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Report: More wildfires likely

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Land burned by wildfires is projected to double in Nevada and across the West by late this century if the climate warms as expected, a conservation group said in a new report released Thursday.

Warmer springs and longer summers since the mid-1980s already have resulted in a four-fold increase in the number of wildfires and a six-fold increase in the amount of land burned compared with the period between 1970 and 1986, said the report prepared by the National Wildlife Federation.

"I see these fires as part of an ecological transition," Steven Running, a professor of ecology for the University of Montana, said of the report's findings.

"The trend is definitely there," agreed Don Feser, an official with California's San Bernardino Fire Department and a former firefighter with the U.S. Forest Service. Feser joined Running and others to discuss the report Thursday by teleconference.

Fifteen of the 20 largest wildfires in California's history have occurred since 1985, Feser said. Nearly 1.2 million acres have burned in the state during a record-setting season this summer.

More fires like last summer's disastrous Angora Fire that destroyed 254 Lake Tahoe homes can be expected despite "very aggressive" efforts to thin the forest there, Feser said.

"You're likely to see more large fires in the Tahoe area even with the fuels treatment," Feser said.

Last year was the second largest wildfire season nationally since 1960, with more than 9 million acres burned, the report said. Some 3.2 million acres burned in the Great Basin states of Nevada, Utah and Idaho.

The problem involves a combination of factors, according to the report:

- Fire seasons now are about 78 days longer than historically, with individual fires typically burning about 30 days longer.
- Longer fire seasons result as the mountain snowpack melts one to four weeks earlier than it did 50 years ago.
- Summertime temperatures in the West are projected to be 3.6 to 9 degrees higher by mid-century, with precipitation expected to drop by up to 15 percent.
- Warmer and drier conditions are conducive to widespread infestation by beetles and other insects, resulting in wide areas of dead or dying forests ready to burn.
- Increased thunderstorm intensity could increase the amount of lightning across the region by 12 to 30 percent, sparking a larger number of fires.
- A century of national firefighting policy to suppress all fires has resulted in overgrown forests particularly vulnerable to catastrophic wildfires.

More and more intense wildfires are increasingly difficult to battle, said Tom France, regional executive director for the wildlife federation.

"The ability to fight fire effectively has really diminished. In some cases, it's impossible," France said.

A number of actions are necessary to help reduce the mounting danger of wildfires, the report said. The wildlife federation is recommending that government policy makers, industry and others take steps to reduce greenhouse gas pollution associated with global warming by 2 percent per year, with a 20 percent reduction by 2020.

"We must address the root of the problem," said Amanda Staudt, a climate scientist with the wildlife federation.

The group also recommends changes in forest management policy involving selective forest thinning to reduce fire danger and adoption of a "more tolerant attitude towards fire as a natural part of healthy forest ecosystems."

The report also recommends homes in fire-prone areas be built with fire-resistant materials and that buffer zones between homes and the forest of at least 132 feet be established.

And the growing practice of building new neighborhoods in places immediately adjacent to forested areas should be re-evaluated by local governments, critics said.

"Unfortunately, some of our policy makers don't seem to take that message to heart," France said.
