

FIRE AND EMERGENCY SERVICES

WILDFIRE RECOMMENDATIONS TO CONGRESS



Photo credit: Los Angeles County Economic Development Corporation

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PREVENTION, MITIGATION, AND RECOVERY

Ensuring that communities are taking proactive steps to ensure they are resilient and engaged in wildfire prevention is a critical aspect of the wildfire conversation. Advance mitigation and prevention efforts can save significant amounts of lives and property while allowing first responders to focus efforts on a smaller number of incidents. Furthermore, rebuilding post-fire is an opportunity to help communities come up to code and rebuild in a resilient manner that will help ensure future safety.

FEMA's landmark study, "Building Codes Save: A Nationwide Study," shows that modern building codes lead to a major reduction in property losses from natural disasters. The FEMA report calculates losses from three types of natural hazard (earthquakes, flooding, and hurricane winds) for each state and Washington, D.C. An additional pilot study is expanding the hazards analyzed to include structure fire and wildfire.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- * Recommendation:** Ensure that federal prevention, mitigation, and recovery funding requires communities to adopt, use, and enforce one of the two most recent editions of national consensus codes and standards. We must ensure that communities rebuild in the most resilient and safe manner to help prevent future losses.
- * Recommendation:** The federal government should lead by example in ensuring that the most recent relevant codes and standards are used for construction. The Department of Housing and Urban Development should be directed to require current and complete codes be used before Federal Housing Administration loans are guaranteed for properties in the wildland-urban interface.



- **Recommendation:** Promote fire-adapted communities. Human populations, communities, and infrastructure should be prepared to be exposed to, respond to, and recover from wildfire.
 - Focus on individual and community-level actions that are integrated with land use plans.
 - Focus on mitigation, education, and action supported by intergovernmental resources.
 - Support community resilience by preparing for and mitigating post-fire impacts through mitigation, evacuation, and recovery planning, and greater investments in recovery.
 - Continue to focus on mitigating the effects of wildfire smoke on communities and its residents.



- **Recommendation:** Require state hazard mitigation plans to comprehensively address wildfire prevention and mitigation including the development of Comprehensive Wildfire Prevention Plans (CWPPs) for at-risk communities. Consider an accelerated timeline for updating the plans.





THE U.S. FIRE ADMINISTRATION

The U.S. Fire Administration (USFA) is the primary voice of the fire service in the federal government. USFA is the lead federal agency for fire data collection, public fire education, fire research, and fire service training. In the wildfire conversation, the voice of USFA is critical to ensuring that wildfire mitigation, prevention, response, and recovery are informed by the needs of the local fire departments responding to the disasters. Without USFA, any wildfire conversation or initiative lacks the necessary information to properly protect communities.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- * • **Recommendation:** In all conversations and policies related to wildfire and the wildland-urban interface, the U.S. Fire Administration must be considered as a primary stakeholder for mitigation, prevention, response, and recovery.
- * • **Recommendation:** Ensure that the U.S. Fire Administration has a lead role in Emergency Support Function #4. ESF #4 is the firefighting function and aims to provide federal support and coordination for firefighting activities in support of local, state, tribal, territorial, and insular area agencies involved in wildland, rural, and urban firefighting operations resulting from, or occurring coincidentally with, an all-hazard incident requiring a coordinated national response for assistance.

TRAINING



87%

of **local fire departments** are responsible for WUI firefighting



78%

of departments that perform wildland and WUI firefighting operations have **unmet training needs**

As noted by the National Fire Protection Association, most local fire departments (87 percent) are responsible for wildland and wildland-urban interface (WUI) firefighting. Overall, 78 percent of the departments that perform wildland and WUI firefighting operations have unmet training needs.

RECOMMENDATIONS



- **Recommendation:** Create a course and funding source through the U.S. Fire Administration (USFA) to train local firefighters on how to safely and effectively respond to wildfires. Ensure that USFA works with fire service stakeholders to ensure that the training is comprehensive and that it is disseminated to local fire departments.

EQUIPMENT AND GEAR

Local fire departments have enormous unmet needs when it comes to ensuring firefighters have the gear and equipment they need. Additional research is needed to ensure that firefighting gear protects the firefighters as much as possible to help ensure their safety on the job.



