

Opinion: Coping with year-round fire season

By Robert Westover

There was a time when fire season for Western states meant only certain months out of the year. Not so long ago the U.S. Forest Service considered it primarily a summer problem with a few regions breaking the trend in early spring and late fall.

But climate change, according to most wildland fire experts, has turned fire season into a year-round issue.

What used to slow down fire season was winter – a long and cold time of year with lots of snow that killed off many invasive or destructive pests and filled rivers and reservoirs with ample water to supply the needs of millions living in the West.

Now winter is shorter and has far less snow accumulation in many areas. Case in point is California with near tinderbox conditions of dry wood from a decade long drought that is being recognized as one of the worst in the state's history – if not the worse. The snowpack this year was so sparse in the Golden State that some scientists from NASA are concerned that the state has literally only one year of water left.

If this dire prediction proves true, California could witness a natural resource disaster no state since the dust bowl years of the Great Depression has ever had to face. However, many other Western states in the coming years may face similar crises of water resource depletion.

To help mitigate the effects of climate change on our forests, the Forest Service is asking that visitors follow all rules to avoid starting uncontrolled fires in our national forests and grasslands. Information about what you can do to help is

available online.

The agency is also reducing hazardous fuels across 2 million to 3 million acres per year to help make wildfires easier to control. Additional information is available online.

It will take years to slow and hopefully reverse the effects of climate change on our wildlands, but it's not impossible – we just all have to pitch in.

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