





**Seminole Tribe firefighters based in Immokalee battle a blaze near the rodeo grounds
March 15. (Beverly Bidney photo)**

It is fire season in Florida and 2017 is proving to be one of the driest. Since early March hot spots have been erupting all over Southwest Florida, including in Naples, Immokalee and Big Cypress.

The dry season typically goes from November through April, but the winter La Nina weather pattern, which cools the water in the equatorial Pacific Ocean and keeps wet winter storms far to the north, left Florida extremely warm and dry.

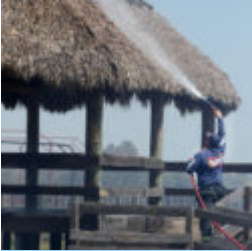
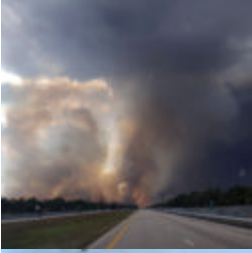
The Cowbell Fire in the Big Cypress Preserve adjacent to the Big Cypress Reservation is the largest so far with 21,815 acres burned as of April 21. More than 250 wildland firefighters from around the country, including crews from the Seminole Tribe, have been fighting the blaze since March 3. The fire is the highest priority in the country.

The Tribe's six forestry and wildland firefighters, who are part of the incident team, brought in three wildland firefighters from the Navajo Tribe and three from the Pima Tribe of Arizona and will continue to import Native American firefighters until fire season is over.

They cleared an 8.6 mile-by-eight-to-24-foot line at the southern boundary of the reservation which borders the Preserve. The team used fire to fight fire by burning the vegetation and creating a barrier between the main fire area and the reservation.



Wildland firefighters Kyle Murphy (Seminole Tribe of Florida), Justin Wedo and Coleman Bussing (Pima Agency) uses one of the Tribe's wildland fire department buggies to contain the Cowbell fire. They are on the North line of the fire using the reservation boundary line as containment to keep the fire of the fire off the reservation. Photo courtesy of wildland fire department (Beverly Bidney photo)



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"We sent the fire back into the preserve to give us more defensible space," said Grant Steelman, forestry and wildland firefighter. "It's a fast moving fire; Cowbell made a seven-mile run in just one day. Usually a fire will grow by about 1,000 acres per day; Cowbell grew 8,000 acres one day."

Fire season in Florida has cycles of about 10 years. This year is drier than 2007 and 1998, both extremely active years. Water levels are lower this year than in 2007 and the National Weather Service predicts below normal rainfall into July.

“Right now local fire managers are bracing for the season to last into July,” Steelman said. “Fast growing and hard to contain wildfires can start at any time. At this time of year everything is set up to burn; the weather, water level and vegetation.”

Fire is a natural event in Florida but houses and roads have been built in the way of the natural system.

“Fire is natural; that’s the big thing,” Steelman said. “This is just part of that natural cycle. We have support from all over the U.S. to help us protect life, property and structures. Our number one goal is safety; everyone goes home in the same way they came to work, not injured.”

Immokalee firefighters took their turn in the heat March 15 when about five acres near the rodeo arena burst into flames.

The cause of the Immokalee fire has not been determined, but it occurred in an area with some homeless people and trash. About 100 tires burned, but no one was hurt and no structures were damaged. About 250 feet of fence line and a few feet onto tribal property were damaged. The Immokalee fire department helped extinguish the flames.

“The Seminole Tribe and Immokalee fire departments have a mutual agreement to assist one another in cases of fire emergencies,” said Lt. Douglas Van Orman.

The Tribe’s Emergency Management Department warned residents to avoid parking on dry grass, avoid the use of open fire and be careful when discarding cigarettes, matches and barbeque coals.

“Watch where you drive off-road vehicles,” Steelman said. “Fires can easily be started in the dry grass. If you see fire or smoke, call 911 as soon as possible.”

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