

Updated October 3, 2022

Wildfire Statistics

Wildfires are unplanned fires, including lightning-caused fires, unauthorized human-caused fires, and escaped prescribed fire projects. States are responsible for responding to wildfires that begin on nonfederal (state, local, and private) lands, except for lands protected by federal agencies under cooperative agreements. The federal government is responsible for responding to wildfires that begin on federal lands. The Forest Service (FS)—within the U.S. Department of Agriculture—carries out wildfire management and response across the 193 million acres of the National Forest System (NFS). The Department of the Interior (DOI) manages wildfire response for more than 400 million acres of national parks, wildlife refuges and preserves, other public lands, and Indian reservations.

Wildfire statistics help to illustrate past U.S. wildfire activity. Nationwide data compiled by the National Interagency Coordination Center (NICC) indicate that the number of annual wildfires is variable but has decreased slightly over the last 30 years and the number of acres affected annually, while also variable, generally has increased (see **Figure 1**). Since 2000, an annual average of 70,072 wildfires has burned an annual average of 7.0 million acres. The acreage figure is more than double the average annual acreage burned in the 1990s (3.3 million acres), although a greater number of fires occurred annually in the 1990s (78,600 average).

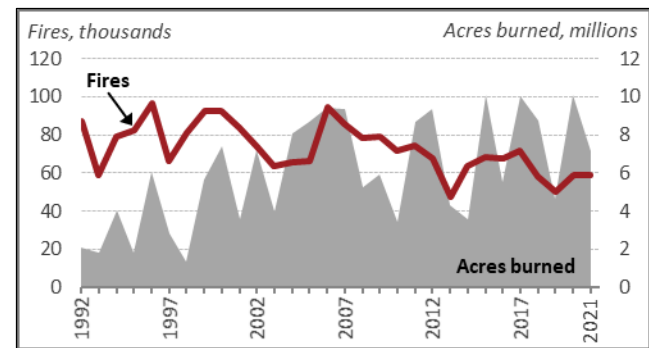
Table 1. Annual Wildfires and Acres Burned

	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Number of Fires (thousands)					
Federal	15.2	12.5	10.9	14.4	14.0
FS	6.6	5.6	5.3	6.7	6.2
DOI	7.3	7.0	5.3	7.6	7.6
Other	1.2	0.1	0.2	<0.1	0.2
Nonfederal	56.4	45.6	39.6	44.6	45.0
Total	71.5	58.1	50.5	59.0	59.0
Acres Burned (millions)					
Federal	6.3	4.6	3.1	7.1	5.2
FS	2.9	2.3	0.6	4.8	4.1
DOI	3.3	2.3	2.3	2.3	1.0
Other	<0.1	<0.1	<0.1	<0.1	<0.1
Nonfederal	3.7	4.1	1.6	3.1	1.9
Total	10.0	8.8	4.7	10.1	7.1

Source: National Interagency Coordination Center (NICC) Wildland Fire Summary and Statistics annual reports.

Notes: FS = Forest Service; DOI = Department of the Interior. Column totals may not add due to rounding.

Figure 1. Annual Wildfires and Acres Burned, 1992-2021



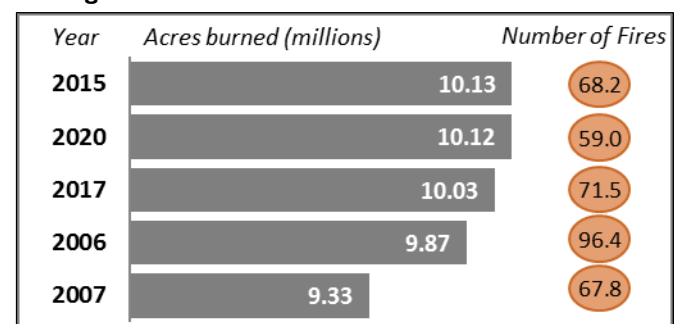
Source: NICC Wildland Fire Summary and Statistics annual reports.

Note: Data reflect wildland fires and acres burned nationwide, including wildland fires on federal and nonfederal lands.

From 2012 to 2021, there were an average of 61,289 wildfires annually and an average of 7.4 million acres impacted annually. In 2021, 58,968 wildfires burned 7.1 million acres.

As of October 3, 2022, nearly 54,200 wildfires have impacted about 6.9 million acres this year. As of September 27, 2022, the nationwide Preparedness Level is 2 (see the “Resources” section for more information).

Figure 2. Top Five Years with Largest Wildfire Acreage Burned Since 1960



Source: NICC Wildland Fire Summary and Statistics annual reports.

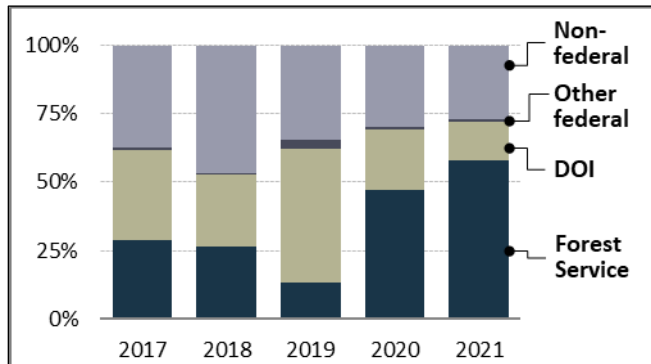
Note: Number of fires in thousands.