PROVISION OF GEAR: More than half (57 percent) of all local fire departments cannot equip all their responders with wildland fire personal protective equipment. This unmet need can be found consistently across departments of all sizes.



- **Recommendation:** Provide funding through the Forest Service to local fire departments for the purchase of wildfire gear and equipment.

57%

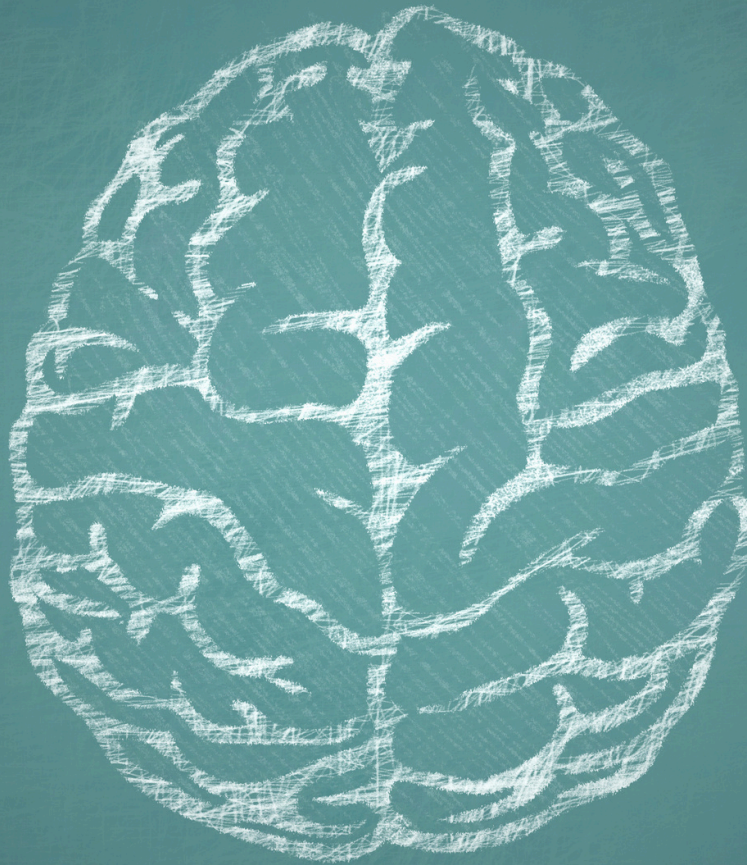
of all local fire departments cannot equip all their responders with wildland fire personal protective equipment.



RESEARCH NEEDS: Research into respirators and personal protective equipment (PPE) – including fit and materials is needed to ensure firefighter safety when fighting wildfires.



- **Recommendation:** Provide funding and research support to NIOSH and NIST for ongoing and future research on topics including: respirator effectiveness, levels of contamination of firefighting gear and best practices for cleaning and decontamination of gear, firefighter exposures, improved fit of gear, gear retirement criteria, and other relevant subject areas.



MENTAL HEALTH

Firefighters develop post-traumatic stress at rates comparable to military service members--and much higher than the general population. They also die by suicide at higher rates than the general public. The number of firefighter suicides is estimated to be at least 100 per year.

RECOMMENDATIONS



- **Recommendation:** FEMA should add mental health practitioners to Urban Search and Rescue (USAR) teams or consider enduring that USAR personnel have completed peer mental health support training. Ensuring that USAR teams have access to appropriate mental health care is paramount.



- **Recommendation:** Create a mechanism to provide mental health services for local firefighters who respond to disasters, including support for establishing peer-support programs and educating health professionals to create cultural competence in treating first responders.

GRANT FUNDING

The National Fire Protection Association's [Fire Service Needs Assessment](#) shows that fire departments across the country are unable to fully staff engines, fully train their members for structural and wildland firefighting, or provide all their firefighters with personal protective equipment (PPE) and updated self-contained breathing apparatus (SCBA). Local resources are often not enough, and in a situation such as an unusually challenging wildland incident, fire departments frequently have to turn to outside resources. The NFPA Fire Service Needs Assessment identifies specific shortfalls in the PPE and training needed for addressing wildfires.

