

November 2022

Federal Costs of Wildfires and Wildfire Management



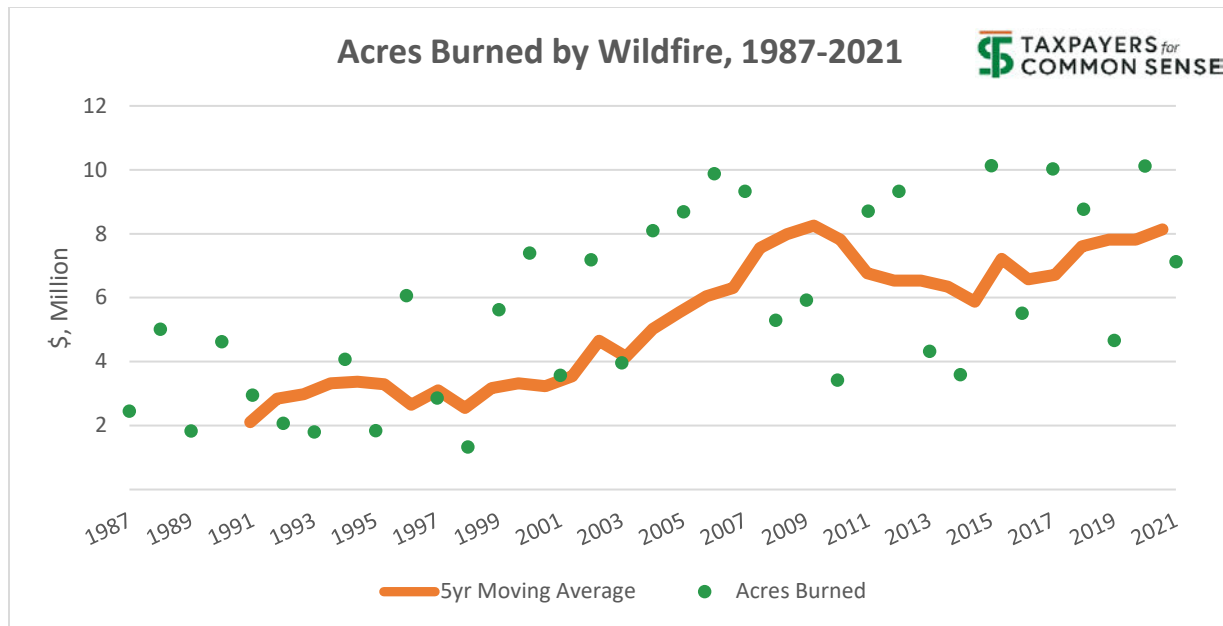
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Wildfire and Federal Wildfire Costs

Wildfires are unplanned fires caused by nature, including lightning, and human activities like unattended campfires, electrical failures, etc. Wildfire has become a growing problem exacerbated by climate change. Over the past three decades, wildfires have burned increasingly larger tracts of grasslands and forests. The nonpartisan Congressional Budget Office (CBO) found that from 2017 to 2021, 8 million acres were burned in the US, on average, “more than double the average amount from 1987 to 1991.”¹ Wildfire suppression costs have also ballooned. The federal government spent on average \$2.86 billion on suppression alone each year from 2017 to 2021, more than double the amount spent from 2007 to 2011.²

¹ Congressional Budget Office (CBO), Wildfires, June 16, 2022. <https://www.cbo.gov/publication/57970>

² National Interagency Fire Center, Suppression Costs. <https://www.nifc.gov/fire-information/statistics/suppression-costs>



Data Source: National Interagency Fire Center, "Total Wildland Fires and Acres," www.nifc.gov/fire-information/statistics/wildfires

Suppression costs, and even disaster aid appropriations, rehabilitation, and prevention costs are easier to tally in dollars and cents. But the true costs of wildfires extend far beyond these suppression costs. Wildfires also destroy properties and thus affect insurance premiums, deteriorate air quality and lead to long term health conditions, and impact watershed, ecosystems, infrastructure, etc. While these costs are harder to quantify than suppression costs, they still have a real, meaningful impact on federal taxpayers' pocketbooks as well as our day-to-day lives.

With the rising direct and indirect costs of wildfires and the acceleration of climate change, the federal government has a vested role in the prevention and suppression of wildfires, as well as post-fire rehabilitation. Government agencies primarily responsible for wildfire management on federal lands and national forests include the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Forest Service (FS) and the Department of the Interior (DOI). Over the last 10 fiscal years, Congress has appropriated \$4.9 billion on average each year to FS and DOI for wildfire management.³ The federal government also supports wildfire activities on nonfederal lands through suppression coordination, wildfire prevention, disaster recovery, and broader climate change programs through other programs, departments, and agencies. As a result, total federal spending on wildfire is much higher than direct wildfire management appropriations.

