

'Super fires' in California's future, says USFS scientist

By Edward Ortiz, Sacramento Bee

Intense and deeply destructive "super fires," like Colorado's current Waldo Canyon fire, which has claimed two lives and burned 350 homes, are almost assured in Northern California's future, according to a U.S. Forest Service scientist.

"Typically we're seeing an earlier fire season and that fire season is lasting longer," said Malcolm North, plant ecologist with the Pacific Southwest Research Station of the U.S. Forest Service. North works out of the station's Davis office.

The culprits, said North, are weather fluctuations and climate change. He said the warmer temperatures and drier winters seen recently in the region are creating ideal conditions for intense and hard-to-control fires like the Colorado fire.

"What we're seeing now is that snow reserves are less in the Sierras and runoff is happening earlier in the year," he said.

That creates drier conditions in areas where fires burn hottest – the forests. The most difficult to deal with are "crown fires," whose flames travel from one tree to another, usually at high speed. It is common for crown fires to move at 30 mph, North said.

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