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Improved Wildfire Spread Prediction with Time-Series Data and the WSTS+ Benchmark

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Abstract

Recent research has demonstrated the potential of deep neural networks (DNNs) to accurately predict wildfire spread on a given day based upon high-dimensional explanatory data from a single preceding day, or from a time series of T preceding days. For the first time, we investigate a large number of existing data-driven wildfire modeling strategies under controlled conditions, revealing the best modeling strategies and resulting in models that achieve state-of-the-art (SOTA) accuracy for both single-day and multi-day input scenarios, as evaluated on a large public benchmark for next-day wildfire spread, termed the WildfireSpreadTS (WSTS) benchmark. Consistent with prior work, we found that models using time-series input obtained the best overall accuracy, suggesting this is an important future area of research. Furthermore, we create a new benchmark, WSTS+, by incorporating four additional years of historical wildfire data into the WSTS benchmark. Our benchmark doubles the number of unique years of historical data, expands its geographic scope, and, to our knowledge, represents the largest public benchmark for time-series-based wildfire spread prediction. Code, model weights, and data can be found at this repo.

1. Introduction

Wildfires are a global cause of concern that have severe human, economical, and environmental impacts, with the average annual economic burden from wildfires falling between $71.1 billion and $347.8 billion [49]. In order to better manage, mitigate, and prevent wildfires, accurately predicting their spread is essential. In this work, we focus on the problem of next-day wildfire spread prediction, where we are provided with current and/or historical information about a particular wildfire, and then tasked with predicting its spatial extent on the following day.

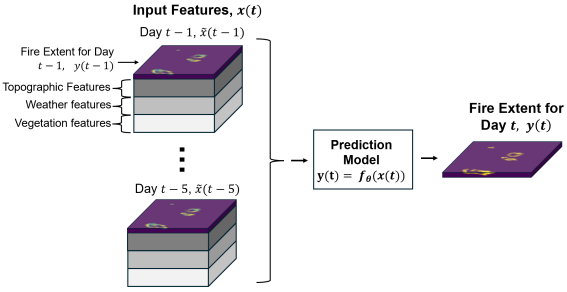


Figure 1. The wildfire prediction models take as input a geospatial map of several variables: vegetation, topography, and weather features, alongside the current day fire mask. We consider two scenarios: one in which the model receives input features from one preceding day, denoted $t-1$, and one in which it receives input from five previous days

A variety of approaches have been investigated to solve this problem, such as those based upon machine learning models [4, 9, 25], or physics-based and observationally-informed models [1, 11, 12]. In this work, however, we focus on a promising emerging class of techniques that utilize high-capacity machine learning models – namely, deep neural networks (DNNs) – to predict wildfire spread using high-dimensional explanatory input data. These input data typically comprise a geospatial raster of the current extent of the fire, as well as explanatory features such as topography, climate, weather, and vegetation indices. Based upon these input data, the model is tasked with producing a

geospatial map, or an image, reflecting the spatial extent of the fire on the following day. See Fig. 1 for an illustration.

A variety of DNN-based models have been proposed to solve next-day prediction, including convolutional models [5, 32, 34], attention-based models such as transformers [46], and spatio-temporal models [3, 35]. One major limitation of most existing work is the lack of standardized evaluation wherein studies often utilize different datasets, model training and evaluation procedures, or compare to few other existing methods. Furthermore, most existing research has focused on next-day prediction where only explanatory data from the current day is input (e.g., only $\tilde{x}(t-1)$ in Fig. 1). However, recent research found that models utilizing a time-series of T previous days of data can achieve greater prediction accuracy [17], suggesting this as an important new direction in next-day wildfire prediction.

Contributions of this Work Our primary contributions are not a novel architecture, but rather, **our first contribution** is to perform a rigorous and controlled comparison of many existing approaches, both for single-day ($T = 1$) and the time-series inputs ($T = 5$). We also propose a novel temporal positional embedding. We compare all methods using the same public benchmark dataset, along with the same training, hyperparameter optimization, and evaluation procedures. We perform all experiments on the WildfireSpreadTS (WSTS) benchmark [17] because it is the only public benchmark for time-series wildfire prediction, it sufficiently large to support DNN training and evaluation, and in contrast to all other existing benchmarks, it employs a realistic 12-fold *leave-one-year-out* cross-validation. Our study reveals the best existing modeling strategies, resulting in substantial performance improvements over the current state-of-the-art (SOTA) for the WSTS benchmark.

Our second contribution is to introduce WSTS+, an extended benchmark for next-day wildfire spread, constructed by doubling the number of years of historical wildfire events in WSTS. By adopting WSTS+, we can double the size of our training datasets. We conduct experiments that reveal additional historical training data, either in WSTS or WSTS+, yields little improvement in the accuracy of wildfire models. We discover and analyze significant cross-year domain shift, a critical challenge for the field.

