FISCAL NOTES

A Review of the Texas Economy from the Office of Susan Combs, Texas Comptroller of Public Accounts

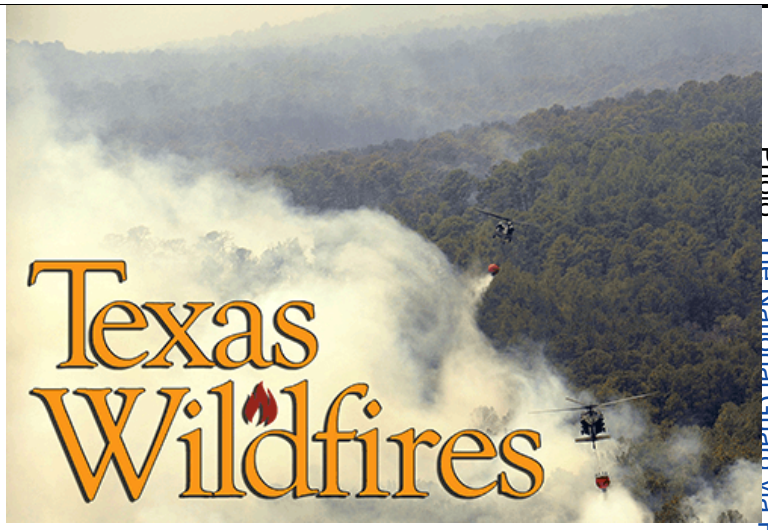

Photo: The National Guard via Flickr

Environmental, Financial Losses Still Fresh on Texans' Minds

By Michael Castellon

The summer of 2011 was a dark and devastating time in Texas. By Labor Day, wildfires had affected every part of the state. Many areas throughout Texas' central and eastern regions were left scorched and barren.

The Bastrop County Complex fire alone, fueled by drought and strong winds driven by Tropical Storm Lee, swept through more than 34,000 acres, killing two and destroying almost 1,700 homes. Bastrop State Park sustained massive damage. Insured losses, as estimated by the Texas Insurance Council (TIC), topped $325 million, making the Bastrop fire the costliest in Texas history.

More broadly, 2011 was the costliest year for wildfires by a wide margin, with insured losses of $500 million, according to TIC. (By contrast, 2009 previously was the costliest year, with $115 million in insured losses.) FEMA recently reimbursed Texas for almost $48 million in costs related to fighting the 2011 wildfires.

In late August of this year, 88 percent of Texas remained in drought conditions, and many remain concerned about threats of wildfire in the autumn.

With the memory of the 2011 fires still fresh in their minds,

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Texas wildfire experts are monitoring conditions across the state in the hope of escaping the 2013 fire seasons with as little damage as possible.

Texas Fire Seasons

“In general, Texas has two traditional wildfire seasons,” says Tom Spencer, head of Predictive Services for the Texas A&M Forest Service. “There’s a winter/spring season, and there’s a late summer/early fall wildfire season that occurs from July through September.”

In 2011, however, there was no definitive break between the winter/spring and summer/fall fire seasons. Dry conditions continued through the Labor Day weekend, when fires were further fueled and spread by the winds of a tropical storm.

The Forest Service constantly analyzes weather conditions, wildfire events and the amount of vegetative fuels present to assess wildfire risks. It also assists state and local officials in preparing for fire dangers, and publishes an array of data to assist other agencies and scientists.

“Summer [and fall] fires are generally fuel-driven fires, primarily in forest and brush, brought on by hot and dry weather,” Spencer says. Such fires are more likely in Texas’ central, north central and eastern regions. During the winter months, Spencer says, conditions favor fast-moving grass fires driven by wind and low humidity over the rangelands of central and west Texas.

Fuel-driven fires usually are not as big as the wind-driven fires of winter and spring, but are of high intensity and can burn for several days.

“If the fuel loading is there, you could have a fire that gets big quickly and really challenges local resources,” Spencer says. “That’s what we see in just about any year like 2011, 2008 or 2009, when we had very active fire seasons.”

An aerial view of the Lost Pines region of Central Texas from August 2012. The area remains in recovery since wildfires swept through the area in 2011. Photo by author.