³ Congressional Research Service (CRS), Federal Wildfire Management: Ten-Year Funding Trends and Issues (FY2011-FY2020) <https://sgp.fas.org/crs/misc/R46583.pdf>
 CRS, Wildfire Management Funding, FY2021 Appropriations, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IF/IF11675>
 CRS, Wildfire Management Funding, FY2022 Appropriations, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IF/IF11978>

Federal Taxpayers Need Smarter Wildfire Spending and Forest Management Policies

Suppression without investing in prevention will lead to more suppression spending down the road.

U.S. Forest Service's fire suppression costs have escalated in recent years. Wildland fire programs associated with suppression accounted for 16% of the FS's total budget in FY1995. By FY2015, wildfire suppression accounted for more than half of the agency's budget,⁴ and the portion dedicated to fighting fires has risen further in recent years. This ballooning cost has crowded out available FS resources that can be spent on other important programs like wildfire prevention measures that can save lives and properties, not to mention long-term taxpayer costs.

Without smarter, targeted investments in wildfire prevention and resilience measures, future suppression costs will continue to increase. The Infrastructure, Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA) appropriated billions of dollars over the next decade on wildfire risk reduction, but this is just the first step toward delivering results for everyone from at-risk communities to taxpayers. Relevant agencies must ensure wildfire and other funding is spent wisely, without waste, fraud, and abuse, and Congress must engage in active oversight to ensure funding is achieving desired outcomes in a cost-effective manner.

Not all fires need to be suppressed.

Not all wildfires are bad. Wildfires can be regenerative, creating essential habitats for a variety of species that have evolved to thrive in post-fire ecosystems.⁵ In fact, aggressive fire management and suppression have disrupted the natural role of fire in certain ecosystems. The Forest Service estimated that from 1984 to 2012, many forests in the western U.S. have experienced a fire deficit while many non-forested areas experienced a fire surplus.⁶ Fire deficit can actually increase the risk of wildfire in certain areas.⁷

Managing wildfires and wildfire risk in the wildland-urban interface (WUI) is different than in remote, forested regions. The US should work to ensure fires avoid the reach of populated areas. However, spending billions of dollars suppressing fires that don't need to be suppressed, or don't need to be fully suppressed, may waste taxpayer dollars and lead to additional fire risks in the future as well.

⁴ USDA Forest Service The Rising Cost of Fire Operations: Effects on the Forest Service's NonFire Work

<https://www.fs.usda.gov/sites/default/files/2015-Fire-Budget-Report.pdf>

⁵ Zwolak and Forsman (2008), Canadian Journal of Zoology

⁶ USFS, Wildland fire deficit and surplus in the western United States. August 25, 2016.

<https://www.fs.usda.gov/rmrs/science-spotlights/wildland-fire-deficit-and-surplus-western-united-states>

⁷ Fire deficit increases wildfire risk for many communities in the Canadian boreal forest.

<https://www.nature.com/articles/s41467-020-15961-y>

Forest management should be based on science and build long-term community and landscape resilience.

The IJA made significant investments towards wildfire risk reduction programs. However, projects carried out for the purpose of fuel reduction, logging, and restoration do not always reduce wildfire risks and might in fact increase fire risk. It's important to scrutinize federal forest management programs to ensure they follow scientific evidence, are spending taxpayer dollars wisely, and are not working at cross-purpose with one another. For example, mature and old growth forests have the highest carbon densities, retaining carbon on-site even if trees are killed by fire. They can serve as significant carbon banks for centuries. Allowing taxpayer subsidies to flow to the logging and felling of older trees may fail to achieve goals of reducing fire risk while also reducing the amount of carbon stored in trees, a vital tool to cost-effectively combat climate change. The IJA made billions of dollars' worth of investment towards wildfire risk reduction, and it's crucial to ensure that these investments are not misguided or cater to industry special interests, but instead build resilience and reduce taxpayers' long-term financial and climate liabilities associated with wildfires.

Conclusion

As wildfires became more prevalent and increasingly catastrophic over the last few decades, both the direct and indirect costs of wildfires have ballooned. Wildfires have a huge impact on federal taxpayers' pocketbooks as well as our day-to-day lives. The federal government needs to take action to protect taxpayers from wildfire and associated liabilities. Federal taxpayers also need smarter investments on wildfire prevention, as well as wildfire and forest management policies that follow science, spend taxpayer dollars wisely, and don't work cross-purpose with one another.

