

READING

READING PASSAGE 1

You should spend about 20 minutes on **Questions 1–13**, which are based on Reading Passage 1 below.

The megafires of California

Drought, housing expansion, and oversupply of tinder make for bigger, hotter fires in the western United States

Wildfires are becoming an increasing menace in the western United States, with Southern California being the hardest hit area. There's a reason fire squads battling more frequent blazes in Southern California are having such difficulty containing the flames, despite better preparedness than ever and decades of experience fighting fires fanned by the 'Santa Ana Winds'. The wildfires themselves, experts say, are generally hotter, faster, and spread more erratically than in the past.

Megafires, also called 'siege fires', are the increasingly frequent blazes that burn 500,000 acres or more – 10 times the size of the average forest fire of 20 years ago. Some recent wildfires are among the biggest ever in California in terms of acreage burned, according to state figures and news reports.

One explanation for the trend to more superhot fires is that the region, which usually has dry summers, has had significantly below normal precipitation in many recent years. Another reason, experts say, is related to the century-long policy of the US Forest Service to stop wildfires as quickly as possible. The unintentional consequence has

been to halt the natural eradication of underbrush, now the primary fuel for megafires.

Three other factors contribute to the trend, they add. First is climate change, marked by a 1-degree Fahrenheit rise in average yearly temperature across the western states. Second is fire seasons that on average are 78 days longer than they were 20 years ago. Third is increased construction of homes in wooded areas.

'We are increasingly building our homes in fire-prone ecosystems,' says Dominik Kulakowski, adjunct professor of biology at Clark University Graduate School of Geography in Worcester, Massachusetts. 'Doing that in many of the forests of the western US is like building homes on the side of an active volcano.'

In California, where population growth has averaged more than 600,000 a year for at least a decade, more residential housing is being built. 'What once was open space is now residential homes providing fuel to make fires burn with greater intensity,' says Terry McHale of the California Department of Forestry firefighters' union. 'With so