WILDFIRES ALSO WREAK HAVOC ON WATERSHEDS AND AGRICULTURE

Relatively new research has been aimed at the impacts of wildfires on the quality of drinking water and on water dependent natural resources including agriculture, according to the United States Geological Survey (USGS).

By the end of August, there are more than 90 large fires that have torched more than 1.6 million acres across 13 states, according to the National Interagency Fire Center. The 2002 Hayman fire remains Colorado’s largest at 137,760 acres. This year’s Pine Gulch fire, burning north of Grand Junction, continues to inch toward that record in acreage.

In the last several decades, both the incidence of large wildfires and the duration of the wildfire season across much of the United States have increased. Approximately 80 percent of the USA’s freshwater resource originates on forested land, and more than 3,400 communities rely on raw water that originates in watersheds on forest lands. Thus, the potential impacts from wildfire occurrence on the quantity and quality of runoff used for source water and to support fisheries and aquatic habitats are considerable.

For example, water providers spent more than $26 million on water quality treatment, sediment and debris removal, and related issues after two recent wildfires in Colorado. Wildfires affect many facets of the source water delivery system, ranging from immediate effects during a fire to long term alteration of watersheds. During a fire, interruption of electrical power and access to ambient water quality monitoring equipment, and stream diversion and monitoring locations are common. Because existing water quality cannot be adequately determined or is adversely affected, source water suppliers are often forced to shift to stored water or other secondary water supplies. These sources tend to be of lower quality, which can necessitate pretreatment actions and processes at considerable additional cost. Runoff from burned areas contains ash and other contaminants, which may have significant effects on the chemistry of receiving waters such as lakes, wetlands, reservoirs, and rivers. Runoff from burned areas also produces higher nitrate, organic carbon, and sediment levels.

Visit www.usgs.gov for more info.

Conservation CORNER
GETTING YOUR YARD READY FOR FALL

Be aware that water needs of plants (including grass) drop dramatically in the fall. Over-watering in the fall can lead to plant disease and fungal problems.

Outdoor watering should be cut back significantly. Cooler weather and seasonal rains make it possible to stop all supplemental irrigation.

Avoid watering during any form of precipitation.

Your landscape irrigation should drop to nearly zero in the winter because only potted plants and other winter annuals and trees need occasional watering.

Late summer and early fall is a good time to replace mulch around winter plants and especially around trees. Mulch helps plants retain water and protect roots in colder temperatures.

CURRENT RIDGWAY RESERVOIR LEVEL: 66% FULL