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# When Winter Burns | Early fire detections signal a tougher season ahead

Smoke is now the missing headline. Forest fires emit fine particulate matter and toxic gases.

 [Santosh Chakraborty](#)

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Image showing a forest fire. For representational purposes. Credit: iStock Photo

Forest fire alerts are arriving earlier than usual across the Western Himalaya. In mid-winter, the Forest Survey of India (FSI)'s near-real-time portal is already flagging fresh detections in Uttarakhand, Himachal Pradesh, and parts of Jammu & Kashmir. That matters because it signals a longer window of risk. The region has always had a pre-monsoon fire season, but longer dry spells now raise the odds that a small ignition becomes a spreading incident.



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Most fires here are closely linked to people and land use. Roads, construction, tourism pressure, grazing, and routine forest dependence raise the chance of ignition along the forest edge. In Uttarakhand and Himachal Pradesh, chir pine belts add a familiar vulnerability: dry needles accumulate as litter, ignite easily, and carry fast surface fires along slopes. In J&K, rugged terrain and limited access can delay first response, and make containment risky.

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The visible loss is familiar: scorched hillsides and damaged saplings. The deeper costs are cumulative. Repeated fires weaken regeneration, degrade soils, and increase erosion in fragile catchments. Springs and small streams become more vulnerable, and forests provide weaker protection against floods and landslides. For states that depend on upland watersheds for drinking water, irrigation, and hydropower reliability, this is not a side issue. Tourism also pays a price when haze reduces visibility and visitor confidence.

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severe pollution episodes in hill towns. Plumes then travel downwind and add to particulate loads in the foothills and plains. The national AQI platform captures these episodic spikes during bad smoke days. Global Forest Watch's fire dashboards and NASA's FIRMS map show how activity can cluster across large landscapes, not just isolated compartments.

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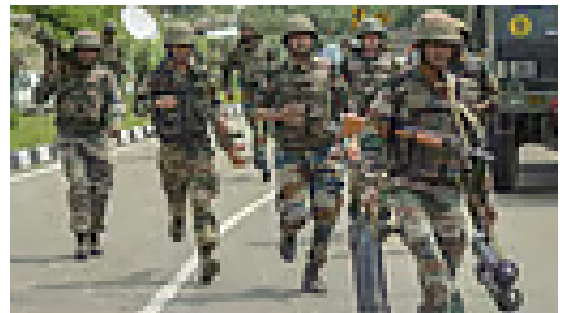
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Air quality planning still treats these episodes as background noise. Hill towns need smoke-day protocols that trigger advisories, school guidance, and protection for vulnerable groups. District administrations should co-ordinate with forest divisions so that forecasts translate into action before the smoke settles. Without these, the same communities face repeated exposure with little warning or support.

India's detection capacity has improved, and that progress should be protected. The FSI's portal and its fire point search provide near-real-time alerts and location details. Large forest fire monitoring flags bigger incidents that deserve rapid escalation.


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Yet detection is only the first step. The recurring weakness is the last mile. Alerts do not consistently translate into timely, coordinated action on the ground. Suppression remains heavily manual in rugged terrain. Fuel management is limited and uneven. Post-fire recovery, including erosion control and assisted regeneration, is often underplayed. Smoke response is fragmented across forestry, pollution control, and health systems.

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fuel removal, avoided forest degradation and assisted regeneration, alongside spring-shed protection. That financing must reward prevention outcomes, not paperwork.

Second, communities must be treated as first responders. Participatory fire management should build village-level brigades with clear responsibilities, equipment, and performance-linked support. Local institutions such as Van Panchayats and Joint Forest Management committees can sustain year-round prevention work, including fuel removal and maintenance of fire lines and water points.

Third, technology must guide ground decisions. Beat- and range-level fire vulnerability zonation, using forest type, slope, aspect, past fire density, and proximity to roads and settlements, can show where to act first. Simple fire spread modelling can help pre-position crews and tools on high-risk days instead of chasing flames after ignition.

Fourth, smoke must trigger public health action. Fire activity combined with weather conditions should activate advisories, school guidance, and health preparedness, similar to urban pollution episodes, not ad hoc messaging.

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to-recovery cycle. The gap is consistent implementation and co-ordination.

the most predictable feature of the summer sky.

**Sayanta Ghosh is Associate Fellow, Land Resources Division, The Energy and Resources Institute (TERI), New Delhi.**

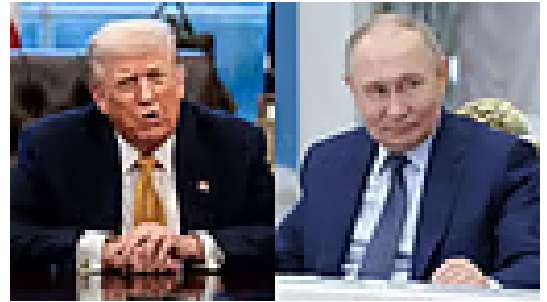
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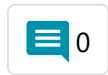
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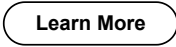
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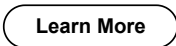
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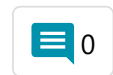
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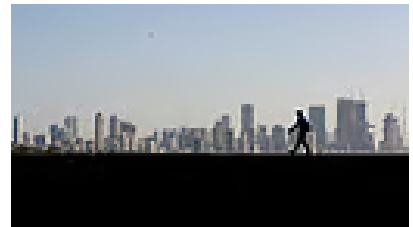


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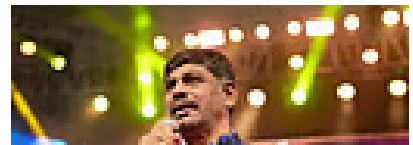
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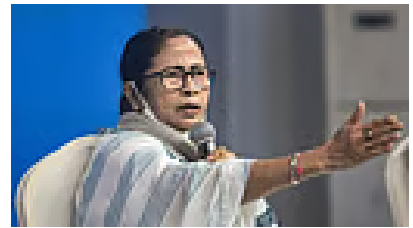


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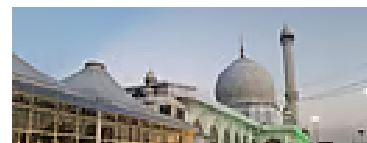


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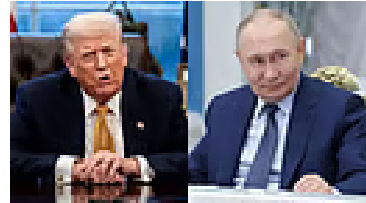
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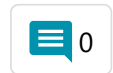
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