

Research says wildfires worsen after decades of deficit

By Tom Yulsman, *Scientific American*, and DailyClimate.org

BOULDER, Colo. – As the West has warmed and dried over the past 30 years, headlines describing fire season have grown ever more apocalyptic: “epic” dryness, “monster” fires, new records for damage and devastation.



Angora Fire

This year is no exception. The Waldo Canyon Fire has incinerated hundreds of homes in Colorado Springs, and every indication points to another big, early start to the wildfire season.

Recent research, however, suggests these severe conflagrations could be a prelude. Climate stressors are putting increasing pressure on a “fire deficit” the West has accumulated over the past 100 years, say scientists who have compared today’s burn rates with fire activity over thousands of years. As the West continues to warm, that debt will come due – possibly with interest – triggering fires that are fiercer and harder to contain, they warn.

“If you just look at what the current climate is like, the rate of biomass burning should be much higher than what we’ve observed over the 20th century,” said Patrick Bartlein, a

climatologist at the University of Oregon and a co-author of the study, published earlier this year in the journal Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences.

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