MEDIA RELEASE

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California not the only tinderbox, as climate change-driven fires loom for Tasmania's rainforests

The intense bushfires sweeping parts of California could be repeated in Tasmania, with a University of Tasmania researcher describing the state as akin to a volcano waiting to erupt from climate change-driven mega fires.

School of Plant Science Professor David Bowman said the prediction was not fantasy but reality and could mean substantial damage to the island's World Heritage Areas and reserves if climate change continued to dry out Australia.

The concerns will be addressed by a three-year investigation funded by the Australian Research Council to understand the impact of global climate change on eastern Australian rainforests from the tropic and temperate zones.

The research team will review forests and woodlands in a historical context to develop a landscape change timeline by reviewing aerial photographic records of rainforest boundaries and soil testing.

Prof. Bowman said in the past 50 years in the Northern Territory rainforests have expanded, while populations of the fire-sensitive conifer Callitris, or cypress pine, have collapsed and the contradictory pattern could be an ecological symptom of global environmental change.

He said Tasmania was now drier and therefore rainforests and other fire sensitive vegetation were vulnerable to destruction by wildfire.

"This summer is a real worry; fuel accumulation in Tasmania is very high and we're extremely ripe and vulnerable for a mega fire if the summer is hot, dry and windy," Prof. Bowman said.

"We are akin to living on the side of a volcano and we must be very aware of the very serious risk of fire in hot windy conditions.

"In areas of Tasmania, like the south west, vegetation is growing in flammable organic soils and if the drought continues they may dry out and become fuel for a ground fire. It's not fantasy that they will never recover from the mega fires in a drier world.

"Global environmental change is so overwhelming and pervasive that our unique ecosystems, like temperate rainforests, could be living on borrowed time with the threat of mega fires that have been occurring elsewhere in the world."

The research team led by Prof. Bowman will also evaluate the importance of fire and climate in controlling tree growth, resolve uncertainty about past impact of Aboriginal burning and improve understanding of CO2 enrichment on the global carbon cycle.

The results will inform forest managers and create policy debate about rainforest conservation, the role of fire in forest management, the likely impact of increased CO2 on forest productivity, national carbon accounting and the consequences of climate change on forest ecosystems.

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