CalFire trains in anticipation of early fire season

By Richard Chang, Sacramento Bee

Seasonal firefighters were at work in Jackson on Thursday, finishing up a weeklong fire training academy where they practiced forming firebreaks, hand tool safety and deploying fire shelters.

“We’re running two weeks ahead of schedule due to the dry weather,” said Robert Withrow, battalion chief for CalFire’s Amador, El Dorado and Sacramento unit, who oversaw the training. “Fire activity is going to start real soon.”

The early training by the CalFire was prompted by an unusually dry winter and spring, combined with recent high winds that have created near-perfect conditions for wildfires. In addition to the academy in Jackson, the unit for Nevada, Yuba and Placer counties will start May 6.

CalFire spokesman Daniel Berlant said the department has “already responded to 660 wildfires statewide this year,” 200 more than the average.

“Just because we’re not in summer doesn’t mean there isn’t a fire danger,” he said.

Fire season typically starts June 1 for Northern California, but this year, that “could be moved up to May,” Berlant said.

CalFire is dispatching units weekly to monitor the moisture contained in grass, brush and timber – considered a big indicator of how intensely and quickly a wildfire will burn.

Firefighters won’t get relief from Mother Nature anytime soon.

The National Weather Service is predicting dry conditions through the month.

“We don’t have any real chance of precipitation at least for the next week or two,” said Craig Shoemaker, a forecaster with the weather service in Sacramento.

The situation is particularly dire this year because the season’s precipitation occurred in November and December. January, February and March stayed relatively dry.

As a result, the “lack of rainfall has allowed grass and brush to dry out,” Berlant said, adding that high winds are exacerbating the situation.

Sacramento’s precipitation levels are 81 percent of normal for the year, while the Sierra is at 82 percent, according to the weather service.

“It’s unlikely we’re going to make that up. May is a fairly dry month,” Shoemaker said.

In some areas of the state, precipitation is only 20 percent to 30 percent of normal. Drought conditions are likely to return to California and will “significantly” worsen during summer, said Tom Rolinski, a meteorologist with the U.S. Forest Service’s predictive services program.

“Certainly the potential is going to be there for more fire activity and larger fires because we’ve had two dry years,” Rolinski said.

In Southern California, where fire season began two weeks early on April 15, firefighters on Wednesday contained a blaze in Monrovia that they had been battling for five days, but not before it had charred 125 acres.

The fire started Saturday in a backyard with a garden tool that “somehow sparked” nearby brush, Monrovia city spokeswoman Jennifer McLain said.

At least a dozen fire departments were called in, and at one point several hundred homes were threatened.

Last year, CalFire responded to 5,800 wildfires that burned 140,000 acres. By comparison, 2011 saw 4,600 blazes that engulfed 57,000 acres.

So far, the agency has spent $168 million in emergency money taming the flames for the fiscal year beginning July 2012. That figure is projected to grow to $215 million when the period ends June 30.

CalFire, however, is responsible for protecting only one-third of the state, with the other two-thirds under the jurisdiction of cities or the U.S. Forest Service.

Rolinski noted that many wildfires are started by humans, either intentionally or accidentally. “It could be hot metal underneath a car or mowing a lawn,” he said.

The 2012 Robbers fire was sparked when Sacramento resident Bryon Craig Mason threw an illegal firework into a remote Placer County swimming hole. The fire stretched 2,630 acres and destroyed four structures.

Mason was released from custody earlier this month after his lawyer successfully argued that the fire wasn’t started willfully and maliciously.

CalFire is asking the public to clear dead brush and other combustible vegetation from around houses, especially in rural areas.

“It’s not going to take much for a fire to quickly escape and require us to respond,” Berlant said.