

Megafires are remaking U.S. forests

By Laura Parker, National Geographic

Twisp, Wash. – The largest fire in state history swept through the eastern slopes of the Cascade Range with explosive force last summer. The Carlton Complex Fire burned more than 250,000 acres, devouring everything in its path at the hypersonic pace of 3.8 acres per second.

Until then, the top slot in the state's fire rankings belonged to the Tripod Fire, which burned up 175,000 beetle-infested acres in two months on the same slopes in 2006.

Carlton and Tripod are “megafires,” part of a wave of extreme fires that are transforming the great forests of the American West. By the end of the century, scientists say, megafires—conflagrations that chew up at least 100,000 acres of land—will become the norm. Which makes them of critical interest to researchers.

These infernos, once rare, are growing to sizes that U.S. Forest Service Chief Tom Tidwell describes as “unimaginable” two decades ago. Five alone have consumed more than 5 million acres in central Alaska since June. Washington, Oregon, California, Arizona, New Mexico and Colorado also experienced their worst wildfires in the past seven years.

So far in the Lower 48, none of the thousands of fires that have burned across the 11 Western states have grown into megafire size. But the most perilous weeks of fire season are still ahead.

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