The number of fires and acreage burned are indicators of the annual level of wildfire activity. However, these numbers may be misleading with respect to their impact on human development or communities since many fires may occur in large, relatively undeveloped areas. Acreage burned also does not indicate the severity of the wildfire, the degree of impact upon forests or soils, or other ecological effects.

Most wildfires are human-caused (89% on average from 2017 to 2021), although the wildfires caused by lightning tend to be slightly larger and burn more acreage (52% of the average acreage burned from 2017 to 2021 was ignited by lightning).

In 2021, 73% of the nationwide acreage burned by wildfires was on federal lands (5.2 million acres; **Table 1**). The other 27% of the acreage burned was on state, local, or privately owned lands. Fires on these lands (44,960) accounted for 76% of total fires. Of the federal acreage burned nationwide in 2021, 79% (4.1 million acres) burned on FS land and 19% (1.0 million acres) burned on DOI land (**Figure 3**).

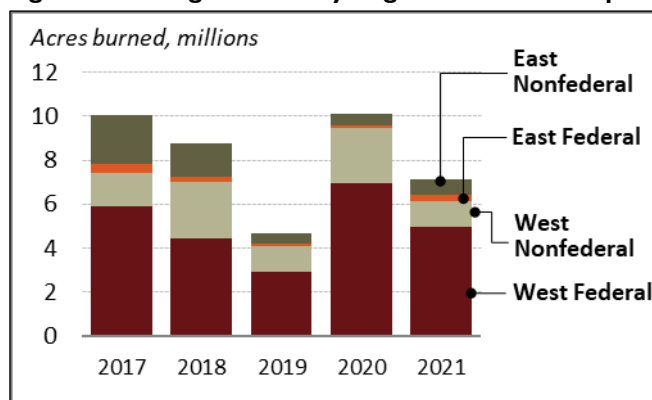
Figure 3. Percentage Acreage Burned by Ownership



Source: NICC Wildland Fire Summary and Statistics annual reports.

More wildfires occur in the East (including the central states), but the wildfires in the West are larger and burn more acreage (including Alaska, Arizona, California, Colorado, Idaho, Montana, New Mexico, Nevada, Oregon, Utah, Washington, and Wyoming). In 2021, just over 23,000 wildfires burned approximately 6.2 million acres in the West, compared with the over 35,000 fires that burned just under 1.0 million acres in the East. In the East (where there is less federal acreage), most of the fires occur on nonfederal lands, whereas in the West most of the fires occur on federal lands (see **Figure 4**). In 2021, 73% (0.7 million acres) of the acreage burned in the East was on nonfederal land, whereas 80% (4.9 million acres) of the acreage burned in the West was on federal land.

Figure 4. Acreage Burned by Region and Ownership



Source: NICC Wildland Fire Summary and Statistics annual reports.

Notes: West: AK, AZ, CA, CO, ID, HI, MT, NM, NV, OR, UT, WA, and WY. East: All other states, including Puerto Rico.

Resources

Another metric useful for assessing wildfire activity is the extent that resources—personnel, equipment—are engaged in wildfire suppression. A proxy for resource commitments is the nationwide Preparedness Level (PL) scale, which

ranges from 1 (lowest) to 5 (highest). The higher PLs indicate significant commitment of shared resources. In 2021, the PL was at the highest level for 68 days, the longest since at least 2000.

Wildfire Damages

Although wildfires may have a beneficial impact on ecological resources, wildfires also may have devastating impacts, especially for communities affected by wildfire activity. Therefore, statistics showing the level of destruction a wildfire causes can provide useful metrics, such as acres burned or impacted, lives lost (firefighters and civilians), and structures (residential, commercial, and other) destroyed. In 2021, nearly 6,000 structures were burned in wildfires, the majority of which occurred in California (see **Table 2**).

Table 2. Loss Statistics

	2018	2019	2020	2021
Structures Burned	25,790	963	17,904	5,972
% Residences	70%	46%	54%	60%

Source: NICC Wildland Fire Summary and Statistics annual reports.

Conflagrations

Of the 1.5 million wildfires that have occurred since 2000, 237 exceeded 100,000 acres burned and 15 exceeded 500,000 acres burned. Only a small fraction of wildfires become catastrophic, and a small percentage of fires accounts for the vast majority of acres burned. For example, only about 1% of wildfires become conflagrations—raging, destructive fires—but predicting which fires will “blow up” into conflagrations is challenging and depends on a multitude of factors, such as weather and geography. In 2021, 2% of wildfires were classified as large or significant (943); 38 exceeded 40,000 acres in size; and 13 exceeded 100,000 acres. In context, there were slightly more large or significant wildfires in 2020 (999), but even more in 2017 (1,409). There have been 1,065 large or significant fires annually on average from 2017 through 2021.

Issues for Congress

Issues for Congress include the strategies and resources used for wildfire prevention, mitigation, and management, and the impact of wildfires on both the quality of life and the economies of communities surrounding wildfire activity. Other issues relate to post-wildfire recovery and site restoration. Congress also considers the total federal cost of wildfire management, including the cost of suppression operations; these costs vary annually and are difficult to predict.

For more information, see

- CRS In Focus IF10732, Federal Assistance for Wildfire Response and Recovery, and
- CRS Report R40884, *Wildfires: CRS Experts*.

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