



CRS Report for Congress

California Wildfires and Federal Assistance

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Summary

Wildfires in southern California have destroyed homes and forced thousands to evacuate. The federal government is assisting state and local efforts to control the fires and evacuate those at risk. Federal programs also exist to assist in recovery efforts after the fires are out. Preventing a recurrence of catastrophic wildfires is impossible, but research has shown how to protect homes even while wildfires are burning.

Raging wildfires, burned homes, and the evacuation of thousands of Californians have been making headlines. Options for federal support and assistance — during the fires, in the aftermath, and aimed at preventing a recurrence — have been raised by many concerned about the ongoing disaster. This report addresses these federal options.

During the Fire

Two federal options for action exist while wildfires are burning. One option relates to efforts to control and extinguish the fires. Federal responsibility for wildfire suppression is limited to federal lands; states are responsible for suppressing wildfires on nonfederal (state and private) lands.¹ The federal government provides support to the states in two ways. One is through direct financial assistance for state fire protection efforts, funded through the Forest Service's state fire assistance program.² The other, and more critical in the current situation, consists of fire suppression forces and assistance — personnel, funding, and equipment (including aircraft) — provided at a state's request, and coordinated through the National Interagency Fire Center (NIFC) in Boise, ID as well as the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). In emergencies, NIFC coordinates federal, state, and private forces (including the military, when called upon) to assist the state or region in need while maintaining local wildfire protection. How paying for these forces gets allocated is usually addressed after the emergency is over. Fire management assistance is also provided by FEMA under the Robert T. Stafford

¹ See CRS Report RL30755, *Forest Fire/Wildfire Protection*, by Ross W. Gorte.

² See CRS Report RL33990, *Wildfire Funding*, by Ross W. Gorte.

Disaster Relief and Emergency Assistance Act.³ Fire management assistance declarations for the California wildfires were issued by FEMA on October 21 and 22, 2007.⁴

The second federal option is to support state and local efforts to evacuate the areas threatened by wildfires. Presidential declaration of an emergency (as has occurred for part of California) triggers federal aid to protect property and public health and safety while preserving state autonomy and responsibility.⁵ Although the new national response framework, required in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, is still not complete, FEMA and the National Guard have been assisting state and local agencies in evacuating areas and establishing and maintaining evacuation shelters.

In the Aftermath

As with during-the-fire efforts, federal actions in the aftermath of a wildfire disaster can take two principal forms. In the first, a presidential declaration of an emergency initiates a process for federal assistance to help state and local governments and families and individuals recover from the disaster. The nature and extent of the assistance depends on a number of factors, such as the nature and severity of the wildfire damages and the insurance coverage of the affected parties.

Site rehabilitation following fire is the second principal form of support by federal agencies. On federal lands, site rehabilitation routinely occurs as an emergency wildfire program. On state and private lands, the responsibility lies with the landowner, but federal assistance can be provided through the state fire assistance and forest stewardship (also state assistance) programs.⁶ However, severely burned areas (especially in southern California) are at risk of landslides during the subsequent rainy season. Little can be done to prevent such events, but monitoring can provide warning to homeowners to evacuate the area prior to a landslide, and other federal post-disaster assistance can then become available.

Preventing a Recurrence

Numerous federal programs provide grants to states and local governments to prepare for wildfire emergencies. The Forest Service provides financial and technical assistance and equipment to states and volunteer fire departments, and through the states for community wildfire protection planning. FEMA provides grants and training for firefighting and for community responses to terrorist attacks and natural disasters.⁷

³ 42 U.S.C. § 5187.

⁴ “Fire Management Assistance Declarations,” [<http://www.fema.gov/news/disasters.fema#sev3>], visited October 24, 2007.

⁵ See CRS Report RL34146, *FEMA’s Disaster Declaration Process: A Primer*, by Francis X. McCarthy.

⁶ See CRS Report RL31065, *Forestry Assistance Programs*, by Ross W. Gorte.

⁷ See CRS Report RS21302, *Assistance to Firefighters Program*, by Lennard G. Kruger, and CRS Report RS22393, *State and Urban Area Homeland Security Plans and Exercises: Issues for the 110th Congress*, by Shawn Reese.

A perhaps bigger question is how to prevent a recurrence of the catastrophic fires. The answer is: You can't. Drought, lightning, and high winds make extreme wildfires inevitable. They cannot be prevented in ecosystems that have evolved with wildfire, such as the chaparral of southern California. However, it is possible to protect structures in such settings. Federal research and grants, particularly for the FIREWISE program, have shown how homeowners can protect their structures, even while wildfires burn around them.⁸ The keys are the structure itself (especially non-flammable roofing) and the landscaping within 40 meters of the structure. Zoning could inform and enforce appropriate standards for wildfire protection.

⁸ See, for example, Jack D. Cohen, "Reducing the Wildland Fire Threat to Homes: Where and How Much?" *Proceedings of the Symposium on Fire Economics, Planning, and Policy: Bottom Lines* (San Diego, CA: April 5-9, 1999), Gen. Tech. Rept. PSW-GTR-173 (Berkeley, CA: USDA Forest Service, December 1999), pp. 189-195.