

# Seven Times More Very Large Fires on Forest Service Land than in the 1970's

## Higher Temperatures and Early Snowmelt Correlate with Severe Fire Years

As of August of this year, 2012 tied the record for the most acres burned by wildfires, with 8.6 million acres, an area larger than the state of Maryland, up in flames. With nearly two months of the annual fire season remaining, 2012 could set the record for the most acres burned in any year since record keeping began.

A new analysis by Climate Central, [The Age of Western Wildfires](#), shows how the massive burn of 2012, and all of its risks, is likely to be the normal in the not-too-distant future.

Assembling and analyzing more than 40 years' worth of fire data from the U.S. Forest Service, Climate Central found a clear trend of more and larger fires on Forest Service land.

And the largest fires are happening more often. Fires larger than 1,000 acres burned twice as often each year in the past decade than in an average year in the 1970s, with 100 large fires each year compared to less than 50 then. Fires larger than 10,000 acres are burning seven times more frequently, while fires even larger — more than 25,000 acres — are burning five times more frequently.

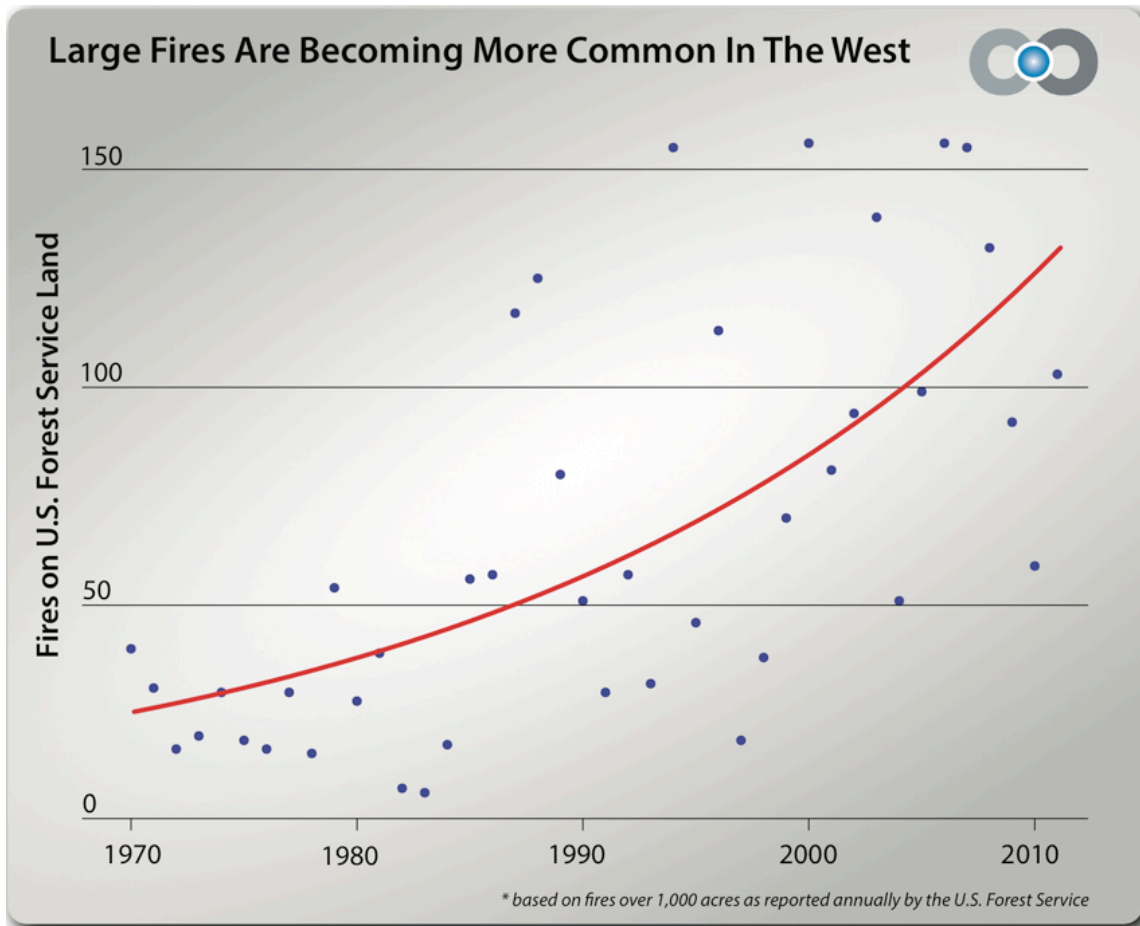
And over the past ten years, wildfires burned twice as much land area each year as they did just 40 years ago.

“Our analysis of fires on U.S. Forest Service land documents a clear, long-term trend toward more and larger fires in the American West,” said study author Dr. Alyson Kenward of Climate Central.

**On Tuesday, Sept. 18, at 1 p.m. EDT, scientists will discuss the report and the relationship between climate change and wildfire risk. Panelists include:**

- Dr. Heidi Cullen — Vice President for External Communication and Chief Climatologist, Climate Central
- Dr. Steven Running — Regents Professor/Director, Numerical Terradynamic Simulation Group, College of Forestry and Conservation, University of Montana
- Dr. Jennifer Marlon — Postdoctoral fellow, Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies

**[To join, click on this link.](#) The password is “heat.”**



The burn season is now two and a half times longer than it was 40 years ago — adding about 75 days to the season each year. Across the West, spring snowmelt comes one to four weeks earlier than in the 1970's, and spring and summer temperatures have been increasing.

