

LESSONS FOR INDIA FROM THE CALIFORNIA FOREST FIRES

Relevant for: Environment & Disaster Management | Topic: Disaster and disaster management

The forest fires raging in California, United States, is said to be the most destructive wildfire in the state's history, with more than 8,800 structures, most of them homes, destroyed. The final death toll has not yet been announced since the search and rescue operations are still underway. While forest fires are not new to the region, this year the scale has been huge thanks to the hot, dry summer conditions persisting into the autumn. According to the [US Drought Monitor](#), 18% of the state is currently experiencing severe drought, which is exacerbating the seasonal weather patterns that make it difficult to fight fires in the state. Experts have said that climate change is also making conditions more favourable for wildfires in the American West. This could be true since climate plays a vital role in determining fire patterns and intensity and, in turn, fire influences the climate system through the release of carbon.

Of the 20 largest wildfires in California's recorded history, 15 have occurred since 2000, at a time when forests have become drier and warmer, says a report in The Guardian. Since 1970, temperatures in the west have increased by about double the global average, lengthening the western wildfire season by several months and drying out large tracts of forests, making them more fire prone, the report added.

A US government report — Climate Change Impacts in the United States — confirms that increased warming, drought, and insect outbreaks, all caused by or linked to climate change, have increased wildfires. Fire models project more wildfire and increased risks to communities across extensive areas.

India's forests are also facing similar challenges. In 2015, there were 15,937 forest fires in India. In 2017, that number rose to 35,888, a 125% spike over two years, says the 2017 State of Environment Report of the Centre for Science and Environment, New Delhi. In 2017, the maximum number of forest fires were reported in Madhya Pradesh (4,781), followed by Odisha (4,416) and Chhattisgarh (4,373). In fact, 23 out of 33 states and Union Territories reported an increase in forest fires. A National Institute of Disaster Management report on forest fires says 50% of the country's forests are prone to fire. Such uncontrolled fires not only burn down the vegetation but also the surface organic matter, increasing the frequency of flooding and soil erosion. In addition, wildlife patterns and habitat are also disrupted.

The Forest Survey of India Report, 2011, says the country has forest cover of 692,027 km², comprising 21.05% of the total geographic area of the country. Unfortunately, our firefighting potential is not as good as it should be.

First, the country lacks fire protection planning knowledge and incentive. Second, the statistics on forest fire damage are poor, and so it is difficult to arrive at accurate losses from the forest fires. Third, as the number of incidents showed a rising trend, all that was done was the replacement of the Intensification of Forest Management Scheme with the Forest Fire Prevention & Management Scheme in December 2017. However, in the last two years, nearly 46-65% of the money allocated under the forest management schemes has not been released, says the CSE report. Fourth, foresters still fight forest fires using outdated methods, when systematic modern fire management techniques and methods have been adopted in the rest of the world. Last, as the National Green Tribunal said in 2017, India doesn't have a strong and clear national policy on how to tackle forest fires.

In an age of climate variability, such lack of preparedness can put India's forest wealth at a huge risk.

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