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## ABUNDANCE OF RAIN BRINGS TEPID START TO GRASS FIRE SEASON

JORDAN SNOBELEN

The hissing and sizzling of farm land giving way to plumes of smoke billowing under a hard sun is so predictable for rural, volunteer fire departments.

Grass fires have their own season; running parallel to, and at once interchangeable with the arrival of spring and hot, dry weather.

In 2018, the North Huron Fire Department responded to 16

See EXPERTS, page 6



Huron-Bruce MPP Lisa Thompson speaking at the 2017 IPM in Walton. See page 5.

Kelsey Dunbar/photo

## LISA THOMPSON MOVED TO NEW MINISTER ROLE IN PROVINCIAL CABINET SHUFFLE

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# EXPERTS SAY CLIMATE CHANGE WILL IMPACT FIRE IN LONG-TERM

Continued from page 1

open-air, grass or field fires, four of which were burning complaints, said Fire Chief Marty Bedard, who is also chief for the Huron East department.

"We had a really dry spell in July, and we responded to quite a few fires," Bedard said of last season.

This year, the department has responded to three open-air burning calls, two of which were for complaints, said Bedard.

## An abnormally wet season

Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada's most recent Agroclimate National Risk Report says seeding is up to six weeks behind normal, with many fields still too wet, needing several weeks to dry out. Data from the same agency and Environment and Climate Change Canada, show precipitation levels in the Wilmet area ranging from 15 to 35-millimetres above average, with a Kitchener-Waterloo weather station having accumulated 205.4-millimetres of precipitation between April 1 and June 17.

Geoff Coulson, a warning preparedness meteorologist with Environment and Climate Change Canada, said year-to-year changes are common. He said this year has been "quite a different story in regards to precipitation and temperatures," due to a jet stream lingering over the lower great lakes, instead of tracking north, in what he called a "very stubborn pattern." As a result, we're seeing the "unsettled conditions" we've all been complaining about - a flip-flop between sunny and rainy days - which Coulson expects to continue for the remainder of June.

Environment and Climate Change Canada's three-month seasonal forecast, released at the end of May, tells a story of tem-

**QUESTION:**  
WHAT FORCES  
CONTRIBUTE TO  
THE NUMBER  
OF GRASS FIRES WE  
EXPERIENCE EACH  
SEASON?

**CONCLUSION:**  
A COMBINATION OF  
WEATHER CONDITIONS,  
MALFUNCTIONING  
EQUIPMENT AND HUMAN  
ERROR.

peratures below seasonal, and levels of precipitation on par with, or below expected averages throughout June, July and August. Coulson says more time is still needed to properly speculate about the potential for midsummer grass fires.

## Grass fires and climate change

Studies are predicting marked increases in temperatures and human-caused fires in Ontario. There will also be more lightning strikes and a lengthening of fire seasons in a warming world connected to climate change. In Saskatchewan, unprecedented dry conditions have already encouraged 132 fires this year.

David Phillips, a senior climatologist with Environment and Climate Change Canada, has been watching Canada's weather for more than 50 years, and cautions that models are forecasting an increase in air temperature due to climate change. More drier days without rain could be on the rise.

For every one-degree rise in air temperature, Phillips says the atmosphere has a seven-percent increase in how much moisture can be held and dropped, meaning it will



Torstar file photo

South Bruce fire fighters are pictured responding to a call in 2015.

take longer to reach a level of saturation needed to rain. When it does rain, there will often be more of it, but with more time between rainy days.

"Amounts [of rain] aren't as crucial as frequency," Phillips said. "Twenty-five-millimetres to one-inch of rain per week would be ideal to prevent grass fires from occurring."

During dry periods, the dirt surface hardens, becoming like pavement, allowing water to run off and preventing the absorption of moisture.

Phillips said he doesn't see how anyone could argue the potential for grass fire occurrences wouldn't rise.

## Getting close to the flames

Dr. Mike Wotton is a fire behaviour research scien-

tist with the Canadian Forest Service and the University of Toronto's fire lab where he's currently researching grass fires in Southwestern Ontario.

Wotton says fuel moisture and wind are the most important predictors of how a grass fire will behave.

In the midsummer when water is lowest, plants "cure off," sending nutrients back into the root system for next season, leaving the plant in prime burning condition, with a moisture level around five-percent. That's a drastic decrease from the beginning of the season, when new-growth plants can hold three times their weight in water.

As wind fans across an open and exposed burning fields of light, dry fuel, flames are bent over and

pushed onto other plants. Each piece of fuel only burns for around 20 to 25 seconds, said Wotton, but it's an energetic fire that burns quick and hot. Provided there's enough fuel and no breaks like large roadways, a grass fire could cover 10 kilometres every hour in a strong, sustained wind.

When the first flare-up of the season inevitably arrives, volunteer firefighters from Wingham and Blyth's 45-member roster will respond to try and corral what is often a prevent-

able fire.

Bedard says field fires are particularly challenging to work with and that farmers are likely "going to lose a lot" because of the large, open area firefighters are forced to contend with. "They're hard to put out once they get going."

Firefighters are usually able to get the upper hand when a fire hits a fence line or spreads into a field with a heavier crop which proves more difficult to ignite, slowing the fire's spread.

Bedard says the cause of the fire calls usually results from residents burning waste or brush, but overheating machinery also contributes to the problem.

"We're seeing more and more burning garbage ... that's what I really don't like, and in most cases it's just to save money, and it gives us a lot of headaches," Bedard said.

Smoke from burning improper fuels produces a thick, heavy and black smoke which Bedard said can be seen for a long distance, bringing in emergency calls, or drifting into neighbouring areas prompting complaints.

In most cases, Bedard says the fire department doesn't issue a fine or charges for being called out, opting instead for a warning letter. But for repeat offenders, the story could be different.

"We have been inundated with rural burn calls," Bedard said of people calling in to advise of a burn. Before conducting an open burn, residents are asked to contact the fire department at 226-523-9500.

## STORY BEHIND THE STORY

When writer Jordan Snobelen was freelancing full-time as a photographer, he attended a bunch of grass fires on farmland every single season to the point where he knew once a weekend there would be some farmer losing out on tens of thousands of dollars worth of product. For some farmers, it ruined their season. Wanting to learn more about how grass fires start and the damage they cause, Jordan spoke to local fire officials, weather and fire experts for this piece.