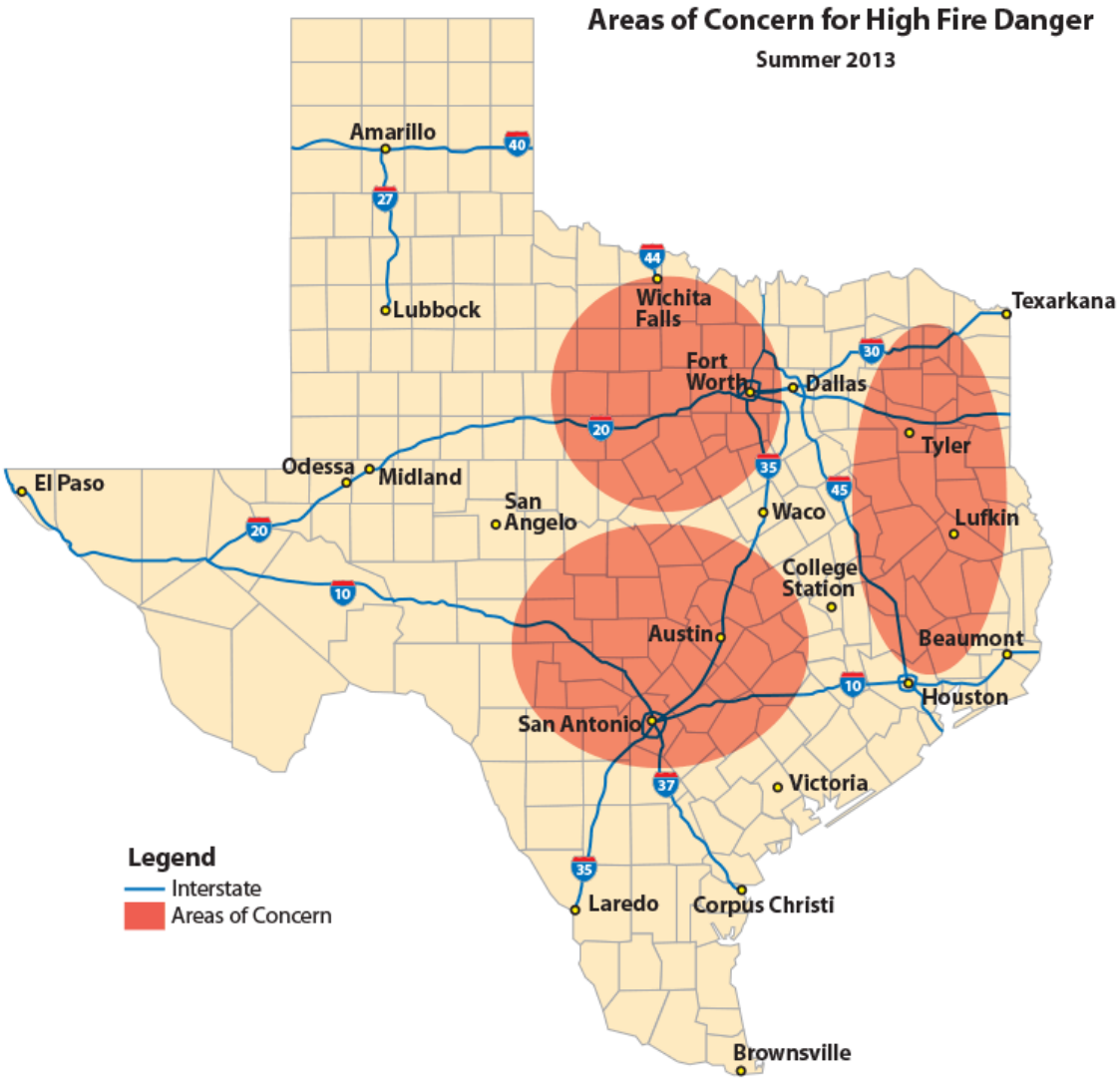
Could the Fires Return?

Predicting fires and weather patterns is a complex business. But one indicator of what may be in store for Texas this fall is fairly straightforward.

While drought conditions contribute greatly to wildfire risk, extended drought conditions can actually suppress the development of grasses and other potential fuels.

“The 2013 winter-spring cycle was close to normal,” Spencer says. “Since October 2010, we’ve been in a drought, and even though we’ve had some rain, we’re still below normal on our rainfall for the year. Because we never really recovered from this drought, we just didn’t have the loading out there in terms of grass fuels.”

AREAS OF CONCERN FOR HIGH FIRE DANGER • SUMMER • FALL 2013



Source: Texas A&M Forestry Service

Spencer and his team remain concerned about at-risk areas, including the eastern Hill Country, Central Texas timber brush areas, areas west of Dallas-Ft. Worth, near Possum Kingdom and virtually all of East Texas.

"All of those areas are still at risk," Spencer says. "Ninety-degree heat can dry out anything quickly. What we're hoping for is [rain] events at the right time to prevent this from being severe. That's what we're hoping for, but we still have some time to go. We could still see some active fires before the middle of September, when the fire season typically runs out." **FN**

Learn more about Texas wildfires, and view current wildfire risks and events across the state by visiting the Texas A&M Forest Service online.

Visit the Texas Interagency Coordination Center online to view

weather warning maps, predictive weather tools and reference materials.

Some areas of Bastrop State Park are still closed to visitors but most areas are now open to the public.
Park photos by staff. Headline photo by National Guard/Flicker.

Volunteer groups such as the student-led Aggie Replant group have spent time cleaning out debris and planting new trees. Photo by Igor Kraqguljac, courtesy of Texas A&M Forest Service.

Be Prepared

For Communities and Local Governments

The Texas A&M Forest Service publishes the Community Wildfire Protection Plan Guide (PDF) to help communities develop wildfire protection plans. The guide discusses mitigation strategies such as hazardous fuels reduction and planning and zoning issues.

Protecting Your Home

The Insurance Institute for Business and Home Safety publishes assessment and risk tools and checklists to help you prepare your home and property for the threat of wildfires. The site also features a mobile app to aid in disaster planning.

The U.S. Fire Administration provides wildfire preparation tips and other information online. Learn evacuation strategies and emergency supplies preparation, and download a wildfire preparation guide.