The rest of the paper is structured as follows: we formulate our problem setting in Sec. 2, Sec. 3 reviews related works, Sec. 4 describes WSTS, Sec. 5 details our experiments, Sec. 6 introduces WSTS+, and Sec. 7 concludes.

2. Problem Setting

In its general formulation, the goal of next-day wildfire spread prediction is to predict a wildfire's spatial extent on some t^{th} day, denoted $y(t)$, given explanatory data from one or more *preceding* days, denoted $x(t)$. We adopt the more specific settings of recent literature [17, 23], as illustrated in Fig. 1, which assume there are T consecutive previous days of explanatory data, so that $x(t) = \{\tilde{x}(t-i)\}_{i=1}^{T}$, and each $\tilde{x}(t)$ comprises a geospatial raster, so that $\tilde{x}(t) \in \mathbb{R}^{H \times W \times C}$, where H, W correspond to spatial dimensions, and C represents the number of explanatory variables, which may include previous fire masks (e.g., $y(t) \subset \tilde{x}(t)$). The fire extent is encoded in a binary geospatial image, $y(t) \in \{0,1\}^{H \times W}$, where a value of one indicates the presence of a fire. Our goal is then to use a dataset of historical wildfire data to infer parameters, θ, of a predictive model of the form $y(t) = f_\theta(x(t))$.

3. Related Works

Next Day Wildfire Segmentation DNN-based segmentation has received growing attention due to its accuracy, enabled by the recent development of large datasets of historical fire data. [23] created Next-Day Wildfire Spread, a large and public dataset for *next-day* spread prediction, and used it to train a custom deep segmentation model. Concurrently, [40] developed SeasFire Cube and trained Unet++ models [55] for medium-term fire prediction, between 8 and 64 days. [26] improved upon the collected data cube and found that the LSTM and ConvLSTM models outperformed the Fire Weather Index (FWI). In FireSight, [20] collected a dataset using remote sensing data from 20 datasets, and trained a 3D UNet model to model short-term fire hazard, between 3 and 8 days. Overall, most work has been done using U-Net architectures and their variants, and many authors [13, 29, 46, 51] have recently reported that attention-based U-Nets achieve greater accuracy. We investigate the SwinUnet[33] in our study as a widely used and therefore representative example of such models.

Next Day Wildfire Prediction with Time-Series In contrast to the existing work discussed above, we also focus on time-series input for spread prediction, which has been cited as an important emerging direction [13, 17, 29]. Historically, time-series modeling has been challenging due to the lack of appropriate public datasets to train and evaluate models for this task. Recently, [17] extended the Next-Day Wildfire Spread dataset from [23] to be suitable for time-series prediction, and achieved their best overall next-day predictions using a time-series model, termed UTAE [16].

Other DL Approaches Aside from a segmentation formulation, researchers have also investigated, for example, reinforcement learning [43], probabilistic cellular automata [18], and synthetic data approaches [30]. We refer readers to [53] for a review of DL for wildfire prediction.

4. The WSTS Benchmark

In this work, we employ the WildfireSpreadTS benchmark [17]. The dataset includes 607 wildfire events across the

western United States between 2018 and 2021, totaling 13,607 daily multi-channel images. These 23 channels include data on active fires, weather, topography, and vegetation, resampled to a common resolution of 375 meters, providing a multi-modal and multi-temporal framework for modeling fire spread. A key feature of this benchmark is a rigorous 12-fold cross-validation evaluation procedure. Each fold of the cross-validation includes all wildfire events from a single year, so that the trained models are always evaluated on wildfire events from a previously unseen year, reflecting real-world use of wildfire prediction models.

5. Improving Wildfire Spread Prediction

In this section, we describe our methods for $T = 1$ and $T = 5$ scenarios, respectively, as well as experiments to support them (e.g., ablations). Results for our developed benchmark models are reported in Tab. 2, in terms of Average Precision (AP) using 12-fold leave-one-year-out cross-validation on the WSTS benchmark, following prior work [17]. Also following [17], we report model performance for three feature sets: vegetation features only (Veg), a combination of vegetation and topographic features (Multi), and all features (All), which includes additional weather forecast features. Detailed descriptions of our models, alongside full experimental details, are provided in Sec. 8 in the supplement. Key deployment information (FLOPs, GPU memory requirements, training/inference times) can be found in Sec. 9.1. Models in Tab. 2 with citations correspond to the three current best models on WSTS, as reported in [17]. All other models reported in Tab. 2 were developed in this work.

5.1. Single-Day Input ($T = 1$)

The current $T = 1$ SOTA utilizes a U-Net architecture with a ResNet-18 encoder, and is denoted Res18-Unet[17]. Therefore, we focus our investigation on improving it.

Modeling Improvements We next describe the investigated improvements to the Res18-Unet[17] at a high level. More details can be found in Sec. 8 of the supplement.

