WILDFIRES

Military bases brace for greater risk of flames

Bev Banks, E&E News reporter Published: Monday, October 5, 2020



A member of the Vandenberg Hotshots works on a controlled fire at Vandenberg Air Force Base. The installation in California is among 36 listed as vulnerable to wildfires in a 2019 Department of Defense report. Airman 1st Class Aubree Milks/Air Force

Four years ago, the Canyon Fire raged through Santa Barbara County, Calif., burning over 10,000 acres on Vandenberg Air Force Base.

The wildfire damaged infrastructure at the installation and killed a Ventura County firefighter.

"We had a couple of close calls for the firefighters," said Mark Farias, the base's fire and emergency services chief.

This year, fires have surged across the western United States, killing at least 40 people and setting millions of acres ablaze (***Climatewire***, Sept. 25).

"It's been an active year" for wildland fires on the Vandenberg installation, which launches rockets and missiles for its defense missions, Farias said.

Military bases across the United States have prepared for an increased risk of wildfires from climate change and installation activities year-round.

A 2019 Department of Defense **report** on climate impacts identified 36 installations that are vulnerable to wildfires.

Only Air Force and Army installations are listed as currently vulnerable, with an additional seven Navy facilities listed as potentially at risk in the next 20 years. A majority of the threatened installations are Air Force bases.

Criteria for listing included a history of wildfires, vulnerability to drought and wind, and use of ignition sources, DOD spokesperson Chuck Prichard said in an email.

F.E. Warren Air Force Base outside Cheyenne, Wyo., was one of the bases listed as at risk. Spokesperson 1st Lt. Jonathan Carkhuff said that's probably because of high winds and drought.

"Here in Cheyenne, I believe it's referred to as kind of like the wind capital of the West," said Carkhuff.

The base's grasslands are also affected by drought, said Joshua Steen, F.E. Warren's assistant fire chief.

"It definitely increases the fire load that we have on base with the dry out of vegetation," he said.

At the Vandenberg base, a lack of rainfall makes fires more likely to spark.

"It's very warm in California. We haven't experienced a lot of rainfall, so the moisture in the vegetation is often quite low," Farias said.

Fort Bragg, in North Carolina and the military's most populated installation, was one of the four Army bases listed as at risk for wildfires. But natural causes like drought aren't the main reason.

Most of the installation's fires are a result of military activities like training exercises with live fire ammunition or pyrotechnics, said Rodney Fleming, Fort Bragg's forestry branch chief.

"Most of our wildfires, what we consider wildfires, are from our mission," Fleming said. "I mean, on occasion we may get a lightning strike that causes a fire or started some other way on [the] installation, but I would say over 95% of our fires are due to training."

What about climate change?



[+] null Claudine Hellmuth/E&E News(graphic); Department of Defense(data)

Scientists have noted that climate change creates conditions more conducive for starting fires, though it's not the only factor (***Climatewire***, Sept. 17).

Fleming acknowledged that climate change is a "reality" and said Fort Bragg is looking into how it affects wildfires and thus military readiness.

Climate change has not contributed to fires on F.E. Warren, Steen said, but the base is prepared for future impacts.

"As a missile wing, and as one that operates both vehicles as well as helicopters, we have to consider the effects of climate-related events, whether that's fire, wind, snow," Carkhuff said.

At Vandenberg Air Force Base, Farias doesn't point to climate change as much as restrictions on burning in Santa Barbara County.

"It's easy to say that climate change is the culprit, but I've been here for 20 years, and we've had bad fire seasons for a while now. But I know it's not easy to conduct our prescribed measures," Farias said.

Farias called the restrictions "overregulation" and said they limit when the base can conduct controlled burns.

He'd like Gov. Gavin Newsom (D) to take action to reduce the impact of wildfires in California.

"He can't keep having these level of losses across the state without taking some aggressive steps, whether that's to ease the burden on the regulation, whether it's to do some other activities that may be, you know, as a result of climate," Farias said.

Tony Velasquez, the wildland fire chief at Beale Air Force Base near Marysville, Calif., said in an email that "fire intensity is not expected to increase much" in the future.

In part of an email thread inadvertently sent to E&E News, the spokesperson for the base said the "military and the Air Force do not have a specific stance on climate change."

When asked for clarification, the spokesperson said, "Due to the partisan political process that can accompany topics such as climate change, guidance provided to us recommended avoidance of a specific stance to ensure we remain nonpartisan."

Why are we listed?

Two bases in DOD's climate impact report weren't sure why they were included on the wildfire risk list.

In an email, a spokesperson from Peterson Air Force Base in Colorado Springs, Colo., said the installation is "not prone to wildfires."

And at Joint Base Andrews in Prince George's County, Md., fire chief Ralph Barone said the wildfire threat there is "very, very low."

"Whatever that report is saying, is again at Andrews our risk is extremely low, and none of us had ever recalled even having a wildfire on the base," Barone said.

He added that drought is a contributing factor for fires, but Joint Base Andrews is "very developed" and wildfires are not a problem at the installation.

'Tools in the toolbox'

Bases where wildfires occur every year use several strategies to lessen the spread and damage of the fires.

"Our two biggest tools in the toolbox in terms of managing our lands for not only training but for ecosystem management is forest management thinning and prescribed burning," Fleming said.

He said Fort Bragg burns an average of 56,000 acres a year to reduce brush and help restore ecosystems.

For example, he said, controlled burns are crucial to maintaining the habitat of the endangered red-cockaded woodpecker near the base.

Climate change could put additional military facilities at risk of wildfire in the future.

Some bases not included on the report's list are currently experiencing fires on or near the installation.

Fort Hunter Liggett in Jolon, Calif., starting early last month posted warnings and updates as the Dolan Fire breached remote training areas, according to the Army installation's website.

"Do not be complacent," the base posted last week.

DOD spokesperson Prichard said there are no plans to update the congressionally mandated report unless lawmakers require it.