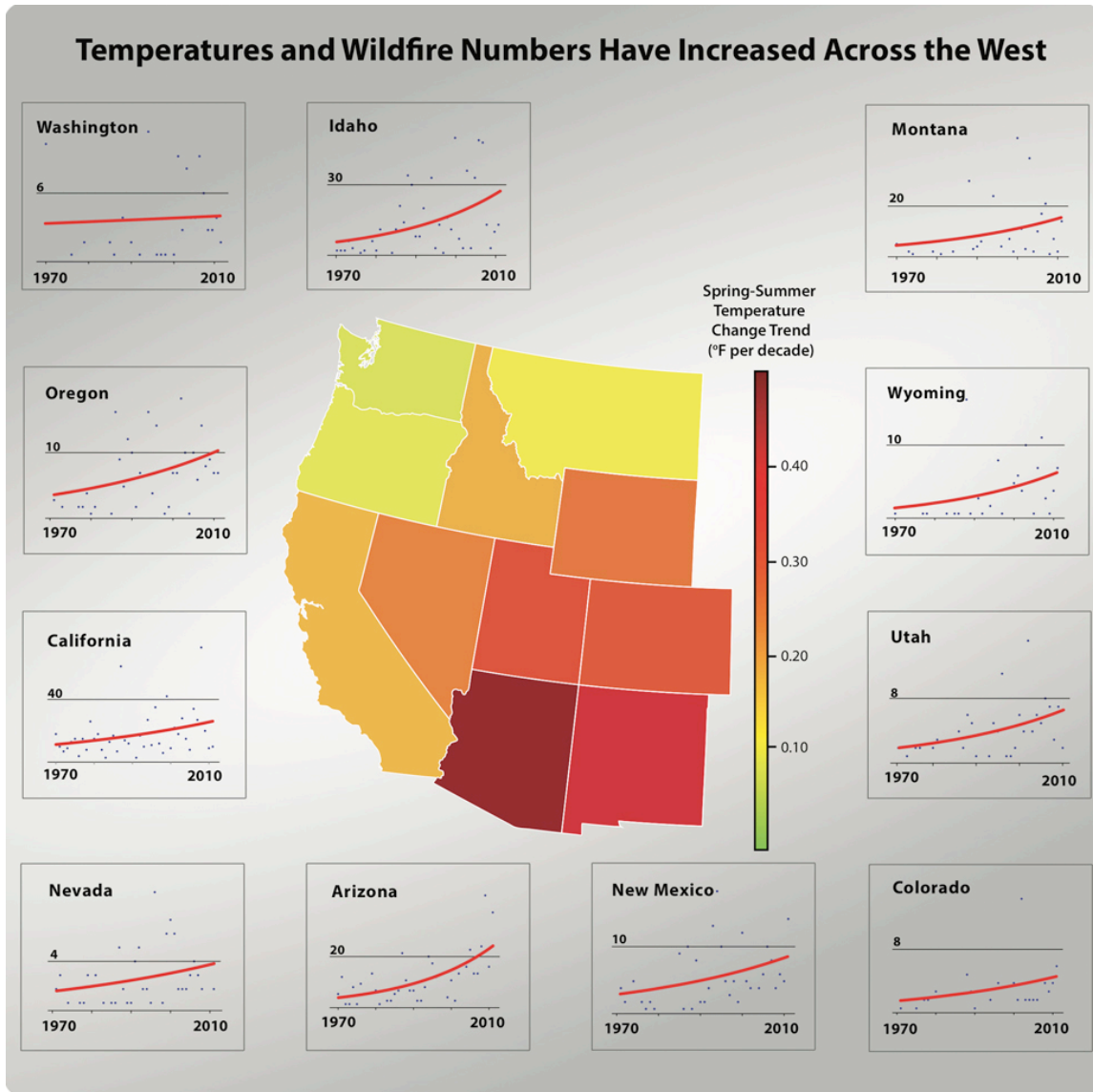
Since 1970, years with the most acres burned have typically been the years with above-average spring and summer temperatures.

“America's Western forests now see seven times more very large fires over 10,000 acres in an average year than in the 1970's,” said Kenward. “Over the same time period, spring and summer temperatures in the West have also increased dramatically.”

The report cites wildfire drivers not related to climate change, including land practices, pest infestations and day-to-day weather, but the results reinforce how warmer, earlier springs and longer summers make conditions ripe for larger and more numerous fires.

Some states will be more at risk than others. Since the 1970s, the average total of fires larger than 1,000 acres each year on U.S. Forest Service land has nearly

quadrupled in Arizona and Idaho and has doubled in every other Western state except Washington.



In addition to the report, Climate Central has developed [an interactive wildfire tool](#) to assess how this record-breaking year is currently playing out state by state.

“In the not-too-distant future, as temperatures continue to rise across the West, we’re likely to see years like this a lot more often,” Kenward said.

You can direct questions about the report to Richard Wiles, [rwiles@climatecentral.org](mailto:rwiles@climatecentral.org), 609-986-1997.