

Drought brings early start to wildfire season

By Kate Schimel, High Country News

When Jim Stimson first spotted a fire burning 20 miles northwest of Bishop, California, on Feb. 6, he didn't think much of it. Stimson, a 40-year resident of the area and a local photographer, was leading a workshop in the hills outside of town. He couldn't remember the last time a fire in February did much damage.

But it didn't take long for him to realize this wasn't a typical February fire.

The Round Fire, as it was named, burned 7,000 acres and 40 homes before local firefighters, aided by a rainstorm, brought it under control.

For local residents, it drove home a message Westerners may finally have to get used to: Fire season isn't just confined to the months of July and August anymore, or even May through September. Over the last four decades, the season across the West has gotten two and a half months longer. Last year, rare January fires swept across southern California. And just last week, the Round Fire wasn't the only abnormally early burn to hit the West. A spate of wildfires broke out in northern Utah Feb. 8 and 9, burning a few hundred acres.

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