

CALIFORNIA WILDFIRES

Could Colorado's type of extreme winter wildfires happen in California?

'Absolutely,' Cal Fire official says

[Kellie Hwang](#)

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David Marks, center, uses a borrowed pair of binoculars to see how his home in Superior, Colo., fared as smoke rises in the distance on Friday, Dec. 31, 2021. A wind-whipped wildfire tore through the area Thursday, and authorities fear more than 500 homes were destroyed.

Thomas Peipert/Associated Press

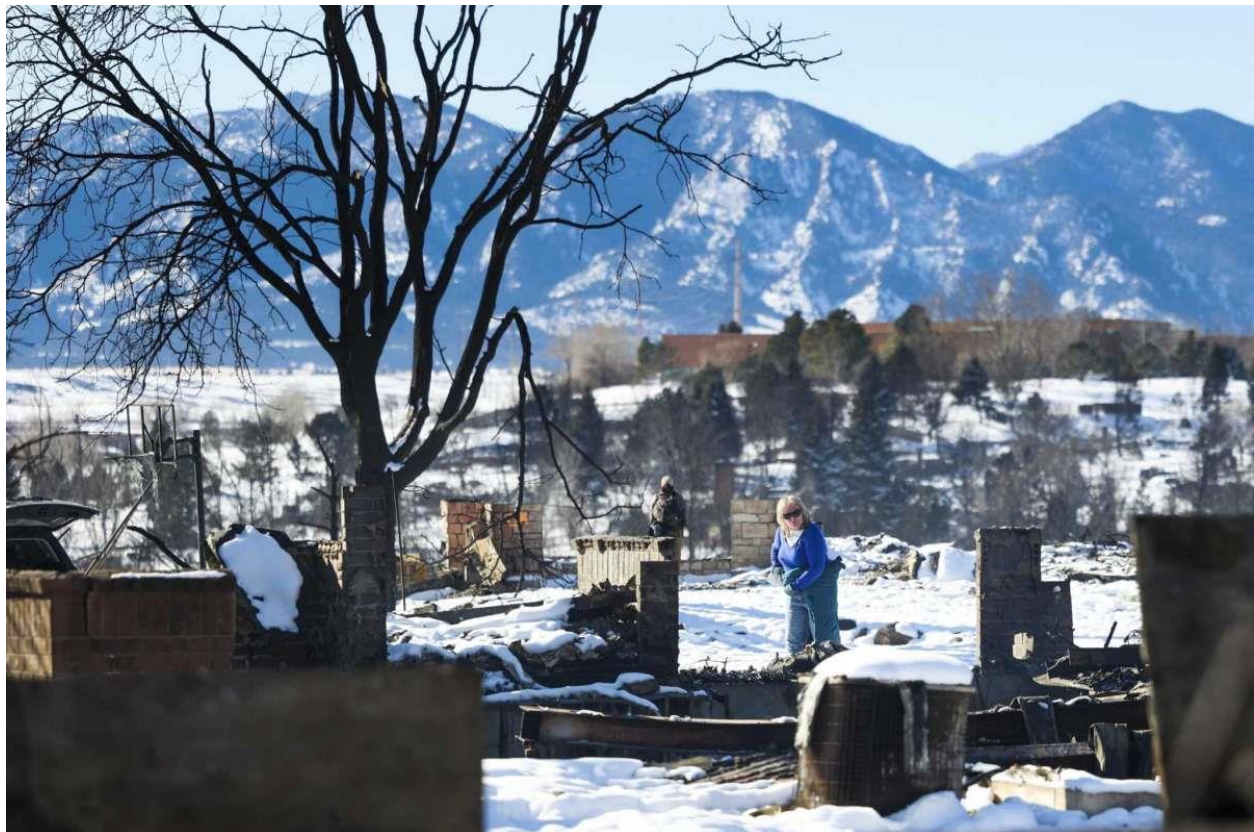


The recent cold-weather wildfire in Colorado was a shocker, but it “could absolutely ” happen in fire-prone California as well, with the advent of late-season wildfires already offering a warning, a Cal Fire official said Sunday.

