

# DRY SPELL SPARKS WILDFIRES ACROSS HIMACHAL

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Tough to control: Smoke rises from a forest fire on a hill near Dharamshala in Himachal Pradesh. APAP

The prolonged dry spell coupled with unusually high temperatures in recent days has triggered many wildfires in Himachal Pradesh, destroying several hectares of forest cover across many parts of the hill State.

The early onset of summer this year in the hills posed a major challenge to the State government's efforts to control forest fires and with dry weather conditions and high temperatures expected to continue, the task has become more difficult.

## 719 incidents

According to government data, till April 28 this year, as many as 719 incidents of forest fires have been reported across the State, affecting close to 5,662 hectares under forest circles of Shimla, Chamba, Bilaspur, Dharamshala, Hamirpur, Kullu Mandi, Rampur, Nahan and the Great Himalayan National Park at Shamshi in the Kullu region. The estimated loss so far has been pegged at around Rs. 1.40 crore.

In 2018-19, the State witnessed as many as 2,544 forest fire incidents while in 2019-20 the figure was down to 1,445. In 2020-21, there were 1,045 forest fire incidents and in 2021-22 as many as 1,275 fire instances were reported.

"We are witnessing a prolonged dry spell this year; there's hardly any moisture in the soil. High atmospheric temperature and dryness offer favorable circumstances for a fire to start in the forest. The unusually warm weather is a big reason for the spurt in fires," Ajai Srivastava, Principal Chief Conservator Forest with the Forest Department told *The Hindu*.

"The maximum number of forest fires are human-generated — many accidental but a few deliberate ones. In several areas, there is a practice of burning the pasture lands to get rid of the dry leaf litter to ensure fresh grass growth for livestock. Usually, when there is intermittent rainfall, such fires do not go out of control but when there's prolonged dry weather, many of these fires go out of control," Mr. Srivastava explained.

"We are taking all necessary steps to curb fire incidents. The challenge is big in the hills as the mountainous terrain makes it very difficult to control fires. Reaching the site of forest fires which are often away from a roadhead is a difficult task, but at most places where the fire incidents have occurred, the situation is under control. We regularly sensitise people and seek their help in forest fire control and management," he said.

## Rains unlikely

Immediate relief from the raging fires and billowing smoke is unlikely as the dry weather is expected to continue prevailing for at least the next fortnight. According to India Meteorological Department (IMD), the maximum and minimum temperatures have been hovering appreciably above normal in most parts of the State and the trend is unlikely to change anytime soon.

"Since mid-March, the average maximum temperature has been 4-5 degrees Celsius above

normal while the average minimum temperature has been 2-3 degrees Celsius above normal at many places of Himachal Pradesh. This trend is expected to continue in the coming days as well. Both the maximum and minimum temperatures have been abnormally higher this year over a month,” said Surinder Pal, director at IMD, Shimla.

“There’s no chance of a widespread rainfall in the next fortnight at least. Scattered thundershowers are expected but dry conditions would prevail and largely the temperature is likely to be above normal,” he said.

Himachal Pradesh spans 55,673 sq km, of which 37,033 sq km are classified as forest — about 66% of the geographical area of the State.

These forests are broadly classified into coniferous and broad-leaved forests. Forests of pines are very prone to fires, especially during the summer due to the shedding of highly inflammable pine needles.

### **Vulnerable areas**

“Around 15% of area across the State is vulnerable to forest fires and pine forests are more susceptible,” said Anil Sharma, Chief Conservator of Forest with the State Forest Department.

According to a recent Parliamentary Committee report on 'Forest Fires and its effect on environment, forests, biodiversity and wildlife and remedial-preventive measures', in Himachal Pradesh, the forests are sometimes also burnt to conceal illicit felling and illicit resin tapping and encroaches and poachers also cause forest fires.

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