



## **News Release**

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For IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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### **Disastrous wildfires could sweep across the Southern Plains this winter**

SOUTHERN PLAINS, Texas — The West Texas town of Cross Plains was decimated by a massive and deadly firestorm in 2005. Three months later, a similarly-destructive firestorm forced the evacuation of seven communities in the Panhandle.

More recently in 2009, another 14 counties — this time in North Texas — faced the same fate.

“We just felt helpless. It was completely unexpected,” Texas Forest Service Assistant Chief Regional Fire Coordinator Les Rogers said, recalling the fire that burned through Cross Plains. “Everybody knew we could have serious fire that day, but nobody dreamed that it would run through a community.”

Considered a true force of nature, a firestorm is a massive and destructive fire — or group of fires — that often can’t be controlled by firefighters. Much like a hurricane or tornado, it can’t be stopped. All you can do is get people out of the way on the day they occur.

During just the last five years, 10 firestorms — also known as Southern Plains Wildfire Outbreaks — have been documented. These day-long firestorms have resulted in 287 fires that burned 2.5 million acres, destroyed 1,065 structures and killed 22 people.

Texas Forest Service fire officials and National Weather Service fire weather forecasters are predicting that such a storm could happen again, possibly this winter. As a result, Texas Forest Service is launching a new website — [www.texasfirestorm.org](http://www.texasfirestorm.org) — and 12-minute informational video to help the public understand firestorms and why they happen, and learn what they can do to protect themselves.

“When it occurs, it’s devastating to an area. It takes lives,” said Greg Murdoch, senior meteorologist and certified fire weather forecaster for the National Weather Service in Midland. “Being proactive is going to be critical to saving life and property.”

Conditions must be just right for these devastating wildfires. Occurring mostly in winter and spring, it takes the perfect mix of low relative humidity, strong winds, an abundance of dead grass and other weather factors to produce the Southern Plains Wildfire Outbreak pattern. When that pattern develops, it means conditions are ripe for a firestorm. Once a firestorm ignites, the weather is in control.

As its name implies, the weather pattern and resulting firestorms occur in the Southern Plains, an area that spans from eastern New Mexico west to the Dallas-Fort Worth area, and from Oklahoma south to the Texas Hill Country. However, the Interstate 20 corridor leading from just west of Abilene to the Dallas-Fort Worth area — and 100 miles north or south of it — seems to be a particular hotspot.

Meteorologists can predict these weather patterns and issue warnings several days ahead of time, which should give residents in high-risk areas time to evacuate should they need to do so. That’s why it’s key to be prepared in advance, fire and weather experts said.

“The impact could be devastating to the people who find themselves in such a situation,” Texas Forest Service Predictive Services Department Head Tom Spencer said, noting that he hoped the website and video helped people understand the severity of firestorms. “We hope they take it seriously and they’re prepared to evacuate if asked to do so. If local officials tell you to leave, you have to go.”

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**Firestorm website:** [www.texasfirestorm.org](http://www.texasfirestorm.org)

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