Bracing for the worst

By MAUREEN DOLAN mdolan@cdapress.com | Posted: Saturday, August 29, 2015 12:15 am

With heavy winds, extremely dry conditions and a chance of lightning strikes in the forecast for Saturday, firefighters throughout the region are on high alert.

Meteorologist Randy Mann said strong winds, some rain showers and possibly some thunderstorms are expected.

“We could see gusts of 50 mph on Saturday,” Mann said.

He said the winds are expected to decrease a bit Sunday, and rain showers are expected.

“This is extremely critical fire weather,” said Coeur d’Alene Deputy Fire Chief Glenn Lauper, in a press release issued Friday by the city.

Residents are urged to use extreme caution outdoors when conducting any activity that could cause a fire to ignite.

At the same time, fire districts and law enforcement agencies are joining forces to deal with an arsonist suspected of starting multiple grass fires and small wildfires throughout Kootenai County.

Investigators in Coeur d’Alene believe a fire set Thursday night near the vacant Garden Motel on Northwest Boulevard could be the work of the same arsonist. Coeur d’Alene Fire Department responded to the blaze at 6:40 p.m. It threatened a structure and required two fire engines and a ladder truck.

Firefighters quickly knocked the fire down. It damaged an area approximately the size of a city block, according to a press release.

“There are currently severe weather warnings and watches in North Idaho and eastern Washington with forecasts of high winds, blowing dust and reduced visibility,” stated the press release issued by the Coeur d’Alene Police Department. “This could result in toppled trees, downed power lines and hazardous travel. This kind of weather condition impedes firefighting efforts.”

Since late June, firefighters from Northern Lakes Fire District and Kootenai County Fire and Rescue responded to 17 of these fires set near the intersection of 15th Street and Woodland Drive in Dalton Gardens.

Crime Stoppers of the Inland Northwest is offering a cash reward for information leading to the arrest of the person or persons responsible for setting the fire Thursday in Coeur d’Alene. Crime Stoppers is offering rewards for the previously set fires in the Dalton Gardens area.

“There is potentially one in Post Falls that might be similar,” said Northern Lakes Fire District spokesman, Jim Lyon.
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CONTINUED — Lyon said an arson task force comprising five fire districts - Northern Lakes, Kootenai County Fire and Rescue, Coeur d'Alene, Spirit Lake and Hauser - and law enforcement agencies will meet next week to look at similarities in the fires that have been set.

The investigation has been ongoing, but there are no definite leads yet, Lyon said. He said the sheriff’s office has assigned a detective to the case.

Firefighters and police are urging residents to be on the lookout for suspicious activity and report it immediately.

Anyone with information on the suspected arson in Coeur d'Alene is asked to call the police department at 208-769-2320 or email the tipline at policetips@cdaid.org.

To report information to Crime Stoppers, call 1-800-222-TIPS or submit a confidential tip online at www.crimestoppersinlandnorthwest.org.

Free pamphlets explaining fire danger and how to protect homes and property are now available at Coeur d'Alene City Hall, the Coeur d'Alene Public Library, each of the city’s three fire stations and local grocery stores.

Helpful information, including advise