



## 'Desert-dry' Saskatchewan primed for wildfires

Jonathon Charlton: 20 April, 2016

<http://thestarphoenix.com/technology/science/dry-weather>

Saskatchewan could be in for an early wildfire season after unusually warm winter temperatures.

“It’s already started in Western Canada and the fires have been going for several weeks in Alberta. And now these massive fires in British Columbia are far earlier than normal,” said John Pomeroy, director of the Centre for Hydrology at the University of Saskatchewan.

According to NASA and Environment Canada data, average monthly temperatures in January, February and March have been four degrees warmer than normal over the Prairies, he said. Some areas have been up to six degrees warmer than normal.

Pomeroy was speaking from a field site at Banff, where he said he’s seeing “crazy” snow melt and a daytime high of 27 C, smashing the previous record for the date.

“What we’re seeing is what Western Canada looks like if you warm it up by the amounts predicted under climate change models,” he said.

Environment Canada senior climatologist David Phillips said Saskatoon has had less than one millimetre of precipitation in the last three weeks. Regina has had 6.2 millimetres.

This winter was the third warmest on record in 70 years and the second driest, he said.

“We’ve seen this high pressure area, a ridge pumping California air into the Western prairies, British Columbia and the Northwest Territories and it is bone dry. I mean it’s desert-dry air, and you’re not getting any moisture at all.”

Pomeroy said the result in Saskatchewan is an early snow melt, exposing soil to dry winds that have sucked out moisture. This has led to brush fires and forest fires in northern Alberta and northern British Columbia, where communities have had to be evacuated, he said.

Despite the risks Pomeroy cited, the province has had 18 wildfires so far this year compared to 25 at this time last year, said Steve Roberts, executive director of Saskatchewan’s wildfire management program. Six fires are active.

Most of the fires have been along the forest fringe from Meadow Lake Park through Hudson Bay, where the ground remains wet and cold despite the warm temperatures, he said.

“We’re not excessively early, or a lot.”

Saskatchewan is in a better position than its western neighbours because they’ve had even less precipitation and even warmer temperatures, Roberts said.

The rest of the wildfire season is hard to predict and will depend on the frequency and location of rain, he said, noting last year’s rash of fires was driven by both dry June weather and lightning strikes.

Pomeroy said people with acreages need to be vigilant about fires, as vegetation has yet to green up and could burn.

Saskatchewan farmers who got rain last fall should be all right, since moisture will still be available for the roots of their crops, but dust storms could be an issue, he said. These conditions could lead to a drought if the dry weather continues.

The other potential concern is the flow of the South Saskatchewan River, which is driven by mountain snow melt. If the province is facing drought, it will want to store water in Lake Diefenbaker, but that could exacerbate flooding during typical heavy June rainfalls, Pomeroy said.

*With Regina Leader-Post files*

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