



ISSUE BRIEF

Wildfire Funding

Key facts

- Washington is experiencing nearly a four-fold increase from 117,000 average annual acres burned (2000 to 2011) to 460,500 average acres burned (2012 to 2017). 788,000 acres have burned so far in 2020.
- The 2019-21 biennial budget appropriated \$88,711,000 to wildfire suppression compared to \$7,774,700 for wildfire prevention activities. The capital budget also included \$14.2m for forest hazard reduction.
- In 2015, wildfire burned approximately 1,064,100 acres and cost state and federal agencies nearly and \$345,000,000 in firefighting expenses.

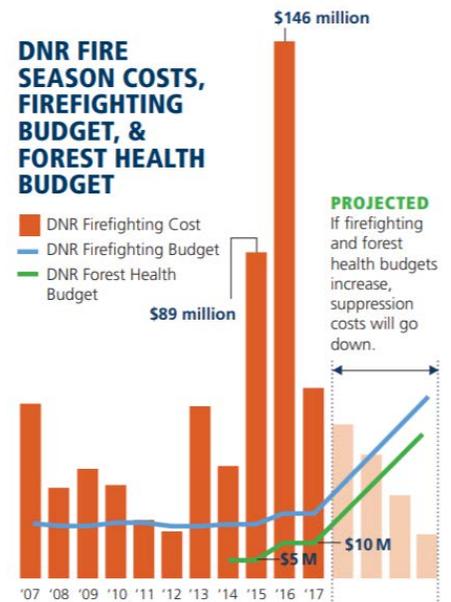
The debate

Seen historically as an eastern Washington issue, and as Washington experiences warmer, dryer summers, the number of annual wildfire events continues to increase. The debate over how to best combat wildfire has intensified in recent years, as a result. The discussion centers around the share of resources that should be directed towards suppression vs. prevention efforts, as well as where funding for these efforts should come from.

The traditional, reactionary method of **wildfire suppression** is to wait for a wildfire to start and then put it out as quickly as possible. As Washington experiences larger, more frequent wildfires, proponents of suppression believe the solution is to increase funding for wildfire suppression assets and personnel in scale and pace with the growth of the wildfires themselves. Suppression aims to match the influx of catastrophic wildfire events with firefighting resources rather than prevent these events from occurring.

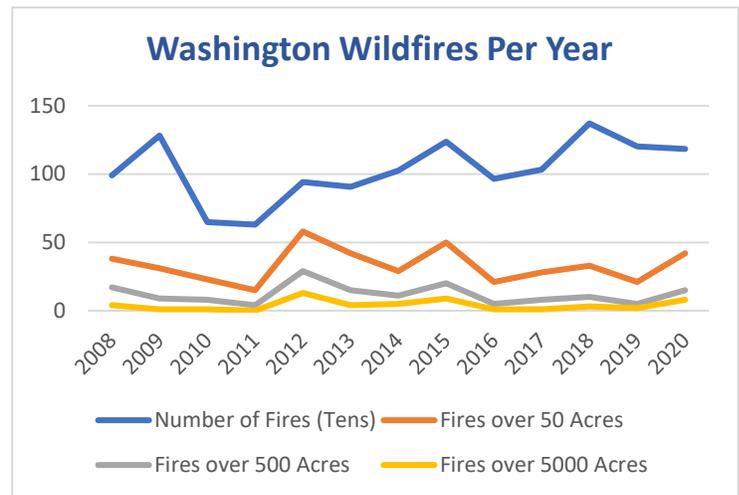
Wildfire prevention aims to keep these catastrophic wildfire events from occurring by proactively managing our states wildlands, and by improving response to wildfire starts to prevent them from turning into catastrophic events. Wildfire caused by lightning is a natural rejuvenating process which has occurred for millennia without human interference. As civilization expands into once untouched lands, we grow accustomed to putting out these fires to prevent loss of life and property. Decades of preventing wildfire from running its natural course has led to an unhealthy buildup of organic matter on the forest floor. When these unmanaged forests are ignited under increasingly dryer conditions, catastrophic wildfire events are far more likely to occur. As fires increase in intensity, wildfire suppression efforts grow more costly and less effective. Shifting funding from suppression to prevention activities can decrease the overall cost of Washington’s firefighting efforts by ensuring fires that do start are more predictable and manageable to contain.

Nearly every year, funding provided for wildfire suppression efforts covers only a fraction of the annual cost to put out these fires, so the debate continues to revolve around where funding to increase prevention efforts will come from. Advocates for suppression are hesitant to offer resources currently provided to put out fires because resources are already scarce, while prevention advocates argue focusing on forest health will decrease long-term suppression costs.



Background

Suppression. DNR's wildfire suppression assets include more than 800 permanent DNR employees, 550 seasonal employees, about 120 wildland fire engines, nine helicopters and six single-engine air tankers, which are under contract with DNR. DNR also works with local fire agencies, as well as employing hundreds of [private contractors](#) on an as-needed basis for wildfire suppression services. Lastly, in cooperation with the [Department of Corrections](#), DNR also provides on the job training and employs approximately 300 inmates, who assist with wildland firefighting and firefighting support efforts.



Prevention. Wildland management by public and private sector entities using a number of practices are meant to decrease the frequency of catastrophic fire events by reducing fuel loads, creating defensible spaces and improving forests health. Land management tools include prescribed fire, mechanical vegetation removal, public/private cost-sharing for fuel reduction, home protection education, logging, managing natural fire under ideal conditions, grazing, and pesticide and herbicide spraying.

What to expect in the 2021 session

From the governor and other Democrats, expect to see legislative proposals that would:

- DNR Forest Health/Wildfire (Cost: \$25m): Scalable Capital ask that crosses State, small landowner private, and federal lands for rapid job development in multiple sectors statewide, linking the Forest Action Plan, Forest Health Strategic Plan, and Wildfire Strategic Plan.
- A version of [HB 2413](#): DNR's Wildfire Preparedness Insurance Surcharge would require insurers to add a \$5 surcharge on every Property & Casualty (P&C) insurance policy in force in Washington. The tax is intended to raise \$130 million biannually to fund a dedicated account to improve forest health and wildfire suppression.

From Republicans, expect to see proposals to:

- Rangeland Fire Protection Associations – providing local volunteers in fire prone areas the ability to gain access to training and surplus equipment, empowering them to serve as the initial attack extinguish or suppress wildfire until traditional firefighting resources arrive.
- Requiring DNR to deploy fastest available resources during the first 48 hours of response to a wildfire event.
- Require State Fire Marshal to provide financial assistance to local fire suppression entities for the cost of flying or contracting for aircraft on the initial attack of wildland fires.

Stakeholders

[Washington Cattlemen's Association](#), [Washington Farm Bureau](#), [Washington Audubon](#), [Department of Natural Resources](#), [Conservation Northwest](#), [Washington State Council of Fire Fighters](#), [NW Insurance Council](#), [Washington Public Employees Association](#), [Washington Fire Chiefs](#), Tribes.

Additional information

- DNR: [Information on wildfires, preparedness, prevention.](#)
- DNR: [WA Wildland Fire Protection 10 Year Strategic Plan](#)
- DNR: [20 Year Forest Health Strategic Plan](#)
- NWCC: [Year to Date Fire Data and Info](#)

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