

February 22, 2023

Wildland Fire Mitigation and Management Commission

Policy recommendations: Science, Data, and Technology

The Pew Charitable Trusts' Fiscal Federalism Initiative (Pew) appreciates the opportunity to submit policy recommendations related to science, data, and technology to the Wildland Fire Mitigation and Management Commission (WFMMC). Pew is a non-profit research and public policy organization dedicated to serving the public.

In November 2022, Pew published a report, entitled "[Wildfires: Burning Through State Budgets](#)." This report aims to improve available data and understanding of the impact of wildfire spending on state fiscal policy. Based on the report's findings, Pew identified three recommendations for policymakers: 1) evaluate current budgeting practices to account for growing risk; 2) maximize investments in evidence-based mitigation activities; and 3) explore opportunities to better track and share data on wildfire spending.

In response to the WFMMC's request for policy recommendations related to science, data, and technology, this submission focuses in greater detail on the third recommendation calling for more comprehensive and continually reported data on wildfire management spending. Specifically, Pew recommends that Congress seek opportunities to improve tracking of wildfire spending data across federal, state, and local governments.

Background

Government spending on wildfires is on the rise. Combined funding from the U.S. Department of the Interior and the U.S. Forest Service nearly doubled from fiscal year 2011 to 2020.¹ Data on state and local spending is not readily available, but to give one example, Washington spent an annual average of \$24 million in state funds on wildfire suppression between 2010 and 2014. For the period from 2015 to 2019, that average more than tripled to \$83 million.²

Figures like these begin to tell the story of rising fire costs, but significant data gaps obscure the complete picture of government spending on wildfires. Specifically, Pew's research found that:

- Although the National Interagency Fire Center (NIFC) coordinates large amounts information related to government spending on fighting fires to determine reimbursements under cooperative agreements, little of this suppression spending information is available to researchers, policymakers, or the public.
- Additional sources of federal data exist but are distributed across agencies or focus on a small subset of expenditures. For instance, the Federal Emergency Management Agency provides data for larger fires that receive declarations under the Stafford Act; and data on spending by the U.S. Forest Service and Department of the Interior is spread across many different sources.
- Generally speaking, states do not systematically or regularly track and report their wildfire spending, and no federal entity currently collects and aggregates this information. Efforts to collect comprehensive data on state expenditures provide additional information but are labor intensive

¹K. Hoover, "Federal Wildfire Management: Ten-Year Funding Trends and Issues (FY2011-FY2020)" (Congressional Research Service, 2020), <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R46583>.

² Pew calculation of data from Washington Department of Natural Resources, "Fire Season Summary: A Review of Season Activity, DNR's Fire Program, and Our Major Accomplishments" (2019), https://www.dnr.wa.gov/publications/rp_fire_annual_report_2019.pdf.

for both researchers and officials and only provide a snapshot of spending, not ongoing information.³

- While some sources of federal and state spending on suppression activities do exist, data on spending for prevention, mitigation, preparedness, and recovery is much more limited.
- Little if any data exists related to expenditures by local governments and Tribes.

These gaps make it difficult for policymakers at all levels of government to make informed funding decisions. For example, in the absence of spending data, it is impossible to assess the cost-effectiveness of mitigation investments that could reduce the cost of future fires. Similarly, budget planners cannot predict future budget needs if they do not have accurate information about how much is being spent today, what it is being spent on, and which level of government ultimately foots the bill.

Options for Congressional Action

Congress can help improve the overall wildfire spending data landscape by taking steps to improve and consolidate reporting on federal wildfire spending, and by supporting and encouraging state efforts to improve their own spending data collection and reporting.

Improving reporting of federal spending data: Congress should take steps to improve the reporting of federal wildfire spending. The federal government both directly manages fire on federal land and provides grants to states to support state efforts. Taking steps to better track and report federal wildfire spending across agencies would be a clear step forward. This tracking should clearly articulate what funding was spent directly by federal agencies versus what was sent to states, and should specify which funding was allocated for prevention, mitigation, preparedness, suppression, and recovery.

Improving reporting of state spending data: Congress should look for opportunities to encourage and assist states in improving their own collection and reporting of spending data. This could include providing funding or technical support to help states assess their total fire-related spending, establishing standards for data reporting that states can implement, or incentivizing improved data practices through the structure of grant reporting requirements.

Improving the tracking of wildfire spending would benefit Congress in its oversight capacity and would help inform state and federal investments in cost-effective mitigation in the future by providing a baseline of current spending. A more complete picture of spending across the country, including spending by states, would make improved federal reporting all the more valuable by allowing states to better understand the impact of wildfires on their budgets and, ultimately providing evidence in support of state-funded mitigation efforts. For example, Washington has invested significant state funds in mitigation after conducting a series of investigations to better understand their true wildfire expenses.⁴

Pew thanks the members of the WFMMC for their consideration and welcomes any further engagement regarding these recommendations. Please contact Colin Foard, Manager, Fiscal Federalism Initiative (cfoard@pewtrusts.org) with any questions.

³ See P.S. Cook and D.R. Becker, "State Funding for Wildfire Suppression in the Western U.S.," University of Idaho College of Natural Resources Policy Analysis Group, no. 37 (2017), <https://www.uidaho.edu/-/media/UIDaho-Responsive/Files/cnr/research/PAG/Research/PAGReport37.pdf>; McIver et al., "The Fiscal Burden of Wildfires." See also: [Colorado Legislative Council Staff Memorandum on Wildfire-related Funding](#)

⁴ Concerning Long-Term Forest Health and the Reduction of Wildfire Dangers, HB 1168, Washington State Legislature (2021-22), <https://app.leg.wa.gov/billssummary?BillNumber=1168&Year=2021&Initiative=false>.