Climate change fingerprints all over Calif. wildfires

By Bobby Magill, Scientific American

Reports this week from the front lines of the Sand Fire in Southern California painted the scene as apocalyptic. The drought-fueled blaze was explosive, fast-moving and devastating, burning through 38,000 acres in the Santa Clarita Valley and forcing the evacuation of more than 10,000 homes.

If the state's wildfire season holds true to forecasts, the Sand Fire will be one of many catastrophic wildfires to scorch drought-stricken forests and shrublands across California this year. So far, only one wildfire has been larger – the 48,019-acre Erskine Fire, which started in June in the Sierra Nevada Mountains and destroyed 250 homes and buildings.

None of the fires haa been among the worst or largest wildfires the state has seen in recent years, but they're part of a dire global warming-fueled trend toward larger, more frequent and intense wildfires. The number of blazes on public lands across the West has increased 500 percent since the late 1970s, said LeRoy Westerling, a professor studying climate and wildfire at UC Merced.

The outlook this summer is sobering: Wildland fire potential for most of coastal California and the Sierra Nevada Mountains is above normal and is expected to remain that way through October, according to the National Interagency Fire Center.

Read the whole story