



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

### A comprehensive strategy to address America's wildfire crisis

The relentless toll of wildfire losses makes it increasingly clear that the U.S. is facing a deep wildfire problem. Experts warn that the destruction seen in the past three years—including well over 100 fatalities, 40,000 structures torched, and nearly \$40 billion in insured losses—is not an anomaly, but a look into the near future. The alarm bells are sounding, calling for action.

In the U.S., action has long meant at least \$2 billion per year supporting fire suppression. While the efforts of firefighters have been both brave and tireless, the conditions on our landscapes, joined with the vast proliferation of homes and communities into wildfire hazard zones, make turning the tide through fire suppression increasingly untenable.

Today there are nearly 45 million homes in the wildland/urban interface (WUI). Each year some of the largest-loss fires occur in the WUI. Structure loss due to wildfire has increased more than 163 percent over the past decade. The nation's area at risk to wildfire is now the size of Texas. This is the country's present and burgeoning urban conflagration. Without a new approach, we are destined for greater and even more unmanageable loss of life and property.

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

If we truly want to solve the wildfire problem, we need a holistic approach. The National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) is calling for a comprehensive approach that will push for the transformation 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 these fires 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:

- **Require all homes and businesses in the WUI to be ignition resistant:** There are 44.8 million homes across approximately 70,000 communities in the WUI. Changes made to both the home and surrounding property can greatly reduce the risk of structural ignition during a wildfire event. These retrofits and mitigation measures must be supported, incentivized, and mandated where necessary. Research must also continue to create even more effective means of reducing risk. These actions are critical to protecting the vitality of communities in the WUI.
- **Current codes and standards, as well as sound land use practices, must be in use and enforced:** The key to stopping the growth of risk is ensuring that new development and rebuilding in the WUI is designed, sited, constructed, and maintained to resist ignition from wildfire embers and flames. State and local governments must embrace the tools to help assess wildfire hazards, as well as the regulations, codes, and standards needed to mitigate those hazards. These governments must also update their codes regularly to ensure the latest knowledge is in force to reduce risks.

- **Fire departments for communities in the WUI must be prepared to respond safely and effectively to wildfire:** With so many lives and homes to protect, fire departments for communities in the WUI need the training and protective equipment necessary to respond safely and effectively to these fires. Currently, only 37 percent of fire departments reported all their firefighters had wildland firefighting training; only 32 percent reported they had enough wildland fire personal protective equipment (PPE) for each member of their department. In addition to civilian deaths, according to U.S. Fire Administration data, there were 99 on-duty firefighter fatalities from wildland incidents from 2010 to 2019. The Wildland Firefighter Foundation lists 173 active duty firefighter deaths in incidents from 1994 to 2018. A recent National Wildfire Coordinating Group study found that 170 firefighters died during wildland fire operations between 2007 and 2016. Firefighter safety should be a top priority.
- **Government must increase resources for vegetative fuel management:** Due to decades of fire suppression, past land management decisions, and environmental changes, over 100 million acres of federal land are at high or severe risk of wildfire, and likely many acres on private land as well. While federal land management agencies perform some treatments on these lands to clear them of debris and vegetation buildup, more funding, support for coordination with state and local stakeholders, research, workforce development, and education of the public to gain support for their efforts is needed, given the scale of the problem.
- **The public must understand their role and take action in reducing wildfire risk:** Government officials, from politicians to foresters, have significant roles to play in tackling the wildfire challenge. However, the public must take responsibility for their own safety as well. Homeowners initiating retrofits and maintaining ignition-resistant properties, community members heeding emergency orders to evacuate, and everyone exercising fire safety on the landscape are all essential to achieving gains in saving homes and lives. Leaders must support this knowledge transformation among the public.

As climatic conditions create year-round fire seasons and the number of acres burned in wildfires each year rises over time, communities in wildfire hazard zones must adopt practices to lower the risk to lives, homes, businesses, and overall prosperity. All levels of government must support these goals if the nation is to reduce the estimated \$63 to \$285 billion in losses that wildfires generate for the U.S. each year. Given the size and scope of the U.S. wildfire challenge, reaching any one of these goals will take time. But making progress toward all of them will save more lives. **The key to ending the destruction of communities by wildfire is to start now.**

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

## CITATIONS AND REFERENCES

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



## RESOURCES

- National Fire Protection Association: Fourth Needs Assessment of the U.S. Fire Service
- National Interagency Fire Center (NIFC): Fire Statistics
- Insurance Information Institute, Facts, Statistics: Wildfire
- U.S. Department of Agriculture, U.S. Forest Service: The Wildland/Urban Interface in the United States



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