(i) Encoders. Better performance may be obtained with larger encoders or those with attention mechanisms. Recent studies have indicated that attention-based models may be superior to convolutional models for wildfire spread [29, 46, 51, 56]. We investigate a ResNet50 [21] encoder, as well as the attention-based SwinUnet-Tiny encoder [7] and SegFormer-B2 [52].

(ii) Utilizing Pre-trained Parameters. Utilizing pre-trained weights to initialize training is a well-established technique to improve model accuracy, including in remote sensing [24]. We investigate pre-trained weights for each encoder we consider (i.e., ResNet18, ResNet50, SwinUnet, and SegFormer), while decoders are trained from scratch.

(iii) Improved Loss Functions. The existing SOTA Res18-Unet [17] is trained using weighted binary cross-entropy loss. However, it has been established that Jaccard/Dice losses are often superior alternatives for segmentation tasks [10], and focal loss has been shown effective for class imbalance [31] (the WSTS benchmark exhibits severe class imbalance), and for wildfire spread in particular [13]. Therefore we investigate and compare the aforementioned losses in our experiments.

(iv) Improved Hyperparameter Optimization. The existing SOTA Res18-Unet [17] was trained by selecting the model with the highest F1 score on the validation; however, all models on WSTS are evaluated utilizing the average precision (AP) metric [17]. We investigate aligning the validation and testing metrics by using AP for both.

For our experiments, we consider a U-Net with a ResNet-18 encoder (denoted *Res18-Unet*), a ResNet-50 encoder (denoted *Res50-Unet*), a SwinUnet-Tiny (denoted *SwinUnet*), and a SegFormer-B2 (denoted *SegFormer*). For each of these models, we perform a grid search over all combinations of learning rates ($[1e-1, 1e-2, 1e-3, 1e-4, 1e-5]$), loss functions (BCE, Focal, Dice, Jaccard), and the use of pre-training or not (a binary choice). Following [17], we use a single fold of the 12-fold cross-validation, and only one of the three feature sets (the "All" set) for this optimization. As discussed, in contrast to previous work, we utilize AP during validation to select the best models instead of F1. The focal loss has two hyperparameters: α, set as the inverse frequency of positive class pixels, and γ, set to its default value of two.

Experimental Results We found that pre-training was nearly always beneficial, and that Focal Loss usually yielded substantial improvements compared to our other candidate losses. Therefore, for the WSTS benchmark, we included both pre-training and focal loss in all our models: *Res18-Unet*, *Res50-Unet*, *SwinUnet*, and *SegFormer*. As an ablation study, Tab. 1 reports the performance of our *Res18-Unet* on the full WSTS benchmark, where we progressively remove each of our improvements to assess its impact. Our results indicate that each improvement is highly beneficial, or at least not significantly harmful.

Tab. 2 reports the performance of our models on the WSTS benchmark, compared to the best existing $T = 1$ model, *Res18-Unet[17]*. Our *Res18-Unet* is identical to the *Res18-Unet[17]*, except for our aforementioned modifications, and obtains substantially higher AP across all input features considered: a 37% improvement on average. We find in Sec. 9.3 that these improvements are statistically significant using a Wilcoxon signed-rank test.

Our other models, *Res50-Unet*, *SwinUnet*, and *SegFormer* also substantially outperform the existing *Res18-Unet[17]*. However, despite having approximately twice

Table 1. Ablation showing the impact of the successive removal of each of our improvements on a *Res18-Unet* trained on Vegetation features

Model	Test AP	Percent Decrease
Res18-Unet (ours)	0.455 ± 0.092	–
No pretraining	0.456 ± 0.086	-0.22
No focal loss	0.345 ± 0.084	24.18
No AP as validation	0.321 ± 0.078	29.45

the number of trainable model parameters of *Res18-Unet*, we find that our model outperforms the three larger models in most cases. *Our Res18-Unet also obtains the highest overall AP (0.468) for the $T = 1$ models when utilizing the "Multi" feature set, establishing a new SOTA on WSTS for $T = 1$.*

Several recent studies have reported that large and/or attention-based models achieve SOTA accuracy for $T = 1$ wildfire spread prediction [29, 46, 51, 56]. However, we find here that with simple improvements and appropriate optimization, *Res18-Unet* outperforms such models. In Sec. 9.2 and Tab. 8, we test the hypothesis that the more rigorous (and potentially more real-world) leave-one-year-out (LOYO) cross-validation adopted by the WSTS benchmark may penalize more complex models for overfitting. Yet, we find that using a random cross-validation still allows the Res18-Unet to outperform attention-based models, suggesting its superiority even under different evaluation scenarios.

