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Federal Assistance for Wildfire Response and Recovery

Wildfires are unplanned and unwanted fires. Wildfires can have some beneficial impacts on an ecosystem, but also often threaten homes and communities and force the evacuation of thousands of people. Wildfires are often caused by lightning strikes, and may also occur when a prescribed burn escapes control or through unauthorized human activities (deliberate or accidental). Over the last 10 years (2008-2017), wildfires have burned 6.6 million acres annually on average in the United States. In 2017, more than 71,500 wildfires burned 10.0 million acres and destroyed more than 12,300 structures nationwide. More than 65% (8,065) of the structures destroyed were residences, and nearly 90% of the structures destroyed (11,000) were in a single state, California.

Congress and other stakeholders have considered options for federal support and assistance to address wildfire suppression during a fire, post-wildfire recovery in the aftermath, and land management activities to reduce the risk of future catastrophic wildfires.

During the Fire

The federal government is responsible for responding to wildfires that begin on federal lands. The Forest Service (FS), within the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), carries out wildfire management and response across the 193 million acres of the National Forest System. The Department of the Interior (DOI) manages wildfire response for more than 400 million acres of national parks, wildlife refuges and preserves, other public lands, and Indian reservations.

Federal responsibility for wildfire suppression is intended to protect lives, property, and resources on federal lands. Federal wildfire policy is to evaluate the risks to firefighter and public safety and welfare—and to natural, ecological, and cultural values to be protected—to determine the appropriate response to wildfire. Depending on the risk assessment, the federal response may range from active suppression to monitoring, as supported by the area's land and resource management plans.

States are responsible for suppressing wildfires on nonfederal (state, local, and private) lands, although the response may be managed jointly for wildfires that encompass comingled land ownership types (including federal lands). The federal government supports the states in several ways. Many states have partnerships with federal agencies to provide wildfire suppression services through cooperative agreements. These cooperative fire protection agreements authorize federal and state partners to share resources—such as aviation equipment and personnel—depending on ongoing need during a wildfire season, allowing for a coordinated interagency response that deploys resources to areas of greatest critical need. The

National Interagency Coordination Center, located at the National Interagency Fire Center in Boise, Idaho, coordinates and allocates federal, state, and private forces (including the military, when called upon) and resources at a national level. Geographic Area Coordination Centers coordinate and allocate resources at nine regional levels. The cost of these resources is then reimbursed as specified in the cooperative fire protection master agreement, which often lists several different methods to apportion costs, each with different financial impacts.

A state may also request assistance from the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) of the Department of Homeland Security for wildfires that began on state or private lands. A governor could request an emergency declaration when a wildfire is burning out of control and threatens to become a major disaster. However, the most frequent assistance provided at this stage from FEMA is through the Fire Management Assistance Grants (FMAGs) as authorized by the Robert T. Stafford Disaster Relief and Emergency Assistance Act (Stafford Act, 42 U.S.C. §5271 et seq.). Once issued, an FMAG declaration authorizes various forms of federal assistance—such as equipment; personnel; and grants to state, local, and tribal governments—for the control, management, and mitigation of any fire on certain public or private forest land or grassland that might become a major disaster. The grants may reimburse up to 75% of the allowable suppression costs for eligible fires. FMAG declarations, unlike some major disaster declarations, do not authorize assistance to individuals and households. A state or tribe may also request that the President declare the wildfire a major disaster under the Stafford Act, authorizing other assistance and recovery programs, including assistance to individuals and households.

The federal government also supports state and local efforts to evacuate areas threatened by wildfires. A presidential declaration triggers federal aid to protect property and public health and safety while attempting to preserve state autonomy and responsibility. The National Planning Frameworks, required to be created in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, guide FEMA on how to assist state and local agencies with emergencies and disasters, including wildfires.

In the Aftermath

Federal actions in the aftermath of a wildfire disaster can take two principal forms: assistance for economic recovery and assistance for ecological recovery. Economic recovery includes resources to repair damage to infrastructure and private property. A presidential declaration of a major disaster initiates a process for federal assistance to help state and local governments and communities 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.

Ecological recovery includes resources for site rehabilitation and restoration. On federal lands, site rehabilitation routinely occurs under an emergency wildfire program through the FS or DOI's Burned Area Emergency Response protocols, as well as through regular land management activities. Activities include sowing areas with quick-growing grasses as well as planting trees and other activities to reduce erosion. They may also include removing dead or damaged trees threatening resources or public safety.

On state and private lands, site rehabilitation is the responsibility of the landowner, but USDA has several programs that can provide assistance following wildfires or other natural disasters. For example, the Emergency Watershed Protection Program (administered jointly by the Forest Service and Natural Resources Conservation Service), as well as the Emergency Forest Restoration Program and the Emergency Conservation Program (both administered by the Farm Service Agency) can provide technical and financial assistance for stabilization, recovery, and restoration activities, respectively. USDA also has several agricultural assistance programs to help farmers and ranchers recover from production losses following natural disasters.

Some severely burned areas are at risk of landslides during subsequent rainstorms, even after site restoration efforts. Little can be done to prevent such events, but monitoring (usually the responsibility of the landowner) can provide warning to homeowners to evacuate an area prior to a landslide. After a landslide, other federal post-disaster assistance might become available.

Prevention and Mitigation

Numerous federal programs provide grants to states and local governments to prepare for wildfire emergencies. FS provides financial and technical assistance for state and volunteer fire protection efforts. Through partnerships with state forestry agencies, these programs provide funds for pre-fire community wildfire protection planning and preparation, hazard mitigation, equipment, and personnel training. FEMA provides grants and training for firefighting

and for community responses to terrorist attacks and natural disasters. Projects to reduce the risk of future fires may also be eligible under FEMA's Pre-Disaster Mitigation Program.

Other issues include how to prevent a recurrence of catastrophic fires or minimize the damage after one occurs. Conditions such as drought, lightning, and high winds make preventing catastrophic wildfires impossible, but reducing fuel levels can reduce the potential damages from wildfires and decrease the likelihood of a catastrophic wildfire occurring in some cases. However, severe wildfires cannot be prevented in certain ecosystems, such as the chaparral of southern California and lodgepole pine in the northern and central Rockies, and in many cases, these fires are crucial to ecosystem functions. (Some tree species—lodgepole pines, for example—require high temperatures to release their seeds.) Nonetheless, it is often 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. The keys are the structure itself (especially nonflammable roofing) and the landscaping within 40 meters of the structure. Local zoning typically is used to inform and enforce appropriate standards for wildfire protection for structures.

CRS Products

CRS Report R43738, *Fire Management Assistance Grants: Frequently Asked Questions*.

CRS Report R42854, *Emergency Assistance for Agricultural Land Rehabilitation*.

CRS Report RS21212, *Agricultural Disaster Assistance*.

CRS Report RL34537, *FEMA's Pre-Disaster Mitigation Program: Overview and Issues*.

CRS Report R43784, *FEMA's Disaster Declaration Process: A Primer*.

CRS Report R41884, *Considerations for a Catastrophic Declaration: Issues and Analysis*.

CRS Report R41981, *Congressional Primer on Responding to Major Disasters and Emergencies*.

CRS Report R43537, *FEMA's Disaster Relief Fund: Overview and Selected Issues*.

CRS Report R40811, *Wildfire Fuels and Fuel Reduction*.

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