

West may never look the same after wildfires

By Kurtis Alexander, San Francisco Chronicle

As hotter and bigger fires blaze through the West and yet another year passes with a disastrous toll, America's wildlands are having a harder time bouncing back. Some spots, from the singed valleys of Wine Country to the steep slopes of the Sierra, may never look the same.

The fiercer fires are killing more of the vegetation needed to provide seeds for regrowth, and scientists are learning that even when new trees sprout, many are struggling with the warmer and more extreme weather wrought by climate change.

While wildfires have historically benefited the natural landscape, cycling soil nutrients and clearing space for new plants, for example, scientists say more burned areas are likely to end up devoid of trees and populated instead with weeds and grasses. This new vegetation is even likelier to burn, setting in place a vicious cycle of only more fire and less forest.

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