

Global Warming Making Fires Worse, Scientist Says

By JOHN FLJECK
Journal Staff Writer

Global warming is making Western wildfires worse, a top fire expert told members of the U.S. Senate on Monday.

Combined with a century of fire-fighting that has left some forests choked and overgrown, along with people building more and more communities at the forests' edge, the

problems "are coming together in a perfect firestorm," said Tom Swethnam, head of the Laboratory of Tree Ring Research at the University of Arizona in Tucson.

Swethnam testified Monday before Sen. Jeff Bingaman, D-N.M., and the other members of the Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources. Idaho and Utah have seen their largest wildfires in the last 50 to 100

years this year, according to Swethnam. Arizona, Colorado and Oregon had that distinction in 2002, and Texas in 2006, he said.

This year's total U.S. acreage burned to date is 8.2 million acres, the second largest such number in history, behind 2006, according to the federal government's National Interagency Fire Center.

With the planet warming and more

acreage being burned, federal fire-fighting costs are soaring, Bingaman said, more than tripling in the last decade.

Scientists say human pollution — mostly carbon dioxide from tailpipes and factory smoke stacks — is trapping heat near Earth's surface, warming the planet.

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While much of the resulting attention has focused on reducing emissions of those so-called "greenhouse gases," Monday's Senate hearing was devoted to coping with the resulting problems.

Swethnam, who grew up the son of a New Mexico forester and fought fires as a young man before he began studying them, said natural climate variability has always been a big part of the story of fires in the West.

Dry years, linked to La Niña conditions in the Pacific Ocean, tend to have more fires. A century of fire suppression also plays a role, he said. Some Western forests have become choked with the sort of small trees and undergrowth that used to burn every few years in low intensity fires.

But Swethnam and colleagues who have collected and studied fire data in recent years have concluded those causes alone are not sufficient to explain the dramatic increase in acreage burned annually in recent years.

Sen. Pete Domenici, R-N.M., the committee's ranking Republican, expressed skepticism about the importance of global warming in understanding the fire problem.

"It seems to me we have always had years of drought, warm summers, early runoff of the snow pack, and when we have the right weather



MARK ZALESKI/THE PRESS-ENTERPRISE/AP

Trees explode in flames in a California wildfire earlier this month. A top scientist told members of Congress on Monday that global warming is making Western fires worse.

conditions, we experience spectacular fires," Domenici said at the hearing, which was broadcast on the Internet. "And I have no doubt that we will see the convergence of these events again in the future."

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