In Fig. 2, we qualitatively evaluate our *Res18-Unet* and *Res50-Unet* against the Res18-Unet [17]. Each row corresponds to a fire event, and the columns show the current fire, the next-day label, and the predictions of each model. Yellow represents the fire extent, green shows correctly predicted burned areas, and red shows false positives.

We observe that the original model tends to overpredict fire spread, leading to multiple red patches where no fire actually occurs. However, the model also underpredicts in areas where the fire spreads, capturing some, but not the full extent of the fire. On the other hand, we observe that our models make consistently more accurate predictions, with far fewer false positives, and slightly better matching green areas.

We provide additional examples in Fig. 11-Fig. 18 of the best and worst predictions made by the Res18-Unet for each testing year, and we analyze these results in Sec. 9.4 and Sec. 9.5. Overall, we find that the model struggles with very small, newly ignited, or displaced fires, while achieving high accuracy on larger, more consolidated fires, with performance positively correlated with fire size across years.

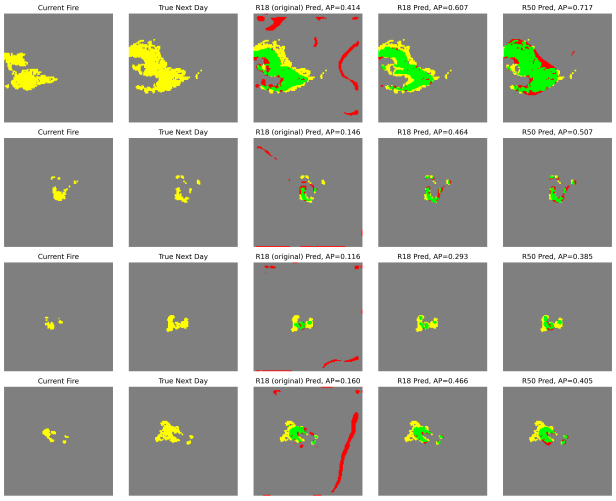


Figure 2. Sample predictions made by the Res18-Unet [17], our *Res18-Unet*, and *Res50-Unet*. The two leftmost columns show the current fire spread $y(t-1)$ and the next-day label $y(t)$. True positive pixels are colored in green, while false positives are colored in red

5.2. Time-Series Input, $T = 5$

Existing models for the time-series scenario generally adopt one of two approaches: (i) a data-level fusion, or (ii) a feature-level fusion. In data-level fusion, the features for each day, $\tilde{x}(t) \in \mathbb{R}^{H \times W \times C}$ are concatenated along the feature dimension into one input tensor, $x(t) = [\tilde{x}(t-1)|, ..., |\tilde{x}(t-T)] \in \mathbb{R}^{H \times W \times CT}$, after which they can be processed in the same manner as single-day input (see Sec. 2 for problem notation). Therefore, we adopt our best-performing $T = 1$ models from Sec. 5.1, and their hyperparameter settings, and evaluate them for data-level fusion. As a reference, we also include the *reported* results of the Res18-Unet [17] when it was applied for data-level fusion.

In this context, feature-level fusion implies that we use a shared encoder to first extract features (or embeddings) independently for each day of our input, $\tilde{z}(t) = f_{\theta_{En}}(\tilde{x}(t))$ so that we have a collection of features, $z(t) = \{\tilde{z}(t-i)\}_{i=1}^{T}$, which are utilized as input into a subsequent model for joint processing (i.e., fusion). The current SOTA accuracy on WSTS, both for the time-series setting, and overall, was obtained with a UTAE model [16], as reported in [17]. Furthermore, the UTAE achieved superior accuracy despite having just 1.1M parameters - significantly fewer than many other models considered (e.g., the Res18-Unet has 14.3M). Therefore, we focus our modeling improvements on the UTAE from [17].

Improvements to the UTAE We develop two improved UTAE models, referred to as *UTAE* and *UTAE(Res18)*. Sec. 8.1 introduces key notation and background support-

Table 2. Mean test AP $\pm$ standard deviation using vegetation features only (Veg), vegetation, land cover, topography and weather (Multi) and All features, when training with 1 and 5 input days. Models with citations represent accuracy reported on our benchmark from previous publications; all other models reported are developed in this work. Results style: **best**

