

Hurricane Michael Left a Serious Fire Danger

G.B. Crawford: Residents of Florida's Panhandle must contend with yet another danger as they struggle to recover from Hurricane Michael. The huge volume of timber the storm knocked to the ground last October has become a highly combustible fuel for wildfires. A wildfire in March scorched 500 acres in Bay County before it was suppressed.

Florida State Forester Jim Karels has overseen wildfire control efforts for many years. He recently discussed the fire threat created by the storm.

Jim Karels: Hurricane Michael had significant impact to the Panhandle of Florida as well as into Georgia and Alabama – about 2.8 million acres of impact to forest lands alone in the Panhandle there and critical fire danger in anywhere from about one-and-a-half million acres to two million acres of that land.

Fuel loadings – that's how we talk in the fire business about the number of tons per acre on the ground. In that area where there were well-managed private forest landowners and private farmers who burned their land and managed it well, on average there was probably about four tons per acre prior to the storm. Now there is in many cases upwards of to a hundred-plus tons of fuel on the ground per acre.

Crawford: The fuel loading presents a constant hazard. Low rainfall will only add to the potential for catastrophic fire. Karels said the best defense against such a disaster is to support the private landowners and agencies involved in reducing the fuel load. He is optimistic that federal assistance for this massive work will be forthcoming.

Karels: If we can help the forest landowners and the farmers get back in there, get their land cleared, and get it back into working forest landscapes and working farms again, that goes a long way in reducing the fire threat.

Crawford: Karels said that all property owners in the region should try to maintain clear lanes of from 30 to 50 feet between heavy vegetation and property boundaries or residential lots. This strategy helps to protect homes and buildings and also aids in the control of wildfire. The Florida Forest Service is already busy working to support the cleanup on major forestlands.

Karels: We're working with the landowners in the Panhandle. We're asking them to sign up, to call us, we are going out, looking at their property and evaluating it, and ...we're opening their fire lanes and opening their forest roads so we have access in there so we can start to break up those fuel beds. We are better able to get in there if there is a fire threat. What it does is, it gives them access back into their property.

Crawford: The fire danger could remain an acute problem in the Panhandle for years unless there is a collective intervention. Without government assistance, the necessary clearing and other protective land management may not be possible.

Karels: We could have very large fires and very large, costly fires if the weather conditions line up and it could be upwards of 10 years of impact if we don't start to clean it up. The bad thing is, this could happen anywhere in Florida.

This is G.B. Crawford for Florida Farm Bureau's *Newsline*.