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Lack of rain heats up Florida's wildfire risk

During times of extreme drought, Florida's natural landscape and seasonally dry climate are prime ingredients for severe and sudden wildfires. Despite torrential rain associated with Tropical Storm Fay last summer, Florida Agriculture and Consumer Services today advised that below average rainfall has significantly increased the state's wildfire risk.

During the past year, 2,894 wildfires have burned nearly 106,000 acres in Florida. Most of those wildfires are caused by lightning strikes, arson and carelessly discarded cigarette butts, all of which catch quickly on the state's parched lands.

The Ketch-Byram Drought Index, which measures available soil moisture and runs from 0 (saturated) to 800 (desert-like), currently stands at 511 — more than double the normal drought index for this time of year. To minimize the wildfire risk:

- Never leave any fire unattended
- Extinguish campfires and clear any area to bare soil before starting a campfire
- Report any suspicious fire by calling 911
- Never burn yard waste
- Never toss cigarettes or other lighted materials out of car windows. Sarasota County has a ordinance against throwing cigarette butts and ashes out of vehicles and violators could be held responsible for damages caused by a carelessly discarded cigarette.

"Lack of concern and lack of planning can be disastrous," says Sarasota County Fire Chief Brian Gorski. "Wildfires often begin unnoticed and spread quickly. Residents can reduce the risk to family, home and property by creating a family plan and deciding what to do and where to go before a wildfire threat exists," said Gorski.

Protect homes by establishing a minimum 30-foot noncombustible buffer zone around the perimeter. This buffer zone not helps protect your home in the critical minutes it takes a fire to pass and gives firefighters an area to work in. During a large scale fire, when many homes are at risk, firefighters must focus on homes they can safely defend.

Other steps residents can take to safeguard their homes from wildfires:

- Install heat-resistant soffit vents
- Monitor local radio and television stations for fire reports, evacuation procedures and evacuation centers
- Keep an emergency checklist handy and prepare to evacuate if your neighborhood is threatened
- During a wildfire threat, close all windows and doors, arrange garden hoses so they can reach any area of your house, and pack your car for quick departure
- Store firewood, propane tanks or gasoline as far away from the house as possible
- Clean gutters and roof of leaf litter and pine needles
- When planting foundation plants, ensure they remain at least two to three feet at maturity from any side of the house

- Plant fire-resistant plants, including saw palmetto, gallberry, wax myrtle and cedar
- Do not dispose of yard waste trimmings or dead plants on vacant lots
- Make sure smoke alarms are in good working order in your home
- Have an emergency supply kit ready

For more information about wildfires contact the Sarasota County Call Center at 941-861-5000 or visit www.firewise.org.

Media note: A PDF of the Keetch-Byram Drought Index is attached.

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