Fusion Level	Model	Input days	Veg	Multi	All	# Params
-	Res18-Unet[17]	1	0.328 ± 0.090	0.341 ± 0.085	0.341 ± 0.086	14.3M
	Res18-Unet	1	0.455 ± 0.090	$\mathbf{0.468 \pm 0.087}$	$\mathbf{0.460 \pm 0.084}$	14.3M
	Res50-Unet	1	$\mathbf{0.457 \pm 0.089}$	0.459 ± 0.090	0.451 ± 0.093	32.5M
	SwinUnet	1	0.432 ± 0.088	0.437 ± 0.082	0.424 ± 0.090	27.2M
	SegFormer	1	0.433 ± 0.080	0.436 ± 0.083	0.423 ± 0.087	27.5M
Data	Res18-Unet[17]	5	0.333 ± 0.079	0.344 ± 0.076	0.325 ± 0.108	14.4M
	Res18-Unet	5	$\mathbf{0.472 \pm 0.083}$	$\mathbf{0.469 \pm 0.087}$	$\mathbf{0.460 \pm 0.084}$	14.4M
	SwinUnet	5	0.447 ± 0.087	0.453 ± 0.083	0.435 ± 0.079	27.3M
	SegFormer	5	0.439 ± 0.081	0.436 ± 0.085	0.430 ± 0.082	27.7M
Feature	UTAE[17]	5	0.372 ± 0.088	0.350 ± 0.113	0.321 ± 0.135	1.1M
	UTAE	5	0.452 ± 0.082	0.459 ± 0.088	0.433 ± 0.099	1.1M
	UTAE(Res18)	5	$\mathbf{0.478 \pm 0.085}$	$\mathbf{0.477 \pm 0.089}$	$\mathbf{0.475 \pm 0.091}$	14.6M

ing the design of each model below, and the new positional encodings.

Our UTAE Model. Our *UTAE* includes two major improvements over the *UTAE[17]*. The first improvement is to adopt all of the changes investigated for the single-day models from Sec. 5.1. Pursuant to this, following previous work convention, we did a joint search over the following hyperparameters using a single fold of the WSTS benchmark: pre-training (or not), learning rates ($[1e-2, 1e-3, 1e-4, 1e-5]$), and the type of loss (Focal, BCE, Jaccard, and Dice loss). The second improvement is the introduction of a novel positional encoding in the temporal fusion utilized by the *UTAE*. To our knowledge, this modification is novel within the vision and wildfire literature. Specifically, instead of using day-of-year positional encodings, as done in [16, 17], where $\bar{t} \in [1, 365]$, we propose to use a absolute positional encoding that indicates the relative position of each day's set of features within the time-series, so that $\bar{t} \in [1, ..., T]$ for a T-day input. We hypothesize that the features (especially the fire mask) from the most recent day of the fire will be most important for making predictions, and therefore, this relative position information will be much more important than its position in the year. Furthermore, it may be difficult for the models to infer relative positional information from day-of-year encodings, potentially undermining performance.

Our UTAE(Res18) Model. This model is obtained by making one additional improvement to our *UTAE* model. The encoder utilized in the *UTAE[17]* is relatively small (in terms of free parameters). Therefore, in a similar fashion to our investigation in Sec. 5.1, we replace the existing UTAE's encoder with a pre-trained ResNet-18.

Experimental Results Tab. 2 reports the accuracy (in terms of AP) of our time-series models on the WSTS benchmark, categorized by the type of fusion performed: data-level or feature-level. Regarding data-level fusion, our *Res18-Unet*, *Swin-Unet*, and *SegFormer* all substantially outperform the existing *Res18-Unet[17]* across all combinations of input features, with the *Res18-Unet* providing the best overall AP (AP=0.472, on Vegetation features). Regarding feature-level fusion, our two UTAE models (*UTAE* and *UTAE(Res18)*) substantially outperform the existing *UTAE[17]*, which is the current SOTA model on WSTS, both for time-series input ($T > 1$) and overall. Our *UTAE(Res18)* model achieves the highest overall performance for each combination of input features, across both single-day and time-series models. *In particular, our UTAE(Res18) achieves the highest overall AP with the Vegetation (Veg) feature subset, leading to a new overall SOTA performance on WSTS of AP=0.478.*

Notably, our results indicate that models receiving time-series input generally outperform those with single-day input. This is especially apparent when comparing data-level fusion models, such as *Res18-Unet* and *SwinUnet*, with their single-day counterparts, since they have few architectural differences. Most existing wildfire spread prediction in the literature has focused on the single-day input; however, our findings here corroborate those from [17] and suggest that time-series modeling is a promising emerging modeling strategy.

Our results also provide evidence that each modeling change is beneficial. As discussed, our *UTAE* included several applicable improvements discussed for our single-day models in Sec. 5.1, as well as our improved temporal encodings described in this sub-section. We therefore con-

Table 3. Test AP of UTAE trained on Vegetation features using the original Absolute positional encodings from [17], versus our proposed Relative positional encodings

Pos. Encodings	Absolute	Relative
UTAE	0.419 ± 0.101	$\mathbf{0.452 \pm 0.082}$

ducted an ablation experiment, reported in Tab. 3, to demonstrate that our modified positional encodings provide additional benefits. To show that the pre-trained ResNet-18 encoder is beneficial, we can compare the performance of *UTAE(Res18)* and *UTAE* in Tab. 2: the pre-trained ResNet-18 is the only difference between these two models.

