

Winter wildfires in Tahoe-Reno area could become more common

By Jeff DeLong, Reno Gazette-Journal

It happened not once, but twice.

Two rare winter wildfires roared through Reno-area neighborhoods, destroying more than 50 homes, changing lives and leaving some wondering whether the destructive events might be a sign of things to come.

November's Caughlin Fire was followed almost two months to the day by the Washoe Drive Fire on Jan. 19. The fires were strikingly similar – both the result of high winds associated with a dry cold front pushing flames through brush and grass made ready to burn by an early winter of record dryness.

The combination was explosive.

"The fire behavior was intense as it can probably get," Reno Fire Chief Michael Hernandez said. "Those two fires were more destructive than any other fires we've had along the Sierra front in 50 years."

The combined disasters would be remarkable in the heart of summer but instead occurred at a time of year more closely associated with problems such as trying to keep passes open that snowstorms likely closed. For the Reno-Tahoe area, the situation was unprecedented.

Dry and windy conditions lined up perfectly as a fuse for the fires but with a warming climate, invading vegetation and more people living in fire-prone areas, could big winter wildfires become the norm?

It's impossible to say for sure, but some experts say the possibility is there.

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