

Drought changing fire behavior



Tinder dry terrain in California is causing explosive fires.
Photo/CalFire

By Julia Prodis Sulek, San Jose Mercury News

LAKE PORT – CalFire Capt. Scott Rohrs and his three crewmen were racing to the scene of the Valley fire when the foreboding news crackled over radio dispatch: four elite firefighters had been overrun by flames, suffering serious second-degree burns.

The fire was barely an hour old, but driven by fierce winds and the most intense, dry conditions of California's four-year drought, those men had been forced to deploy their zip-up shelter bags, survival gear of last resort.

"This is what we're getting into," Rohrs told his men from the Cloverdale Station on Saturday afternoon as they headed toward the darkening plume of smoke. "This is going to be a career fire, one of the worst ones we ever encounter."

Firefighters throughout California are encountering the unforgettable in 2015 – an epic fire season fueled by a record

drought that has turned much of the Golden State's forests into a matchbox of more than 12 million dead trees. And with global temperatures rising and the Sierra Nevada snowpack at its lowest level in five centuries, concern is growing that the unpredictable ferocity of the Valley Fire could become a new reality for the men and women who battle the blazes.

What's been so stunning to firefighters this year is the swiftness of the flames. July's Rocky Fire, about 10 miles east of the Valley fire, devoured 20,000 acres in just five hours. The Valley Fire grew to 40,000 acres in 10 hours last weekend, cracking the list of the top 10 most destructive fires in California history.

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