AFG AND SAFER

These grant programs have been held flat and even cut in recent years, while demand remains untenably high. In FY2024, AFG received fourteen times more in requests than could be funded.

- * **Recommendation:** Increase funding to the Assistance to Firefighters Grants (AFG) program and Staffing for Adequate Fire and Emergency Response (SAFER) grant program.

FIRE MANAGEMENT ASSISTANCE GRANTS

The Fire Management Assistance Grant (FMAG) Program helps communities respond to major wildfire emergencies.

- * **Recommendation:** Recognize pre-deployment activities as an allowable cost under FMAG.
- * **Recommendation:** Ensure that FMAG is determined by the footprint of the fire, not solely by jurisdiction.
- * **Recommendation:** Consider changing or eliminating the 25% local match for FMAG or provide other incentives to help communities responding to disasters.

THE DISASTER RECOVERY REFORM ACT SEC. 1206

The Disaster Recovery Reform Act of 2018 (DRRA) authorized FEMA to “provide assistance to state and local governments for building code and floodplain administration and enforcement, including inspections for substantial damage compliance” and “base and overtime wages for extra hires to facilitate the implementation and enforcement of adopted building codes for a period of not more than 180 days after the major disaster is declared.” In practice, the 180 day period of performance does not adequately meet the needs of code officials as they organize, equip, respond, and recover following a disaster.

- * **Recommendation:** Amend the Stafford Act to increase DRRA 1206 applicability and funding period from 180 days to 1 year following a major disaster declaration.

GRANT FUNDING

STATE FIRE ASSISTANCE AND VOLUNTEER FIRE ASSISTANCE GRANTS

The State Fire Assistance (SFA) and Volunteer Fire Assistance (VFA) programs help decrease total federal costs for emergency wildland fire suppression by bolstering local readiness and improving local response in the event of a fire. The programs also reduce the threat of fire to people, communities, and both public and private lands.

- * **Recommendation:** Increase funding to VFA and SFA to help ensure that communities are prepared to respond to wildfires.
- * **Recommendation:** Increase the population threshold from 10,000 to 15,000 and decrease the volunteer percentage from 80 to 70 percent.

BUILDING RESILIENT INFRASTRUCTURE AND COMMUNITIES (BRIC) PROGRAM

The program supports states, local and territorial governments, and Tribal Nations as they work to reduce their hazard risk, increase capability, and build capacity.

- * **Recommendation:** Support robust funding for the program and ensure that FEMA is emphasizing the importance of wildfire within the program and ensuring that funding goes to wildfire-related projects.
- * **Recommendation:** Reduce barriers to participation in BRIC that are currently created by the application process (e.g. complexity of benefit cost analysis BCA).
- * **Recommendation:** Streamline environmental compliance and historical preservation requirements.

COMMUNITY WILDFIRE DEFENSE GRANT PROGRAM

These grants help communities and federally-recognized Tribes plan for and reduce wildfire risk and implement the National Cohesive Wildland Fire Management Strategy.

- * **Recommendation:** Support robust funding for the program.

WILDFIRE WORKFORCE



WILDLAND FIREFIGHTER PAY: Currently, low pay and benefits result in chronic staffing shortages, which create an undue burden on local fire departments to supplement federal fire agencies.