Finally, we observe that increasing the number of input features is not always beneficial, which is consistent with [17], where the best AP was often achieved with the Veg or Multi feature sets rather than the All set. This suggests that the explanatory power of some features is outweighed by the cost of (often significantly) increasing the input dimensionality. We hypothesize that this may be due to the low resolution and/or noise present in some features, such as the weather forecast features, which have a resolution of 27 km, while the fire masks have a resolution of 375 m.

6. The WSTS+ Benchmark

Our results on the WSTS benchmark indicated that relatively simple models performed best, such as those based upon a ResNet-18, rather than models utilizing larger encoders (e.g., ResNet-50) or those utilizing attention (e.g., SwinUnet). This contrasts sharply with the broader vision literature where larger models tend to perform best, given sufficient quantities of training data. Therefore, we hypothesize that collecting more training data would facilitate the use of larger models, yielding superior modeling performance. To investigate this hypothesis, we expand the original WSTS benchmark by curating four additional years of historical wildfire data: 2016, 2017, 2022, and 2023. Our extended dataset, termed WSTS+, contains twice the number of years of historical wildfire data, expands the geographic diversity of the benchmark, and is – to our knowledge – the largest public benchmark for time-series next-day wildifre spread prediction. We visualize the geographic distribution of WSTS+ events in Fig. 3 and find that it much of the new data is in the Western United States, similar to WSTS, but that it includes some unique locations there, and some additional data in the eastern states. Tab. 4 summarizes the differences between both datasets in terms of numbers of years, fire events, total images, and active fire pixels. Further collection details can be found in Sec. 10.1.

Table 4. Comparison between the original WSTS dataset and our extension. We double the number of years and total images and drastically increase the number of fire events and active fire pixels.

Dataset	WSTS	WSTS+	Increase (%)
Years	4 (2018-2021)	8 (2016-2023)	+100
Fire Events	607	1,005	+65.6
Total Images	13,607	24,462	+79.8
Active Fire Px	1,878,679	2,638,537	+40.4

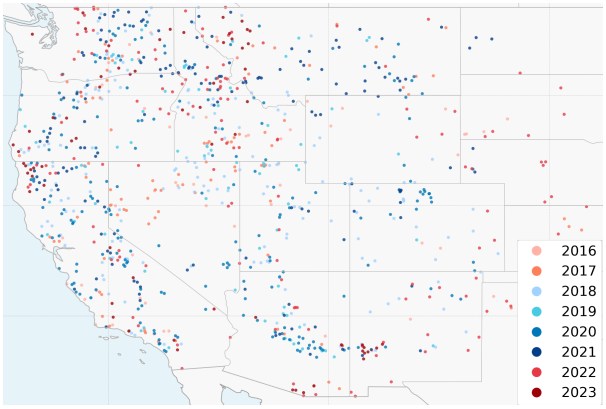


Figure 3. Geographic distribution of the fire events in each year of WSTS (blue) and WSTS+ (red)

6.1. Benchmarking Models with WSTS+

As compared to WSTS, we propose a new scheme for evaluating models using WSTS+, which exploits its greater size to significantly reduce computational complexity compared to WSTS's 12-fold cross-validation – thereby making the benchmark more accessible to researchers – while maintaining a similar level of real-world rigor. For WSTS+, we propose to divide the available data into four folds that each contain two consecutive years of historical wildfire data. We then evaluate models using four-fold cross-validation, where in each iteration, one fold of data is used for testing, one fold for validation, and two folds for training, as illustrated in Fig. 4. To ensure that the testing and validation sets have the same relative temporal distance to the training set, we always select them so that they are non-consecutive. This results in four-fold cross-validation instead of the twelve-fold cross-validation utilized in WSTS, making it far less computationally intensive. At the same time, this approach doubles the quantity of data in the training and validation sets, ideally allowing researchers to train larger and more sophisticated models. Lastly, because two consecutive years of data are included in the test set, the benchmark still evaluates models under challenging, realistic testing conditions.

1	(2016, 2017)	(2018, 2019)	(2020, 2021)	(2022, 2023)
2	(2016, 2017)	(2018, 2019)	(2020, 2021)	(2022, 2023)
3	(2016, 2017)	(2018, 2019)	(2020, 2021)	(2022, 2023)
4	(2016, 2017)	(2018, 2019)	(2020, 2021)	(2022, 2023)

Figure 4. New cross-validation folds used for WSTS+. Each pair of consecutive years is used as validation/testing once. Color code: blue: training, orange: validation, green: test

Table 5. Mean test AP $\pm$ standard deviation using vegetation features only (Veg), vegetation, land cover, topography and weather (Multi) and All features, when training on the WSTS+ dataset Results style: **best**

