Wildfires likely to flare in U.S. hot spots

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By Kathy Turk, Alaska Joint Information Center, via AP

A fire burns near Tanacross, Alaska, on May 26. Statewide, 260,000 acres have burned, and forecasters expect that to rise to 900,000 acres by July.

Parts of the desert Southwest, Alaska, northern Great Lakes and Gulf Coast are facing above-normal chances of significant wildfires this month, a federal agency says.

A forecast Tuesday by the National Interagency Fire Center also warned of increased fire risk later this summer for parts of Northern California and Nevada ; a large area of northern Idaho, western Montana and Wyoming; and parts of eastern Washington state.

"That area had low snowpack this winter," said Rick Ochoa, national fire weather program manager for the federal center's predictive services. "We're anticipating a hotter-and-drier-than-normal summer … so we anticipate we'll see a potentially active fire season in that area."

The forecast by the center, which coordinates wildfire response across government agencies, is intended to give local fire departments guidance in planning for the upcoming wildfire season. It is also intended to warn residents of vulnerable areas where they should clear brush and take other steps to protect their homes and other structures from wildfires.

Much of Alaska is already feeling an active fire season with 262 fires burning nearly 260,000 acres this year, according to federal figures. Forecasters expect that burn acreage to exceed 900,000 by the end of June.

Reasons for the fire threat:

• Drought persists over portions of the Northwest, Great Lakes, Alaska and leeward side of the Hawaiian Islands.

• Abundant fuel for grassland fires exists across southern Arizona, Southern California deserts and southern Nevada, leading to predictions of a four- to six-week active grassland fire season.

• Below-normal winter snowpack over much of Alaska, contributing to lower-than-normal moisture in vegetation. A warmer-and-drier-than-normal May also contributed to the largest number of Alaskan wildfires during that month in the past six years.

Above-normal fire potential was forecast for the deserts of Southern California, not including Los

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Angeles, through mid-July, and in northeastern California for August and September.

"Although much of California received abundant precipitation over the winter, northeastern California developed drought conditions that, despite the recent cool and wet pattern, are forecast to persist throughout the summer," the forecast said. "This will contribute to lower fuel moistures and higher fire danger."

Significant fire potential is seen through June over the northern Great Lakes, where precipitation was below normal in May. Significant fire potential was forecast for portions of East Texas and western Louisiana, because of drought and anticipated dryness.

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