

The Heat Is On: Lessons in State Wildfire Management and Budgeting

By Leo Garcia | October 2, 2023

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The heat is on, and policymakers are being pushed to rethink and strengthen current wildfire management strategies.

Since January, more than [2.1 million acres](#) of land, roughly twice the size of Rhode Island, burned in the U.S. as a result of wildfires. Wildfires are growing in [frequency and severity](#), posing a threat to human life, communities and economies. Record-breaking heat this summer scorched parts of the U.S. and may have contributed to the devastating fires in Maui.

In May, NCSL hosted legislators from six Western states for a Wildfire Management Workshop to discuss ongoing fire challenges, budget mechanisms and the use of data to inform policy decisions. Workshop participants also reviewed findings from [a study](#) conducted by The Pew Charitable Trusts on state wildfire budgeting and financing. Six key takeaways emerged from the wide-ranging discussion, presenting opportunities for future information sharing and policy solutions to develop across states.

Key Takeaways

Mitigation efforts are more difficult to fund and implement than suppression efforts.

Mitigation refers to measures that decrease the impact of future disasters, such as building with fire-resistant materials and executing prescribed burns. Several legislators noted that funding mitigation activities is more difficult than paying to fight fires after they start. Mitigation is a long-term investment, and policymakers must sometimes address more immediate concerns when determining budget priorities. Some states, like Washington have created [specific funds](#) for mitigation activities to ensure funding is not pulled away for firefighting needs.

Intergovernmental and interagency regulations can create barriers to mitigation policies.

Regulations are meant to reduce risk and keep people safe; however, participants said they can create bureaucratic obstacles when it comes to wildfire management. States must navigate regulatory frameworks across different agencies, jurisdictions and levels of government. Sometimes, regulatory compliance may inadvertently conflict with important state functions. For instance, state-prescribed burn policies might conflict with federal air quality regulations, hampering states' ability to mitigate fire risk through managed burns.

Some states use innovative funding and finance mechanisms to support localities. Like states, local governments face challenges securing funds to manage wildfires. Western states are finding ways to support local governments and work together to decrease wildfire risk. For example, [Arizona](#) set up a revolving loan fund for local governments to access if they need mitigation funds while they await federal reimbursement. [Utah](#) incentivizes local governments to invest in mitigation projects as a condition of receiving state suppression coverage and cost-share negotiation support. Under [Nevada's Wildland Fire Protection Program](#), the state provides financial assistance to participating fire protection districts during a wildfire.

Attracting and retaining fire and forestry workers is challenging. As with other sectors of the economy, challenges in workforce recruitment and retention have become obstacles when managing wildfires. Firefighters often [leave their positions](#) for non-firefighting roles because of the health risks, low pay and irregular schedules. Moreover, interstate competition for firefighters can lead some to move to a state with higher wages. States also compete with federal agencies that may offer higher wages.

Accurate and accessible wildfire spending data is valuable. Access to spending data is a valuable decision-making component. In many cases, the data already exists but is spread across different agencies, jurisdictions and fiscal cycles. More comprehensive spending data provides states with information on total wildfire costs, thus allowing them to budget more effectively. [Efforts](#) are underway in California to better track recent state-funded mitigation activities, for example.

States are interested in data tools but have questions about how to apply them. Data tools can provide decision-makers with important information related to wildfire monitoring, forecasting, detection, suppression and more. For example, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration has a [network](#) of predictive tools that can help at all levels of wildfire response. In addition, The Pew Charitable Trusts and Conservation Science Partners used U.S. Forest Service data to [map](#) areas of high ecological value and areas of proactive forest management practices. Participants were generally receptive to the idea of implementing data tools. However, questions were raised about the costs associated with developing and maintaining them, and how states can most effectively use them.

Legislators from Arizona, Idaho, Montana, Utah, Washington and Wyoming participated in the Wildfire Management Workshop in May 2023.

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