Model	Days	Veg	Multi	All
Res18-Unet	1	0.349 ± 0.109	0.351 ± 0.105	$\mathbf{0.351 \pm 0.122}$
Res50-Unet	1	0.345 ± 0.096	0.353 ± 0.122	$\mathbf{0.351 \pm 0.122}$
Res18-Unet-LTAE	5	$\mathbf{0.354 \pm 0.113}$	$\mathbf{0.363 \pm 0.129}$	0.350 ± 0.117

6.2. Experimental Results with WSTS+

Using our updated cross-validation scheme, we train our best $T = 1$ models and our best $T = 5$ model on WSTS+ and report the results in terms of mean average precision across all three feature sets in Tab. 5. We see that the performance rank-order of our three models is still similar on WSTS+ as compared to WSTS. However, the overall performance is significantly lower for these models on WSTS+ as compared to WSTS (by roughly 0.1 AP). These results seem to contradict our initial hypothesis that additional training data would enable larger models and improve accuracy. To investigate further, Fig. 5 reports the *per-year* performance for a Res18-Unet trained on either WSTS or WSTS+ (denoted Res18-Unet(WSTS) and Res18-Unet(WSTS+), respectively; see caption for details). These results reveal that both models obtain very similar AP on every testing year, despite Res18-Unet(WSTS+) being trained on twice as many years of data in each fold as Res18-Unet(WSTS). Since the two models perform similarly across all years, the lower overall performance obtained on the WSTS+ benchmark in Tab. 5 is likely due to the greater apparent difficulty of the new testing years (2016, 2017, 2022, and 2023), rather than lower predictive accuracy of the models trained on WSTS+.

6.3. Domain Shift: A Potential Challenge to Scaling Data-Driven Wildfire Modeling

The results in Fig. 5 raise a question: why does significantly increasing the quantity and diversity of the training data in WSTS+ lead to little or no improvement? In Sec. 10.2, we present evidence that, in pursuit of WSTS+, we accurately reproduced the preprocessing used for WSTS. Therefore, we argue here that this result is likely caused by cross-year *domain shift* [41], wherein the joint probability distribution of the features and targets, denoted $p(x(t), y(t))$, varies across years. There is a large literature about identifying and addressing domain shift (e.g., see [39, 41]), and comprehensively addressing these problems is beyond the scope of this work. However, we seek here to provide evidence that domain shift is present in historical wildfire datasets, provide an initial characterization of it, and discuss the implications of it. There are many different types of domain shift based upon precisely how $p(x(t), y(t))$ changes from training to testing conditions (or across years in our case) [27, 28, 41]). We consider here two widely-studied types of shift: concept and covariate shift.

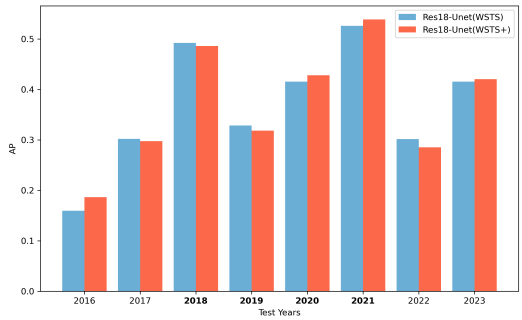


Figure 5. Performance breakdown by test year. Blue bars represent models trained on the original WSTS data, termed Res18-Unet(WSTS), while red bars represent those trained on WSTS+, termed Res18-Unet(WSTS+). The bolded x-axis ticks highlight original test years from WSTS. For Res18-Unet(WSTS+), we stratify its performance by year. For Res18-Unet(WSTS), we stratify by year to obtain performance for 2018 to 2021. To obtain performance on the remaining years, we select the cross-validation fold with the best-performing model (as judged by its test fold error) and report its performance on the newly added WSTS+ years.

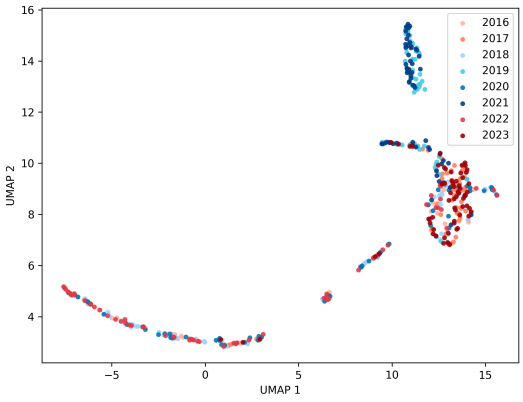


Figure 6. UMAP visualization of the input features across years. Each point represents the encoded features at the deepest layer of our best Res18-Unet encoder, with blue indicating original WSTS year and red newly added years in WSTS+

Concept Shift refers to changes in the conditional distribution $p(y(t)|x(t))$, which in a regression context *generally*

implies that the true underlying function $y(t) = f(x(t))$ is changing. Under this hypothesis, we would expect that combining multiple years of data would likely lead to significant reductions in accuracy, since each year exhibits a different underlying relationship. Our results in Fig. 5 indicate that adding two additional years of training data, as is done in WSTS+, did not significantly impact accuracy, suggesting that significant concept shifts are unlikely. In Tab. 6 we also report the results of an experiment where we train eight Res18-Unet models - one on data from each year - and then test each model on a disjoint test set from each year (see Sec. 10.4 for experimental details). The results indicate that, given a specific single testing year, most models achieve relatively similar accuracy, also suggesting they are each learning similar concepts.

