

TIMBER TROUBLES

Forests
vulnerable
to fires amid
heat, drought

BY ADAM WAGNER

A nine-day heat wave and dry conditions could increase the risk of fires in Western Pennsylvania's forests, and high temperatures in the upper 90s on Saturday won't help trees ailing from lack of water, foresters say.

Drought conditions exist in parts of Allegheny, Beaver, Lawrence and Mercer counties, although the National Weather Service said most of Allegheny and Westmoreland counties are abnormally dry but not in a drought.

"When the rain comes, it comes in batches with the thunderstorms and then they dry right out again," said Jim Smith, district forester of Buchanan Forest in parts of Bedford, Franklin, Fulton and Somerset counties.

Dry conditions this week sparked a lightning fire in a Bedford County forest. Smith said fire companies responded to about 12 calls in the past two weeks, though he didn't know whether lightning or park visitors started the fires.

The region's fire seasons typically run from March 1 to May 1 and then from Oct. 1 to Nov. 1, but park officials are concerned about the effects of the summer heat. The dry soil could result in fires lasting significantly longer than usual.

"When they do burn this time of year and it's so dry, they burn into the dust in the ground," Smith said. "And they smolder there until they get an oxygen source and then they flare up."

To prevent fires from re-emerging, rangers return to sites the next day.

Younger trees are particularly susceptible to heat.

"Their roots are so shallow, and the soil dries out," Smith said, adding that arborists can tell a tree is ailing when its leaves start to yellow.



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Meredith Watson of Albuquerque cools off in River Front Plaza fountain at the David Lawrence Convention Center, Downtown.

Ed Callahan, district forester of Forbes Forest in Allegheny, Fayette, Greene, Washington and Westmoreland counties, and part of Somerset County, said rangers have not noticed heat-related problems but, "If there's any disease or stress that's on the tree, this heat would compound it."

Mike Zwier, a weather service meteorologist in Charleston, W.Va., said although northern West Virginia and eastern Ohio are not in a drought, they, too, are experienc-

ing abnormally dry conditions.

"A drought's more of a long-term thing — you build into it," Zwier said.

Whether the heat technically brings drought or not, trees feel its effects, Smith said.

"Trees are just like people," he said. "They intake water and they transfer it out, and in the heat, they transfer that much more."

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