

Hottest technology deployed in fight against wildfires

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[Enlarge](#) By Khampha Bouaphanh, AP

A forest fire burns near Sedona, Ariz., on June 1. Firefighters are using digital technology and satellites to help fight what may be the worst wildfire season in six years.

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- Wildfire resources, information
- Graphic:** Dry thunderstorms spark fires



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A helicopter fills its "Bambi bucket" out of a swimming pool behind a house at the La Barranca Fire near Sedona, Ariz., on Friday.

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By Nick Martin, USA TODAY

As firefighters brace for the worst wildfire season in six years, they're hoping satellites and digital technology will keep them ahead of the blazes.

A wildfire technology consultant says crews across the nation will be watching to see whether these cutting-edge tools, being tested in the West, give firefighters a leg up this season.

One team in Moreno Valley, Calif., has been using handheld personal digital assistants in the field and satellite-linked computers in their fire engines since spring to fight fires for the U.S. Bureau of Land Management.

The combination allows the team to track a fire's movement, pinpoint firefighters on the scene and predict how a fire spreads, fire management officer Ron Woychak said.

"It allows us to make better decisions on the ground and safe decisions," Woychak said. "To me, that's the bottom line."

With the start of wildfire season this month in the West, the new tools come at a critical time for firefighters nationwide.

A drought in the Southwest and a dry spell from the Plains to the East could mean some of the worst destruction since 2000's landmark wildfire season, when more than 8 million acres burned nationwide.

Already this year, wildfires have scorched 2.5 million acres — four times the average by this date most years and more than double by this date in 2000, according to the National Interagency Fire Center.

Among other innovations:

- In Missoula, Mont., researchers at the federal Fire Sciences Lab are working to digitally map the vegetation of the entire USA. The maps can help judge how fast and in what direction a fire might burn. The project is hailed as one of the most ambitious of its kind.
 - In Los Angeles, city firefighter Steve Robinson uses a high-definition, infrared camera on board helicopters to beam up-to-the-minute location and temperature data to firefighters on the ground.
- "People are going to be keeping a real close eye on what these technologies are doing and how they are being used to stop wildfires," said Mike Archer, a technical consultant for California-based Wildfire Research Network, a non-profit public safety and research organization.