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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Federal</th>
<th>Nonfederal</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Federal</th>
<th>Nonfederal</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2017</td>
<td>15.2</td>
<td>56.4</td>
<td>71.5</td>
<td>6.3</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>9.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2018</td>
<td>12.5</td>
<td>45.6</td>
<td>58.1</td>
<td>4.6</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>7.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2019</td>
<td>10.9</td>
<td>39.6</td>
<td>50.5</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>4.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2020</td>
<td>14.4</td>
<td>44.6</td>
<td>59.0</td>
<td>7.1</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>10.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2021</td>
<td>14.0</td>
<td>45.0</td>
<td>59.0</td>
<td>5.2</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>7.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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

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 December 2, 2022, around 64,100 wildfires have impacted 7.3 million acres this year; nearly half of those acres were in Alaska (3.1 million acres).

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

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).

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.

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).

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

Katie Hoover, Specialist in Natural Resources Policy
Laura A. Hanson, Senior Research Librarian

https://crsreports.congress.gov
Disclaimer

This document was prepared by the Congressional Research Service (CRS). CRS serves as nonpartisan shared staff to congressional committees and Members of Congress. It operates solely at the behest of and under the direction of Congress. Information in a CRS Report should not be relied upon for purposes other than public understanding of information that has been provided by CRS to Members of Congress in connection with CRS’s institutional role. CRS Reports, as a work of the United States Government, are not subject to copyright protection in the United States. Any CRS Report may be reproduced and distributed in its entirety without permission from CRS. However, as a CRS Report may include copyrighted images or material from a third party, you may need to obtain the permission of the copyright holder if you wish to copy or otherwise use copyrighted material.