Wildfires are mostly human caused, CU Boulder study says

Jennifer Balch

As the summer heats up and the wildlands dry out wildfires are exploding across the west. Currently five of the 45 wildfires burning in the west are in Colorado and, in many cases, the fires are human caused.

It’s a trend that has been heating up over the last few decades, according to Jennifer Balch, an assistant professor in geography at CU Boulder who led a study on the cause of wildfires in the U.S.

CUT 1 “84 percent of all the wildfires that started in the U.S. in the last couple of decades were started by people, and that was a huge shock to us. We knew that people were involved in fire, but that amazing amount of fires that are stared by people was striking.” (:15)

For the study, Balch looked at government records from 1992 to 2012 and found the majority of wildfires in the U.S. over 1.5 million were started by humans.

She says not only are humans a prominent part of the wildfire cycle but, combined with climate change, they’re also making the fire season longer and more devastating.

CUT 2 “We’re also lengthening the fire season. We’re essentially tripling the length of that fire season and providing ignitions when lightning doesn’t during the spring and during the fall. (:08) What’s important about that timing is that climate change is also increasing the number of hot days and the number of dry days and so we have this convergence of climate change increasing the length of the fire season because of the weather conditions and we also have people providing ignition sources during those times.” (:28)

In Colorado human caused wildfires were much lower, just 30 percent, and burning over 1.2 million acres.

CUT 3 “30 percent of the wildfires that start in Colorado are started by people. And that could include anything from debris burning to lighting a cigarette to fireworks. (:11) In fact, across the U.S., the single day with the largest number of wildfires started by people is July 4. So over 7,000 fires across these two decades, were started by fireworks on July 4.” (:24)

Three expensive and devastating wildfires in Colorado – Waldo Canyon, Black Forrest and Fourmile – all have two things in common. They were human caused and they happened in what is known as the “wildland urban interface.” It’s a place, says Balch, made even more vulnerable due to homes and humans.

CUT 4 “I think the first step is just recognizing how critical of a role people play in our wildfires. You know we think of them as a natural force, and they are, but people are playing a very substantial role. And not only are we playing a role, but we’re also vulnerable to those wildfires as well.” (:15)

To learn more about Jennifer Balch’s study, go to [www.colorado.edu/today](http://www.colorado.edu/today) and search wildfire. To get the latest on active wildfires in the U.S. go to the National Interagency Fire Center, <https://www.nifc.gov/fireInfo/nfn.htm>.