Covariate Shift refers to change in the marginal distribution, $p(x(t))$. Covariate shifts are thought to often have limited negative impact for high-capacity models [41], such as our DNNs here. Under this hypothesis, additional years of training data may be either beneficial or neutral, but not especially detrimental. This hypothesis is therefore consistent with Fig. 5. It is also corroborated by the results of Tab. 6 if we note that, for a specific testing year, the accuracy of most single-year models is similar to that obtained by WSTS models (trained on two years) and WSTS+ models (trained on four years) in Fig. 5. For example, if we take 2018 as the testing year, then the average of single-year models in Tab. 6 is nearly the same as the WSTS and WSTS+ models in Fig. 5. In other words, despite significant differences in the years included in, and total size of the training data, these models usually perform similarly. Notably, this also indicates that the WSTS benchmark did not benefit from additional training data: the WSTS models in Fig. 5 do not perform differently (on average) than the single-year models in Tab. 6. As additional quantitative evidence, Sec. 10.3 provides substantial additional evidence that there is significant inter-year variability in environmental conditions (e.g., landcover composition, vegetation indices, and weather variables) and fire size and behavior. This is summarized and corroborated by Fig. 6, which presents a UMAP visualization of the features extracted by our Res18-Unet for each year in WSTS+. The results show that there is significant overlap in the feature distributions, but there are also significant apparent shifts across years.

Conclusions It is well-known within the fire science community that fire spread is impacted by a diverse set of environmental factors (e.g., weather, topography, and fuel) [22, 44], and these factors vary substantially across space and time. For example, fire behavior experts have long established that annual weather patterns strongly influence both fire prevalence and extent [48]. Most of these important environmental factors are encoded by one or multiple input features in the WSTS dataset, providing a plausible physical basis for inter-year covariate shift. Our analysis above provides substantial additional evidence that there is significant inter-year covariate shift in historical wildfire data, which would explain the limited benefits of additional training data in WSTS+.

Table 6. Cross-year results: Rows show the year the model was trained on, while columns show the year the model was tested on.

Year	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	Avg
2016	**0.350**	0.291	0.490	0.276	0.173	0.544	0.268	0.416	0.351
2017	0.242	**0.300**	0.487	0.288	0.180	0.568	0.301	0.437	0.351
2018	0.265	0.297	**0.576**	0.313	0.194	0.595	0.344	0.465	0.381
2019	0.219	0.259	0.455	**0.329**	0.159	0.530	0.324	0.428	0.338
2020	0.222	0.263	0.501	0.285	**0.220**	0.572	0.295	0.460	0.352
2021	0.253	0.321	0.534	0.330	0.187	**0.649**	0.328	0.465	0.384
2022	0.227	0.249	0.460	0.261	0.163	0.508	**0.390**	0.416	0.334
2023	0.242	0.279	0.483	0.289	0.157	0.568	0.324	**0.582**	0.365
Avg	0.253	0.282	0.498	0.296	0.179	0.567	0.322	0.459	0.357

7. Conclusion

We investigated the problem of next-day wildfire spread prediction, systematically comparing a variety of (mostly) existing modeling strategies in two scenarios: single-day ($T = 1$) and time-series ($T = 5$) input, as illustrated in Fig. 1. We conducted our experiments on the WSTS benchmark [17] using a realistic 12-fold LOYO cross-validation and drew the following conclusions:

- Our study revealed which modeling strategies perform best, resulting in new models that obtain a 37% and a 28% improvement, respectively, over the current WSTS state-of-the-art for single-day and time-series prediction. We find that substantial performance gains can be achieved not through novel architectures, but through the careful application and optimization of existing methods.
- A time-series model obtained the best overall performance, and time-series models usually outperformed comparable single-day models, suggesting time-series models are an important future area of research.
- We introduce WSTS+, an extension of WSTS, that doubles the number of years of historical wildfire events in WSTS, and yields the largest existing public benchmark for *time-series* spread prediction.
- Analysis of WSTS and WSTS+ suggests that there is significant cross-year domain shift in historical wildfire data. Preliminary investigation suggests it is primarily in the form of covariate shift, undermining the benefits of adding training data, but we hypothesize this problem may subside as total available historical data grows.

Future work may focus on investigating the nature of domain shift in historical wildfire data and overcoming any associated challenges, potentially enabling larger or more complex models (e.g., high-capacity attention-based models) to realize their full potential performance.

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