

Study: Wildfires increase sediment in watersheds

By Alastair Bland, Water Deeply

Around California, the country and the world, reservoirs are silently filling with sediment, and only a few people are thinking about it. Among them is Tim Randle, a civil engineer with the United States Bureau of Reclamation's Sedimentation and River Hydraulics Group.

"We used to be gaining water storage capacity with dam building," said Randle, who is based in Denver. "Now, around the world, the pace is slowing down as sediment builds up. This is true in the U.S., too."

According to new research from the U.S. Geological Survey, in many regions erosion rates are now accelerating thanks to wildfires and climate change. The Western U.S., which relies on reservoirs for vital water storage and flood control, will be particularly impacted.

Joel Sankey, a coauthor of the study and a USGS research geologist, says portions of the Cascade Range in Washington, Oregon and California, as well as parts of the Sierra Nevada, are likely to experience particularly dramatic increases in fire damage and subsequent erosion.

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