



Climate found most important in wildfires

Published: July 7, 2009 at 4:51 PM

U.S. scientists say they've determined climate -- not high temperatures or longer fire seasons -- is the most significant factor in wildfires.

Scientists at the U.S. Forest Service's Pacific Northwest Research Station and from the University of Washington said the recent increase in area burned by wildfires in the Western United States is a product of a complex relationship between climate and fuels that varies among different ecosystems/

"We found that what matters most in accounting for large wildfires in the Western United States is how climate influences the build up -- or production -- and drying of fuels," study leader Jeremy Littell of the university's Climate Impacts Group said. "Climate affects fuels in different ecosystems differently, meaning that future wildfire size and, likely, severity depends on interactions between climate and fuel availability and production."

The researchers also said their findings suggest that, as the climate continues to warm, greater areas can be expected to burn, at least in northern portions of the West. In addition, they said cooler, wetter areas that are relatively fire-free today, such as the west side of the Cascade Range, might be more prone to fire by mid-century if climate projections hold and weather conditions become more extreme.

The study, called the most detailed examination of wildfire in the United States to date, appears in the journal Ecological Applications.

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