Wildfires have been increasingly burning through acres of forested land, as well as state budgets across the United States.

Over the last few decades, the wildfire season in the United States has been growing over time and becoming more severe. Last year, the National Interagency Fire Center reported that over 10 million acres were burned collectively, the highest number of acres burned in a season ever recorded. In May, the National Interagency Fire Center released its National Significant Wildland Fire Potential Outlook for the 2016 summer months, forecasting that several states, including Alaska, Hawaii, and California, among others in the southwest, will face a significant threat posed by wildfires.

Last summer was a record breaking temperature year globally. According to analyses completed by NASA and the National Oceanic Atmospheric Administration, 2015 was the hottest year on record since modern-day record keeping began in 1880. An increasingly warmer climate means more droughts, less water availability, and as a result, an increase in the amount of wildfires.

In May, a wildfire in Fort McMurray destroyed over 1,400,000 acres, evacuating the area’s population of about 90,000 residents. Collectively, the fire is projected to be costliest disaster in Canadian history, with up to $9 billion in relief and insurance handouts.

To avoid such a disaster in the United States this summer, how can governments prepare for increased risk of wildfires due to rising temperatures?

In the United States, two thirds of the funds to combat wildfires come from the federal government and are distributed to departments such as Department of the Interior and the U.S. Forest Service. The rest is pulled from local and state governments who pair up with these federal agencies to help fight fires. When the federal funds allocated to fight wildfires runs out, agencies and state governments pull funds from fire-prevention programs that would normally go towards forest restoration programs that would thin trees, cut down dead limbs, and promote property owners to enroll in state programs that would remove combustible fuels from their property.

When fire-prevention funds are pulled from, they disrupt the following year’s budget and timeline to restore and trim forests across the nation, creating in turn fuel for the next wildfire season.

Additionally, the growing amount of urban development on the “wildland-urban-interface” has increased the risk of the spread of fires and management to areas that were previously unoccupied. Because of this, some argue that those communities and private land owners should bare more of the burden of the costs to fight them, rather than the federal taxpayers.

Not only do warmer, dry summers mean contributing more to the increasing costs of wildfires, but also a large portion of the increased cost will come from the need to protect these communities that used to be free of development, instead of protecting the forests that surround them. A report from
the Government Accountability Office said that because federal funds cover much of the cost of fighting wildfires, many state and local governments have little incentives to propose policies that would help cut costs, such as designing stricter zoning laws to slow the growth of developing neighborhoods in areas of risk.

A study [9] conducted in Montana reported that if residential development in the state continues in accordance with climate predictions, the cost to protect homes in the state could potentially rise from $28 million in 2008 to $40 million by the year 2025.

However, efforts coordinated between government on local, state, and federal levels are tackling the issue on several fronts.

Many states across the nation have formed interstate compacts to combat the issue by increasing their coordination among state agencies. Neighboring states share resources and equipment, funds, and personal during times of need. Currently, there are six [10] interstate compacts covering majority of the states and some Canadian provinces; the Great Plains Interstate Compact, the Great Lakes Forest Fire Compact, the Northeastern Forest Fire Compact, the Mid-Atlantic Interstate Forest Fire Compact, the Big River Forest Fire Management Compact, and the Southeastern Interstate Forest Fire Protection Compact.

Further, Congress enacted the Federal Land Assistance, Management and Enhancement Act (FLAME [11]) in 2009 to establish funding mechanisms for the U.S. Forest Service and the Department of Interior in hopes to address the rising costs of fire suppression. However, many funds are repeatedly pulled from the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) to fight fires every year, making the argument that perhaps wildfires should be amended to the list of mandated national emergencies. The U.S. Forest Service, among other agencies, is developing adaptation options [12] to ensure management practices are enacted to improve sustainable resource management to adapt to changing climate patterns. They are also working with local communities [13] that have growing residential areas to ensure that neighborhoods are prepared to live in areas of risk.

In Colorado, two bills, House Bill 1004 and Senate Bill 046 [14], were passed in 2014, giving the governor the ability to provide financial assistance without declaring a disaster to the federal government. Also, the bills allowed more funds to be allocated for firefighter safety.

In 2013, Montana passed House Bill 354 [15], changing how state funds allocate wildfire fighting and suppression costs. The law sets aside funds before fires occur, instead of having to search for ways to pay for the wildfire costs months after the season has ended. In 2015, the state had $86.5 million saved [16] for wildfires, and only spent $10.5 million from the fund.

Wildfires continue to be a burning issue for state and federal agencies, and determination to find workable solutions will receive more attention as efforts directed towards reducing the impacts of climate change become more prominent.

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