



## A CALL TO END THE DESTRUCTION OF COMMUNITIES BY WILDFIRE

### **Policy 4: Government must increase resources for vegetative fuel management**

Over the past decade, the U.S. has witnessed a steady increase in wildfire activity. Experts predict this trend will continue. Despite the \$2 to \$3 billion per year to support wildland fire suppression efforts, the number of homes lost in wildfires per year has increased by 163 percent, and wildfires now cost the U.S. an estimated \$63 to \$285 billion per year in losses.

Since the early part of the 20th century, the U.S. government has invested heavily in a fire suppression infrastructure and workforce to ensure most wildfires remain small and can be extinguished quickly. Quick, effective response, while successful in keeping 97 percent of wildfires small and controllable, has an unintended and dangerous side effect. Suppression disrupts the natural occurrence of lower-intensity wildfires, allowing vegetation and debris that would normally be cleaned out by periodic fires to accumulate and grow. Denser, more continuous vegetative fuels create the conditions for severe wildfires that can overwhelm suppression efforts. With the added impact of climate change, the 120 million acres of federal land—and many more private holdings—that are at high or very high risk of uncharacteristic fires must be addressed to lower the risk to communities.

To date, the U.S. government has funded nearly \$6 billion in fuel treatments, relying on methods such as mechanical thinning and prescribed burning. This investment has translated to a rate of treatment of about three million acres per year, which falls short of the estimated 6.8 to 12 million acres per year experts believe is necessary to restore and maintain these lands. The need for fuel treatment is not unique to federal acres. Some estimates indicate that between public and private holdings, the total acreage of land at risk for wildfire in the U.S. could be as high as one billion.

### **Tackling the fuel treatment needs of U.S. landscapes calls for an increased funding commitment, cross-jurisdictional planning and cooperation, and workforce investment.**

In a 2019 report from the Government Accountability Office, the federal land management agencies acknowledged that the lack of staff availability can hinder fuel management projects, particularly those accomplished via prescribed burns. According to a report from the National Association of Forest Service Retirees, since 1992, the number of employees with the skills needed to support treatment and restoration work has fallen by 54 percent. The group concluded that without hiring more foresters, engineers, biologists, and project coordinator specialists, the U.S. Forest Service would not be able to significantly increase its treatment and restoration activities. Conducting a strategic workforce review and creating plans to fill positions—particularly those that require years of training—is a crucial step toward increasing the capacity of the agency to support treatment and restoration work.

Tackling the fuel treatment needs of U.S. landscapes calls for an increased funding commitment, cross-jurisdictional planning and cooperation, the honing of targeting and metrics, workforce investment, and more assistance to meet landscape restoration needs and help communities prepare for and perform prescribed burns and other fuel-treatment projects. Policymakers at the state and federal level must create plans to allocate more funding to treatment to prevent the problem from growing. The U.S. Forest Service must embrace its coordination role, directing funding and staff support work across jurisdictional boundaries. Ideally, land management agencies must also pursue outcome-based metrics that track the progress made in wildfire risk reduction, including risk to communities, through the application of fuel treatments and other land management efforts.

Given the size and scope of the U.S. wildfire challenge, reaching the goals of a comprehensive strategy, including fully supporting and investing in the fuel treatment and land management needs for wildfire safety, will take time. But making progress toward all of these will reduce the risk to American homes, businesses, and prosperity. **The key to ending the destruction of communities by wildfire is to start now.**

**Learn more about Outthink Wildfire by visiting [nfpa.org/wildfirepolicy](https://www.nfpa.org/wildfirepolicy).**

## CITATIONS AND REFERENCES

[www.nfpa.org/wildfirepolicy](https://www.nfpa.org/wildfirepolicy)



## RESOURCES

• [U.S. Department of Agriculture, U.S. Forest Service](#)

• [U.S. Government Accountability Office](#)

• [National Association of Forest Service Retirees](#)

The National Fire Protection Association® (NFPA®) outlined a comprehensive strategy that will push for the transformations that, over time, will significantly reduce risk to communities. The strategy is rooted in two realities—wildfires are going to happen, and the fire service will not be able to extinguish wildfires at a pace to save people and property in their path.

To solve the wildfire problem, these five tenets must be supported by all levels of government:

1. **Require all homes and businesses in the wildland/urban interface (WUI) to be more resistant to ignition from wildfire embers and flames.**
2. **Current codes and standards, as well as sound land use practices, must be in use and enforced for new development and rebuilding in wildfire-prone areas.**
3. **Fire departments for communities in the WUI must be prepared to respond safely and effectively to wildfire.**
4. **Government must increase resources for vegetative fuel management.**
5. **The public must understand its role and take action in reducing wildfire risk.**



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