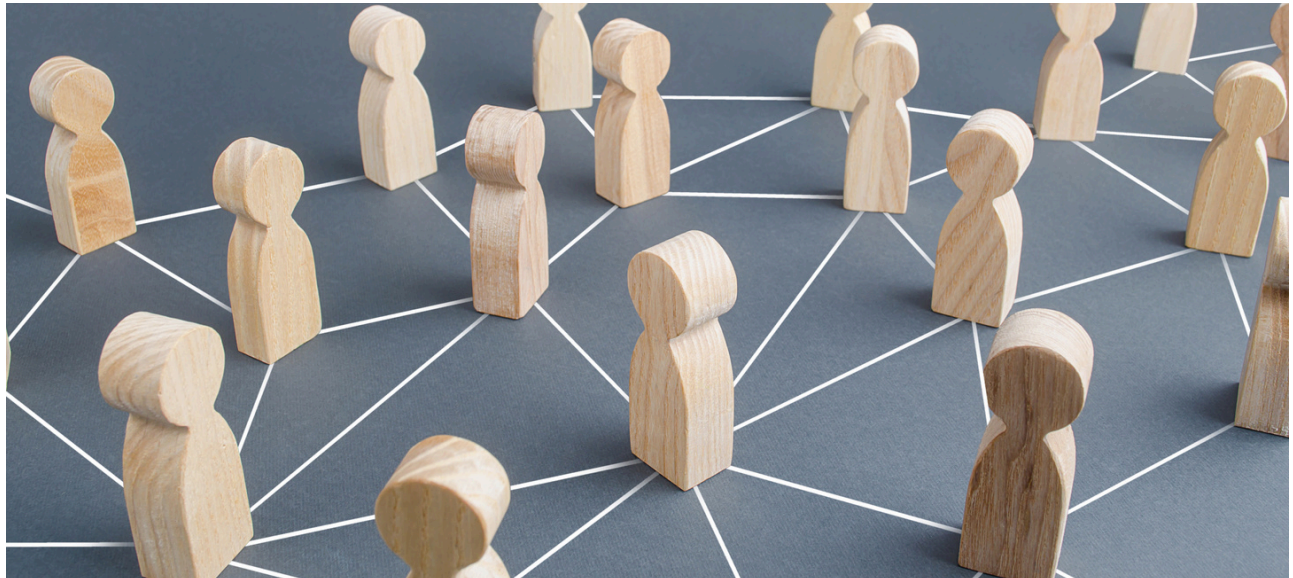
- **Recommendation:** Support efforts to address the pay schedule for wildland firefighters in the Forest Service and the Department of the Interior.



RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION: Recruiting and retaining a skilled wildland firefighting workforce at the local and federal levels builds resilience in all communities.



- **Recommendation:** Congress should work to support comprehensive, year-round workforce recruitment, development, and retention strategies for both wildland and local firefighters, as well as a collaborative focus on workforce health and wellness. The conversation must include the U.S. Fire Administration, in collaboration with the Forest Service and the Department of the Interior to ensure that the public and community safety angle is being taken into account.



COORDINATION

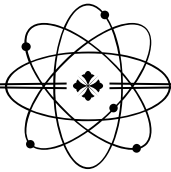
Coordination between the federal government and local fire departments is vital to save lives and protect communities.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- * • **Recommendation:** In all conversations and policies related to wildfire, the U.S. Fire Administration must be considered as a primary stakeholder for purposes of consultation, prevention, mitigation, response, recovery, etc.
- * • **Recommendation:** Streamline and define roles regarding coordination with intergovernmental stakeholders, including local fire departments, USFA, DOI, and more on topics including prevention, mitigation, response, etc. USFS and USFA must be in point positions for coordination.
- * • **Recommendation:** Work towards a standardized national coordination agreement. Essential to any agreement is the understanding that local governments should be reimbursed for all reasonable expenses and actual costs.
- * • **Recommendation:** Ensure that the U.S. Fire Administration has a lead role in Emergency Support Function #4.
- * • **Recommendation:** Clarify the ability to provide reimbursement to DOD for wildfire assistance and create a Task Force to remove roadblocks and ensure DOD firefighters can assist on fires.
- * • **Recommendation:** Conduct a report on a national mobilization system that rapidly and effectively mobilizes local fire departments.

SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

Groundbreaking research should be funded to use science to complement traditional, place-based ecological knowledge and to inform actions.



RECOMMENDATIONS



- **Recommendation:** Promote integrated data collection and analysis that meets the needs of local responders.



- **Recommendation:** USFA should continue to engage with NIST to identify building code testing and research needs of the fire service and define steps on how to move forward.



- **Recommendation:** Fund agencies such as NIST or NASA to develop decision support tools that are informed by real-time data to provide rapid predictive modeling of wildfires. This will help reduce risk in managed fires and improve safety for communities and firefighters.



- **Recommendation:** Improve interagency communication and coordination on wildfire and interface research, including the effects of wildfires, exposures, smoke, etc. on the fire service. Ensure that NIST and CDC play a primary role and USFA is included among the key stakeholders in any such communication and coordination efforts.

CONTACT US



QUESTIONS?

Email: update@cfsi.org

