not, we tend to have more fires," said Rich Hawkins of the U.S. Forest Service.

And not just in the mountains and foothills.

"There's a solid crop of grasses all over the desert floor, which means we're going to be responding to a lot of grass fires in the deserts as well," he said.

Grass is the lightest, fastest burning and most easily ignited of all the vegetation in the county. The brush that feeds San Diego County's biggest and most dangerous fires probably won't be ready to burn until June or July at the earliest.

"The chaparral takes in a lot of water through June. It's not going to want to burn until July," Hawkins said. "It's in a virtually unburnable state through April, May and part of June."

Perhaps the biggest break from the rains might be the dampening effect they've had on the county's thousands of "bug-killed" trees. Pines and other trees stricken by years of drought have been killed by bark beetles, leaving them fire-prone.

Not now, said Hawkins.

"Those dead trees are soaking wet and it's going to take several months for them to dry out," he said.

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