

Lukewarm wildfire season throws damper on climate-change predictions

2014 numbers below average

By Valerie Richardson

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This year's below-average wildfire season comes as welcome news for Westerners, but it's also burning a hole in the environmentalist narrative on climate change.

Although summer isn't over, and fires are burning in California and Oregon, it has been a mild year in terms of the number of wildfires and acres burned, according to the National Interagency Fire Center.

The agency reports that 2.77 million acres have burned this year as of Sept. 5, a decline from the 3.9 million acres that had burned by the same date in 2013 and less than half the 10-year average of 6.2 million acres. The number of fires, 38,451, is also down considerably from the 10-year average of 56,278.

That reduction is even more impressive given that the Pacific Northwest was hit with an above-average wildfire season. In July Washington suffered the most destructive fire in its history, the Carlton Complex Fire, which burned 252,000 acres and destroyed 300 homes in the state's north-central region.

So far the 2014 wildfire season is on pace to be the second-least destructive in the last decade, which could put a damper on the campaign to connect elevated carbon dioxide levels in the atmosphere to an increase in extreme weather events, including wildfires.

That effort is being led by the White House. President Obama's science adviser, John Holdren, says in a video released Aug. 5 on the White House website that climate change "has been making the fire season in the United States longer and, on average, more intense."

"The National Climate Assessment released in May tells us, consistent with earlier studies, that longer, drier summers are expected to continue to increase the frequency and the intensity of

large wildfires in the United States," Mr. Holdren says in the video. "In the Western United States, the average annual area burned by large wildfires has increased severalfold in recent decades. The evidence is strong that climate change is responsible, at least in part, for this increase."

Paul Knappenberger, assistant director of the Center for the Study of Science at the free market Cato Institute, argued that this year's wildfire season comes as further evidence that Mr. Holdren and others have drastically overstated the impact of carbon dioxide emissions on weather conditions.

"When these guys are making these predictions — 'Wildfires are going to get worse' — and then you have a wildfire season which is way below normal, it's ripe for coming back to them and saying, 'See? Why are you making these crazy predictions? It's not going to happen like that all the time,'" said Mr. Knappenberger.

He noted that the 2013 and 2014 hurricane seasons have also been relatively uneventful, even though those in the climate change movement have forecast that storms will intensify as wind speeds and rainfall associated with hurricanes and tropical storms increase due to global warming.

"It was a very inactive year last year and, frankly, the science is just not there to support making definitive statements about how hurricanes or how cold outbreaks are going to change in the future," Mr. Knappenberger said. "To push those things as though they're known, proven facts is just doing an injustice to the science."

Critics of the alarmist scenarios point out that the global mean temperature has remained flat for at least 17 years. Mr. Obama is slated to join other world leaders Sept. 23 at the United Nations Climate Summit 2014, but even the U.N. Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change has lowered its 30-year estimate on the level of warming, as Christopher Lord Monckton reported in January.

Jamie Henn, spokesman for 350.org, an advocacy group "building a global climate movement," declined to comment on this year's wildfire season but offered resources on the connection between wildfires and global warming, including a fact sheet from Climate Nexus.

"These wildfires are yet another indication that climate change has arrived, and the fire threat is only projected to get worse in the future. Unless we cut carbon pollution, extreme weather events like this will become more frequent in the future," says the fact sheet.

Coleen Decker, NIFC assistant program manager for predictive services in Boise, attributed this year's below-average wildfire activity to a combination of factors, starting with the virtual absence of wildfires in the Southeast as a result of cool temperatures and high moisture during the January-to-April fire season.

Wildfires were also down in the Southwest. "We never saw any extended period of warming or drying," Ms. Decker said. "They'd get a little warm, then they'd get a burst of rain."

She also said there are too many variables involved in wildfire seasons to offer conclusions on how climate change may be contributing.

"The factors are weather, terrain and fuel, and it's hard to filter out the noise and decide what's been attributed to each factor," said Ms. Decker.

That Washington, Oregon and Northern California have been hard hit by wildfires this year suggests that other factors are playing a bigger role than hotter temperatures — because it's actually getting cooler in the Pacific Northwest, said Myron Ebell, director of the Center for Energy and Environment at the Competitive Enterprise Institute.

Temperatures in the region peaked around 2007 and fell until 2013, when they ticked up slightly, according to figures from the National Climatic Data Center.

"The problem with wildfires is not climate change. For example, the number of big catastrophic fires has gone up in the Northwest, and yet the Northwest is in a cooling cycle," said Mr. Ebell. "The problem with the Western forests is there's just far too much fuel that's been built up. Under pressure from the environmental movement, we have stopped logging in our national forests."

The 1990 decision to list as threatened the Northern spotted owl has resulted in a huge reduction in the amount of timber being cut in the Pacific Northwest national forests. Timber production has dropped from 12 billion board feet to 2 billion since the early 1990s, according to the Forest Service.

"You can't add 17 billion board feet of fiber every year and only cut 2 billion and not end up with these catastrophic fires," said Mr. Ebell.

Analysts like Mr. Ebell and Mr. Knappenberger have been accused of being climate change "deniers," but they say the only thing they're denying are the environmental movement's predictions of certain global warming catastrophe.

"What I'm denying is not the fact that fossil fuel emissions have some impact on the climate," said Mr. Knappenberger. "What I'm denying is that the impact is detectable or going to be as bad as some people say it's going to be. What I'm denying is the global warming alarmism."