

Updated August 6, 2021

Federal Assistance for Wildfire Response and Recovery

Wildfires are unplanned and unwanted fires. Wildfires can have some beneficial impacts on an ecosystem, but they often threaten homes and communities, forcing the evacuation of thousands of people. Wildfires are sometimes caused by lightning strikes and may occur when a prescribed burn escapes control or through other human activities (deliberate or accidental). Annually from 2011 to 2020, there were an average of 62,805 wildfires and an average of 7.5 million acres impacted. In 2020, 58,950 wildfires burned 10.1 million acres, the second-most acreage impacted in a year since 1960; nearly 40% of these acres were in California. In 2020, wildfires destroyed nearly 18,000 structures nationwide, 54% (9,630) of which were residences.

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

During a Fire

The federal government is responsible for responding to wildfires that begin on federal lands. 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. The Forest Service (FS), within the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), manages wildfire response across the 193 million acres of the National Forest System.

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 comingled land ownership, 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 fire protection agreements. These agreements authorize federal and state partners to share resources—such as aviation equipment and personnel—during a wildfire season, allowing for a coordinated interagency response that deploys resources to areas of greatest critical need. The National Multi-Agency Coordination Group, located at the National Interagency Fire Center in Boise, ID, coordinates and allocates federal,

state, and private forces (as well as the military, when called upon) and resources at a national level. Geographic Area Coordination Centers coordinate and allocate resources at 10 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 also may request assistance from the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) of the Department of Homeland Security for wildfires that began on state or private lands. If a wildfire were burning out of control and threatened to become a major disaster, a governor could request an emergency declaration. However, the most frequent assistance provided at this stage from FEMA is through 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 (e.g., equipment; personnel; and grants to state, local, and tribal governments) for the control, management, and mitigation of any fire on certain public or private forestland or grassland that might become a major disaster. The grants may reimburse up to 75% of 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 request that the President declare a 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. Information on active wildfires may be found at <https://inciweb.nwcg.gov>.

COVID-19 Pandemic Considerations

The COVID-19 pandemic presents several interrelated challenges for wildland fire management. Wildland fire response typically involves activities and conditions that can facilitate the transmission of infectious diseases such as COVID-19. For example, wildland firefighters and other support personnel work and live in close proximity to one another during an active fire, and fire crews often travel to and from different states over the course of a fire season. In addition, exposure to wildfire smoke may increase the

occurrence or seriousness of respiratory infections. More information on wildland firefighters and COVID-19 risk is available at <http://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/wildland-firefighters-faq.html>. The Wildland Fire COVID-19 Medical and Public Health Advisory Team has issued recommendations, based on guidance from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, for the prevention and management of COVID-19 during a wildland fire (see <http://www.nwcg.gov/partners/fmb/covid-19>.)

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 type 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 conducting other activities to reduce erosion, reduce impacts to water resources, or mitigate the risk of a landslide. 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. For example, the Emergency Watershed Protection Program (administered jointly by the FS and Natural Resources Conservation Service), 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. USDA also has several agricultural assistance programs to help farmers and ranchers recover from production losses following natural disasters, including wildfires. Congress also has provided supplemental, ad-hoc disaster assistance funding to respond to wildfire events. For example, the FY2019 supplemental appropriations act (P.L. 116-20) provided funding for the Wildfires and Hurricanes Indemnity Program Plus for agricultural losses in 2018 and 2019 from wildfires, hurricanes, and other natural disasters.

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

mudslides are covered by National Flood Insurance Program policies.

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 community wildfire protection planning and preparation, hazard mitigation, equipment, and personnel training. FMA and major disaster declarations authorize statewide hazard mitigation through FEMA's Hazard Mitigation Grant Program. FEMA also provides grants and training for firefighting and for community responses to natural disasters, including wildfires. Projects to reduce the risk of future wildfires may also be eligible under FEMA's Building Resilient Infrastructure and Communities Program (formerly the Pre-Disaster Grant Mitigation Program).

Other wildfire issues include how to prevent a recurrence of catastrophic fires or minimize damage after they occur. Conditions such as drought, lightning, and high winds make preventing wildfires impossible, but reducing fuel levels (e.g., dead wood) can reduce their potential damage and, in some cases, can decrease the likelihood they will become catastrophic. Severe wildfires cannot be prevented or mitigated in certain ecosystems, however, such as the chaparral of Southern California and lodgepole pine in the northern and central Rockies, which are adapted to high-severity, stand-replacing fires. In many cases, these fires are crucial to ecosystem functions; for example, lodgepole pines require high temperatures from fires to release their seeds. Human interventions, such as fuel reduction, may not mitigate the risk or potential ecological impact of these fires. Nonetheless, it is often possible to protect structures and other resources in such settings. Federal research, grants, and outreach programs are available to educate communities and homeowners on strategies for protecting residences and other structures. Some keys are the design of the structure itself (especially nonflammable roofing) and the landscaping within close proximity of the structure. Local zoning is typically used to inform and enforce appropriate wildfire protection standards.

CRS Products

CRS Report R40884, *Wildfires: CRS Experts*.

CRS Insight IN11716, *2021 Wildfire Season: Brief Overview of FEMA Programs and Resources*.

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

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

CRS In Focus IF11539, *Wildfires and Hurricanes Indemnity Program (WHIP)*.

Katie Hoover, Specialist in Natural Resources Policy

IF10732

Disclaimer

This document was prepared by the Congressional Research Service (CRS). CRS serves as nonpartisan shared staff to congressional committees and Members of Congress. It operates solely at the behest of and under the direction of Congress. Information in a CRS Report should not be relied upon for purposes other than public understanding of information that has been provided by CRS to Members of Congress in connection with CRS's institutional role. CRS Reports, as a work of the United States Government, are not subject to copyright protection in the United States. Any CRS Report may be reproduced and distributed in its entirety without permission from CRS. However, as a CRS Report may include copyrighted images or material from a third party, you may need to obtain the permission of the copyright holder if you wish to copy or otherwise use copyrighted material.