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USFS: Conditions Ideal For Megafires This Summer

Amy Quinton (/about/bios/amy-quinton/)

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The Stanislaus National Forest after the 2013 Rim Fire, a megafire that burned 257,000 acres.

Amy Quinton / Capital Public Radio

The U.S. Forest Service is re-examining how it manages wildfires this summer.

It has historically tried to let lightning-caused fires burn in remote areas as a way to reduce forest density. The hope was to keep forests, particularly in northern California, healthy.

Chris Schow with the U.S. Forest Service Fire Aviation and Management Division says that way of managing wildfire probably won't work this year.

"Due to weather conditions well beyond our control, we could see another megafire," says Schow.

Those are fires that can burn hundreds of thousands of acres severely. He says the forest service is attacking all fires quickly.

"We're initially attacking all of our fires aggressively trying to keep them small, we're currently at our 98 percent success rate on initial attack, our intent is to keep that going," says Schow.

Jim Branham with the Sierra Nevada Conservancy says the practice of fire suppression can make severe wildfires more likely. But he's not surprised at the Forest Service decision given the dry conditions.

"When you look at all the tools you have to restore these forests we're being more limited at a time where we need to be more proactive," says Branham.

The Forest Service says growing numbers of dead and dying trees in the Sierra are also adding fuel and making fire danger worse.

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