

Rim Fire effects to last for decades

By Bettina Boxall, Los Angeles Times

TUOLUMNE – Tourists stopped at the Rim of the World overlook on California 120 earlier this month to take photos of the panoramic view – just as they always have.

But they stared in silence at the ashen hues of a landscape swept by the largest wildfire to burn in the Sierra Nevada in more than a century of recordkeeping. Steep canyon walls and mountain slopes that had been robed in chaparral and oak were now draped in black, spreading to the horizon in a funereal scene.

To the north, miles and miles of forest were still and lifeless, the earth scoured by flame. Millions of charred trees stood naked, their needles incinerated.

The huge Rim fire, ignited Aug. 17 by a hunter's illegal campfire, is likely to have transformed large swaths of the Stanislaus National Forest for decades to come.

Remote sensing satellite images indicate that virtually all of the vegetation is dead on nearly 40 percent of the area of the 401-square-mile blaze, which burned from the national forest into the western portion of Yosemite National Park, where it continues to smolder.

Burned chaparral and oak will quickly resprout. But where large patches of trees were killed, ecologists say it could take 30 to 50 years for the forest to reestablish itself in the shrub fields that are the first to grow. If there are more fires in the meantime, the land could permanently convert to chaparral.

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