

Forest fire rages in Himachal; rain expected to bring relief

The fire reportedly affected 12,718 hectares of land and caused a loss of ₹4.61 crore; State government plans to form a dedicated battalion of NDRF which will be trained for firefighting to reduce losses; IMD forecasts rain in the State today

Vikas Vasudeva
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A prolonged dry spell and unusually high temperatures across Himachal Pradesh in the past month have triggered several wildfires that have destroyed hectares of forest cover and damaged biodiversity and the forest ecosystem.

The government data show as many as 1,318 forest fire outbreaks have been reported across the State this year.

The average maximum and minimum temperatures have been hovering appreciably above normal in Himachal Pradesh since May. The temperature, coupled with dry spells, poses a big challenge for the State government to control the forest fires. However, with dry weather conditions and warm temperatures expected to abate in the days to come, there is hope that incidents of outbreaks will abate.

The government data show that forest fires were reported in areas falling under the forest circles of Shimla, Chamba, Bilaspur, Dharamshala, Hamirpur, Kullu Mandi, Rampur, Na-



Worrying trend: The government data show as many as 1,318 forest fire outbreaks have been reported across Himachal Pradesh this year. PTI

han, Solan, and the Great Himalayan National Park at Shamshi in the Kullu region, affecting 12,718 hectares of land, including 2,789 hectares of plantation, causing a preliminary financial loss of ₹4.61 crore.

Long term measures
Chief Minister Sukhvinder Singh Sukhu presided over a meeting of the Forest Department in Shimla on Monday to deliberate on the fires, and directed the department to address the issue. He instructed them

to initiate long-term measures, along with immediate initiatives, to curb the problem.

He said the State government was contemplating forming a dedicated battalion of the National Disaster Response Force (NDRF) specially equipped and trained for firefighting to reduce losses in forest areas. In addition, he called for the strengthening of fire services in 374 forest beats that are highly vulnerable to forest fires.

Mr. Sukhu underlined

the need to diversify the conifer plant regions with specific plant species to help retain moisture and reduce the number of fire outbreaks. He also directed the Forest Department to conduct a study to look into the causes of fires and recommend necessary action.

Western disturbance

As the forest fires rage, relief is expected as a fresh western disturbance is expected to approach the State by June 4. "In May,



In May, the average maximum temperature was around 4 degrees Celsius above normal, while the average was 2 to 3 degrees Celsius above normal

SURINDER PAL
IMD Director

the average maximum temperature was around 4 degrees Celsius above normal, while the average minimum temperature was 2 to 3 degrees Celsius above normal at many places in the State. Both the maximum and minimum temperatures have been abnormally higher this year for over a month," said Surinder Pal, Director at the India Meteorological Department (IMD) in Shimla.

"The weather was dry and warmer, and there was hardly any humidity, which increases the probability of forest fires. However, we are expecting a fresh western disturbance on June 4, which would provide respite from the heat-wave conditions and high temperatures in most parts of the State," he said.

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