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## Federal Spending and Programs on Wildfire



2003 Simi Fire | U.S. Air Force via [Wikimedia](#)

Wildfires are a growing and costly threat, driven by climate change and increasing development in fire-prone areas. At Taxpayers for Common Sense, we work to ensure federal wildfire disaster spending is transparent, effective, and fiscally responsible. With billions of taxpayer dollars allocated each year across multiple programs and agencies, we advocate for smarter investments in mitigation, forest management, and community resilience to reduce the devastating impacts of wildfires. By promoting strategic resource allocation, we strive to protect lives, property, and taxpayer dollars while addressing the root causes of escalating wildfire costs.

### Rising Wildfire Threats

- **Increased Frequency and Costs:** Wildfires have grown larger and more intense over the past three decades due to climate change and hazardous fuel buildup. Between 2017 and 2021, wildfires burned an average of 8 million acres annually—double the average acreage from 1987 to 1991.<sup>1</sup> Billion-dollar wildfire disasters are now alarmingly common.<sup>2</sup>
- **Wildland-Urban Interface (WUI):** Development in fire-prone areas greatly increases risks. Nearly one-third of U.S. homes are in the WUI,<sup>3</sup> significantly expanding taxpayer liabilities for disaster assistance.

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<sup>1</sup> Congressional Budget Office, “Wildfires,” June 2022. <https://www.cbo.gov/publication/58212>

<sup>2</sup> NOAA National Centers for Environmental Information (NCEI), “U.S. Billion-Dollar Weather and Climate Disasters,” Accessed August 2025. <https://www.ncei.noaa.gov/access/billions/>

<sup>3</sup> Mockrin, Miranda, “Where humans and forests meet: The rapidly growing wildland-urban interface,” May 2025. <https://research.fs.usda.gov/nrs/articles/where-humans-and-forests-meet-rapidly-growing-wildland-urban-interface>

## Historical Policy Failures

- **Total Suppression at All Costs:** Federal wildfire policy has long emphasized suppression even when the fires are burning in remote locations and bring ecological benefits, which exacerbates future fire risks and drives up long-term wildfire costs. The “10 a.m. policy,” which called for “thorough suppression of all fires in all locations” from 1935 to 1977,<sup>4</sup> contributed to a dangerous fire deficit on the landscape.
- **Fire Borrowing:** Before recent reforms, funds were routinely diverted from non-fire programs to cover suppression costs, stalling critical forest management and risk mitigation work. A 2015 U.S. Forest Service analysis found that funding for non-fire programs had not kept pace with the rising costs of wildfire suppression.<sup>5</sup> A TCS analysis found that more than 70 percent of wildfire-specific federal appropriations between FY2015 and FY2024 went to wildfire response or preparedness; only 17 percent supported mitigation.<sup>6</sup>

## Federal Spending Trends

- **Ballooning Costs:** Federal agencies spend billions each year on wildfire suppression, mitigation, and recovery. Between FY2015 and FY2024, including supplemental appropriations for future years, TCS catalogued \$59.7 billion in appropriations for programs or line items that directly address wildfire.<sup>7</sup> Suppression still consumes the lion’s share—often at the expense of mitigation. Firefighting costs on suppressions alone exploded from south of \$1 billion before the 2000s to averaging \$3 billion over the last five years.<sup>8</sup>
- **Legislative Funding Influx:** Recent laws like the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA) and Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) delivered billions for wildfire risk reduction and ecosystem restoration. But concerns remain about whether those dollars are being used efficiently.
- **Proposals to Restructure Federal Budgeting:** The President’s FY2026 budget request would create a new agency within the Department of the Interior to consolidate all federal wildfire responsibilities. The budget also proposes significant cuts to key wildfire related programs at agencies like the U.S. Forest Service and Federal Emergency Management Agency. This restructuring raises questions about how the administration would manage a smooth transition amid a year-round fire season.

<sup>4</sup> Lundgren, Stewart, “Approaches to Fire Planning in Different Agencies - Fs.usda.gov,” U.S. Forest Service, April 1999. [https://www.fs.usda.gov/psw/publications/documents/psw\\_gtr173/psw\\_gtr173\\_03\\_lundgren.pdf](https://www.fs.usda.gov/psw/publications/documents/psw_gtr173/psw_gtr173_03_lundgren.pdf).

<sup>5</sup> U.S. Forest Service, “The Rising Cost of Fire Operations: Effects on the Forest Service’s Non-Fire Work,” August 2015. <https://www.fs.usda.gov/sites/default/files/2015-Fire-Budget-Report.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> Taxpayers for Common Sense, “Topline Analysis for the Wildfire Spending Database: FY2015-2024,” October 2024. <https://tcsdatabases.net/wildfire/topline-analysis/>

<sup>7</sup> *ibid*

<sup>8</sup> National Interagency Fire Center, “Suppression Costs: Federal Firefighting Costs (Suppression Only),” accessed August 2025. <https://www.nifc.gov/fire-information/statistics/suppression-costs>

## Recommendations

### 1. Rebalance Funding Priorities

- Prioritize mitigation, emphasizing community resilience projects and risk reduction in the WUI.
- Maintain funding for non-fire programs that enhance forest health and mitigate long-term risks.

### 2. Improve Transparency and Accountability

- Mandate detailed public reporting on wildfire spending across all federal agencies.
- Develop standardized metrics to measure effectiveness, such as protection of high-risk communities rather than acres treated.

### 3. Strengthen Risk Reduction Efforts

- Invest in early detection technologies to contain wildfires to remote forested areas and away from human development.
- Expand use of prescribed burns and managed wildfires, which are cost-effective tools for reducing hazardous fuels while providing ecological benefits to the nation's forests.

### 4. Improve Federal Wildfire Funding Processes

- Update outdated funding mechanisms, such as the Wildfire Suppression Operations Reserve Fund, to reflect current suppression funding needs instead of historical levels to prevent fire borrowing.
- Reassess U.S. Forest Service trust funds tied to timber sales to ensure they advance forest health goals rather than incentivize overharvesting.

### 5. Enhance Collaboration

- Strengthen partnerships between federal, state, local, tribal, and private stakeholders.
- Ensure federal disaster assistance builds future fire resilience, including adoption of fire-resistant building codes and zoning in high-risk WUI areas.

## Conclusion

Wildfire management is an expansive and expensive problem that demands a smarter, more comprehensive approach. Instead of simply pouring resources into suppression after fires start, we need to focus more on preventing them in the first place. That means better planning, more transparency about how money is spent, and stronger teamwork across agencies and levels of government. Done right, this will save money, protect lives and property, and create healthier forests.