Where California’s wildfires used to blaze most intensely in September and October, they’ve crept later into the fall in recent years with some - like the December 2017 Thomas Fire - even sparking in the winter months, said Cal Fire Assistant Deputy Director Daniel Berlant.

While Western states are well accustomed to wildfires, the wind-driven blaze that erupted last week into the most destructive in Colorado history caught the state and country by surprise.

The Marshall Fire, which destroyed hundreds of homes in the highly populated suburbs between Denver and Boulder, happened at a time of year when fire season is usually well over. The cause is still under investigation, but powerful winds quickly whipped the spark into a hellish firestorm that tore through a landscape already parched by record drought.



People walk through a neighborhood decimated by the Marshall Fire on January 2, 2022 in Louisville, Colorado.

Michael Ciaglo/Getty Images

California is no stranger to this scenario.

As fire season has extended in recent years, California has suffered through the largest, most destructive and deadliest wildfires in state history, turning the old concept of “fire season” into a constant threat, officials said.

Cal Fire says that the length of California’s fire season has increased an estimated 75 days across the Sierra, driven mostly by climate change. Forests have become more vulnerable to major wildfires due to warmer temperatures, dwindling snowpack and earlier spring snowmelt.

“In California and across the West, it’s really become a fire year,” Berlant said. “We don’t know what the next several years are going to bring.”

But one thing is certain, he said: What’s happening in Colorado “could absolutely ” happen in California, with several parallels already on the books.

Berlant pointed to the Thomas Fire, the eighth largest in California history, which ignited in December 2017 and seared more than 280,000 acres in Santa Barbara and Ventura counties. Southern California’s powerful Santa Ana winds were especially strong at that time, helping to fan the flames.

Both the Thomas Fire and Colorado’s Marshall Fire ripped through populated areas, destroying hundreds of homes. Berlant said that’s becoming more common throughout California, including the Bay Area and northern parts of the state.

The most extreme example: the Camp Fire, the deadliest and most destructive in state history, which sparked in Butte County in November 2018 and ravaged the town of Paradise, killing 85 people and destroying more than 18,800 structures. A year earlier, the Tubbs Fire that started in October in Wine Country was the state’s fourth deadliest and second most destructive, killing 22 people and razing more than 5,600 structures.

Berlant said the conditions for the Camp Fire were similar to Colorado's Marshall Fire: very dry, and before the winter precipitation had arrived. If not enough rainfall has arrived by winter and strong winds set in, California is highly susceptible to wildfire, Berlant said.

After the Marshall Fire erupted Thursday afternoon and wreaked havoc, snow arrived Friday and Saturday and smothered the flames — creating strange scenes of snow-covered landscapes still shedding smoke from smoldering embers.



Daniel Peers looks through the snow covered remains of his brother's burned homes after the Marshall Wildfire Saturday, Jan. 1, 2022, in Louisville, Colo. An overnight dumping of snow and frigid temperatures compounded the misery of hundreds of Colorado residents who started off the new year trying to salvage what remains of their homes after a wind-whipped wildfire tore through the Denver suburbs.

Jack Dempsey/Associated Press

The idea that scorching summer temperatures are needed for powerful wildfires to spread is a misconception, Berlant said.

“It tricks people this time of year,” he said. “Winter months and cooler temperatures are not enough to stop destructive fires when you have extremely dry conditions coupled with extreme wind.”

The torrential rain from atmospheric rivers that arrived in Northern California in October helped douse the Caldor Fire, which burned several small Sierra communities forced the evacuation of South Lake Tahoe, as well as the monstrous Dixie Fire farther north. And while the state has subsequently been doused by storms bringing record rain and snow totals, Berlant said, California can no longer routinely count on such precipitation to bookend fire season.

“These weather events of extreme rain and extreme drought ebb and flow,” he said, and don’t match up with the traditional fire season pattern, peaking in the summer months and usually ending by early to mid-fall.

Berlant, whose work focuses on fire prevention and land use planning decisions, said the state needs to “do a better job preparing communities” no matter the time of year. Efforts include creating new infrastructure to improve evacuation and emergency access, building and retrofitting homes to make homes more fire resistant, and creating defensible space around houses.

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