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Federal Assistance for Wildfire Response and Recovery

Kelsi Bracmort

Specialist in Agricultural Conservation and Natural Resources Policy

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Raging wildfires, burned homes, and the evacuation of thousands make headlines nearly every fire season. As of early November 2013, approximately 4.1 million acres have burned, with the largest acreage burned occurring in the state of Alaska.¹ More than 9.3 million acres burned in 2012, the third-largest acreage burned annually since 1960.² Severe wildfires in 2012 occurred in Oregon and New Mexico, including the Whitewater-Baldy fire, which was the largest wildfire in New Mexico history.³ Options for federal support and assistance—during the fires, in the aftermath, and aimed at preventing a recurrence—have been considered by many concerned about the ongoing disasters. This report briefly describes these federal options.

During the Fire

Federal wildfire policy is to actively suppress all wildfires, unless a fire management plan identifies locations and conditions when monitoring or less aggressive suppression efforts are appropriate (called *appropriate management response* or AMR). Federal responsibility for wildfire suppression is to protect lives, property, and resources on federal lands; federal firefighting is funded through the U.S. Forest Service (Department of Agriculture) and through the Department of the Interior.⁴ States are responsible for suppressing wildfires on nonfederal (state and private) lands.⁵ The federal government provides support to the states in two ways. One is through direct financial assistance for state fire protection efforts, funded through the Forest Service's state fire assistance program. The other, and more critical when wildfires are burning, consists of fire suppression forces and assistance—personnel, funding, and equipment (including aircraft)—provided at a state's request, and coordinated through the National Interagency Fire Center (NIFC) in Boise, ID. In emergencies, NIFC coordinates federal, state, and private forces (including the military, when called upon) to assist the state or region in need while maintaining local wildfire protection; how paying for these forces gets allocated is usually addressed after the emergency is over. The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) of the Department of Homeland Security can also assist through Fire Management Assistance Grants (FMAGs) that can provide grants, equipment, personnel, and supplies to supplement community resources when fires threaten destruction that might warrant a major disaster declaration; this requires a request from the governor while the fire is burning.⁶ If the President declares a disaster, fire management assistance and other recovery programs are also available from FEMA under the Robert T. Stafford Disaster Relief and Emergency Assistance Act.⁷

The federal government also supports state and local efforts to evacuate areas threatened by wildfires. Presidential declaration of an emergency triggers federal aid to protect property and public health and safety while preserving state autonomy and responsibility.⁸ The National

¹ National Interagency Fire Center, *Current year-to-date by state*.

² National Interagency Fire Center, *Total Wildland Fire and Acres*.

³ National Interagency Fire Center, *Wildland Fire Summary and Statistics Annual Report 2012*.

⁴ See CRS Report R43077, *Wildfire Management: Federal Funding and Related Statistics* and CRS Report RL33990, *Federal Funding for Wildfire Control and Management*, by Kelsi Bracmort.

⁵ See CRS Report RL30755, *Forest Fire/Wildfire Protection*.

⁶ See CRS Report RL33053, *Federal Stafford Act Disaster Assistance: Presidential Declarations, Eligible Activities, and Funding*, by Francis X. McCarthy.

⁷ 42 U.S.C. §5187.

⁸ See CRS Report RL34146, *FEMA's Disaster Declaration Process: A Primer*, by Francis X. McCarthy.

Planning Frameworks, required in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, guide FEMA on how to assist state and local agencies with emergencies and disasters, including wildfires.⁹

In the Aftermath

As with fire control efforts, federal actions in the aftermath of a wildfire disaster can take two principal forms. In the first, a presidential declaration of a major disaster initiates a process for federal assistance to help state and local governments and families and individuals recover from the disaster. The nature and extent of the assistance depends on a number of factors, such as the nature and severity of the wildfire damages and the insurance coverage of the affected parties.¹⁰

Site rehabilitation and restoration following fire is the second principal form of support by federal agencies. On federal lands, site rehabilitation routinely occurs as an emergency wildfire program and through regular land management activities. Activities include sowing areas with quick-growing grasses as well as planting trees and other activities to reduce erosion.

On state and private lands, the responsibility lies with the landowner, but federal assistance can be provided through the Forest Service's state fire assistance and other state forestry assistance programs.¹¹ In addition, USDA has two programs—the Emergency Watershed Protection Program administered by the Natural Resources Conservation Service¹² and the Emergency Conservation Program administered by the Farm Service Agency¹³—that can provide for restoration activities (tree planting, streambank stabilization, and more) following wildfires.¹⁴

Some severely burned areas (e.g., in southern California) are at risk of landslides during the subsequent rainstorms, even after site restoration efforts. Little can be done to prevent such events, but monitoring can provide warning to homeowners to evacuate the area prior to a landslide, and other federal post-disaster assistance can then become available.

Preventing a Recurrence

Numerous federal programs provide grants to states and local governments to prepare for wildfire emergencies. The Forest Service provides financial and technical assistance and equipment to states and volunteer fire departments, and to communities for wildfire protection planning. FEMA provides grants and training for firefighting and for community responses to terrorist attacks and natural disasters.¹⁵ Projects to reduce the risk of future fires may also be eligible under FEMA's Pre-Disaster Mitigation Program.¹⁶

⁹ Federal Emergency Management Agency, *National Planning Frameworks*, May 2013.

¹⁰ See CRS Report RL31734, *Federal Disaster Assistance Response and Recovery Programs: Brief Summaries*.

¹¹ See CRS Report RL31065, *Forestry Assistance Programs*, by Megan Stubbs.

¹² 33 U.S.C. §701b-1 and 16 U.S.C. §2203.

¹³ 16 U.S.C. §§2201-2204.

¹⁴ For more information, see CRS Report R42854, *Emergency Assistance for Agricultural Land Rehabilitation*.

¹⁵ See CRS Report RL32341, *Assistance to Firefighters Program: Distribution of Fire Grant Funding*, and CRS Report R40471, *FEMA's Hazard Mitigation Grant Program: Overview and Issues*.

¹⁶ 42 U.S.C. §5133.

A perhaps bigger question is how to prevent a recurrence of catastrophic fires. The answer is: You can't—drought, lightning, and high winds make extreme wildfires inevitable. Reducing fuel levels can, in some ecosystems, reduce the damages from wildfires and decrease the likelihood of a catastrophic wildfire occurring.¹⁷ However, severe wildfires cannot be prevented in ecosystems that have evolved with wildfire, such as the chaparral of southern California and lodgepole pine in the northern and central Rockies. Nonetheless, it is also possible to protect structures in such settings. Federal research and grants, particularly for the FIREWISE program, have shown how homeowners can protect their structures, even while wildfires burn around them.¹⁸ The keys are the structure itself (especially non-flammable roofing) and the landscaping within 40 meters of the structure. Zoning could inform and enforce appropriate standards for wildfire protection for structures.

Author Contact Information

Kelsi Bracmort
Specialist in Agricultural Conservation and Natural
Resources Policy
kbracmort@crs.loc.gov, 7-7283

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This report was originally written by Ross Gorte, retired CRS Specialist in Natural Resources Policy. The listed contact has updated the original report and is available to respond to inquiries on the subject.

¹⁷ See CRS Report R40811, *Wildfire Fuels and Fuel Reduction*.

¹⁸ See CRS Report RS21880, *Wildfire Protection in the Wildland-Urban Interface*.