

## Interagency Wildfire Commission Report: Summary and Analysis

The 2021 Infrastructure, Investment, and Jobs Act established the Wildland Fire Mitigation and Management Commission. This interagency commission was charged with developing recommendations for Congress to mitigate and manage wildland fires. Many of the Commission's final recommendations, if implemented, could significantly reduce the costs of wildfires for communities and taxpayers.

### Background

The Commission comprised representatives from federal agencies, state, local, and Tribal governments, non-governmental organizations, academia, and the private sector.

On September 27th, the Commission released its final report, ON FIRE: The Report of the Wildland Fire Mitigation and Management Commission. The report offers a comprehensive but not exhaustive list of recommendations, agreed upon unanimously by commission members and subject matter experts. These 148 recommendations are categorized under seven themes:

- Urgent New Approaches,
- Supporting Collaboration,
- Shifting from Reactive to Proactive,
- Enabling Beneficial Fire,
- Supporting and Expanding the Workforce,
- Modernizing Tools for Informed Decision-Making, and
- Investing in Resilience.

The report organizes its recommendations according to the fire cycle—before, during, and after a fire. Before a fire, it focuses on actions in built and natural environments to lessen impacts. During a fire, it emphasizes improving response coordination and pre-fire planning. After a fire, it stresses actions to enhance resilience. Other recommendations, such as building an effective workforce, integrating modern science and technology, and future investments, apply throughout the fire cycle.

### Improving Wildfire Risk Mitigation

The Commission's recommendations include improving land use planning, using ignition-resistant structures, and developing standards for electric utility wildfire mitigation plans. Taxpayers for Common Sense (TCS) supports risk mitigation and intelligent redevelopment measures, especially in the Wildland Urban Interface (WUI), like wise land use planning and zoning practices and constructing with fire-resistant materials to lower wildfire risks. Additionally, recognizing the role for more controlled burns in the landscape, the

Commission suggests removing regulatory and administrative barriers to prescribed burns—a position TCS supports. TCS also endorses the Commission's recommendations on promoting fire science and technology, as well as post-fire ecological research.

### Evaluating the Success of Mitigation Activities

The Commission advocates for changing federal performance metrics to more accurately measure success, critiquing current metrics like acres treated or timber volume output for not effectively evaluating treatment effectiveness or taxpayer resource use. It found that such metrics “incentivize treating areas that can be reached at low cost rather than those with the highest risk or highest restoration potential.” As TCS reported in *Clearing the Smoke*, the current metrics of acres treated may also have been inflated by double- or triple-counting acres treated using different methods, which may misdirect federal taxpayer resources. The Commission recommends shifting metrics to outcome-based measures, like protected resources or restoration degree, and improving data collection and accessibility to support community protection and informed policymaking.

### Improving Budget Stability and Structures

Notably, the Commission made multiple recommendations that would improve budget stability and structures, like creating budget crosscuts to better track all federal wildfire spending and ensuring balanced, robust funding for pre-fire mitigation and post-fire restoration. In *Clearing the Smoke*, TCS also observed that there are many challenges in presenting a comprehensive view of federal wildfire spending, such as a lack of standard definitions for wildfire spending activities and accounts. However, opportunities exist for better cross-departmental tracking and accounting to identify federal spending trends

### Recalibrating Mitigation and Suppression Funding

TCS recommends recalibrating mitigation and suppression funding, highlighting the importance of maintaining funding levels for non-suppression programs to mitigate fire risks and reduce long-term suppression costs. The Commission supports this view, emphasizing the significance of pre-fire and post-fire funding, including recommendations for agencies to fund pre- and post-fire work under existing “fire response” appropriations.

### Mechanical Thinning and Investing in Wood/Biomass Utilization

The Commission made other recommendations that will warrant further study and feedback, including a focus on mechanical thinning and investing in wood/biomass utilization. In *Clearing the Smoke*, TCS cautioned against timber subsidies, which may create perverse incentives that compromise forest health and risk mitigation objectives. Where timber and other forest products harvest can take place is often determined by road access, commercial viability, and other local conditions that may misalign with wildfire spatial patterns or even undermine overall forest health. The Commission recognized this in the report and agreed that fuel treatment decisions should not be based on commercial viability, cautioning that prioritizing commercial output could be “a significant distraction from and impediment to strategic wildfire mitigation and management.”