

Directions:

1. Mark your confusion.
2. Show evidence of a close reading. Mark up the text with questions and/or comments.
3. Write a one-page reflection on your own sheet of paper.

America's War on Wildfires

Tens of thousands of wildfires ravaged extensive areas of the country this summer. Is this the new normal?

Source: *The Week*/ September 14, 2012

How many wildfires were there?

More than 45,000, and they destroyed more acres of forest than in any year on record. An unusually mild winter that left little snowpack gave way to a hot, dry summer across much of the South and Midwest, turning huge swaths of the country into a giant tinderbox. Almost 13,000 square miles of land in California, Utah, New Mexico, Colorado, and other states — an area larger than Massachusetts — have been burned by wildfires this year. And the fire season isn't over yet. Last week, 34 large fires were still burning. Over the past decade, there have been six unusually severe fire seasons — suggesting that extensive wildfires have become the new normal. "Fire activity has definitely increased in terms of overall activity and acreage burned," said William Sommers, former director of fire research for the U.S. Forest Service.

Why are wildfires getting worse?

Climate change is clearly a factor. The past decade has been hotter in the U.S. than any in recorded history, and prolonged drought has left forests highly combustible. The spread of human development into once-remote, fire-prone areas hasn't helped. One out of every four homes in Colorado, which suffered a brutal fire season this summer, has been built in a "red zone" of high wildfire risk. This kind of sprawl leads fire officials to quickly suppress any fire that threatens human lives or dwellings, which disrupts the natural fire cycle — setting the stage for larger, more intense fires.

What is the natural fire cycle?

Wooded areas naturally accumulate lots of deadwood, leaves, pine needles, and underbrush on the forest floor. For millennia, nature's way of clearing this undergrowth came in the form of smaller fires that would periodically roll across forests, thinning them and renewing the soil. Human habitation changes that pattern, as people suppress all fires to protect lives and property. As a result, the underbrush and deadwood grow very dense — and serve as a huge store of kindling when a fire is sparked. Such fires can burn intensely and race rapidly across the landscape, defying efforts to stop them. This year, the fire season was so bad the U.S. Forest Service changed its firefighting strategy for the first time in decades.

What was the new strategy?

The Forest Service ordered all blazes to be snuffed out, no matter their size or location. In recent years, smaller blazes in remote areas had been allowed to burn, to restore the natural fire cycle. But controlling these "prescribed fires" has become more difficult because of the drought. Prescribed fires are also expensive to carry out — and federal firefighting funding has been slashed by \$512 million, or 15 percent, since 2010. So in the face of this year's extraordinary conditions, the agency decided that suppressing all fires quickly was its only option.

Does that make sense?

In the short term, perhaps. But total suppression is not only counter-productive, it's impossible. Thousands of fires still occur each month, sparked by everything from recklessly discarded cigarettes to lightning strikes. And budget cuts are making firefighting efforts even harder: The U.S. Forest Service employs about 10,000 firefighters to cover dozens of states, and relies on local crews for help. State and local government budget cuts, however, have eaten into that support. In California, for example, the state cut 750 seasonal firefighters last year, in order to shave \$34 million off its budget. In recent years, the federal government has also failed to invest in new equipment, such as the air tankers that drop thousands of gallons of water or fire retardant on wildfires. The Forest Service had 43 air tankers on call in 2000, but when some of these decades-old planes crashed, many were taken out of service, and there were just nine available tankers earlier this year. President Obama finally signed a \$24 million bill to fund seven additional tankers — but many of those will not be operational for months.

What does the future hold?

The federal government is slowly moving toward a more preventive approach, through a computerized system that would model fire-prone regions, and predict the likelihood of fires and how quickly they might spread. This would alert fire officials to do some controlled burns and take other steps to stop wildfires from getting out of control. "Simulating the fire behavior in a computer is really the future," said Mark Finney, a U.S. Forest Service researcher. But the technology has been very slow to emerge. The government originally said the prediction system would be operational by 2007, but ran into many programming problems, and now says a scaled-back version will be rolled out next year. That'll be too late, of course, for the thousands of people whose communities were destroyed in 2012, as wildfires reduced vast forests to smoldering ash. "Billions of dollars, homes, and people's lives were at stake," said Chester Joy, a retired natural-resources expert for the Government Accountability Office. "And now we're paying the price."

Punishing arsonists and fools

About 90 percent of wildfires are started by humans, experts estimate. And over the last decade, as wildfires have become more damaging, the penalties for setting them — either inadvertently or on purpose — have become more severe. Two arsonists in California now face the death penalty for setting wildfires that resulted in the loss of human life. Texas, meanwhile, recently increased the maximum penalty for arson to life in prison. States are also ratcheting up the punishments on people who start wildfires through negligence. Utah now has a law requiring those responsible for starting a fire to pay back the costs of fighting it, which typically run into millions of dollars. Some reckless fire starters are even sent to jail. William Rupp of Jones Valley, Calif., was jailed for four years in 2006 for "negligent use of a lawn mower," after the blade of his ride-on mower struck a rock. The resulting sparks ignited drought-stricken grass, sparking a major wildfire that destroyed 80 homes.

Possible WN topics

- Consider other consequences of global warming. In what other areas are we facing a “new normal”? How else is global warming changing our world?
- Do you agree with the increased penalties for those who start fires? Why? Why not?
- Google “global warming” and comment on some of your findings.