

Why fighting wildfires in California costs more than other states

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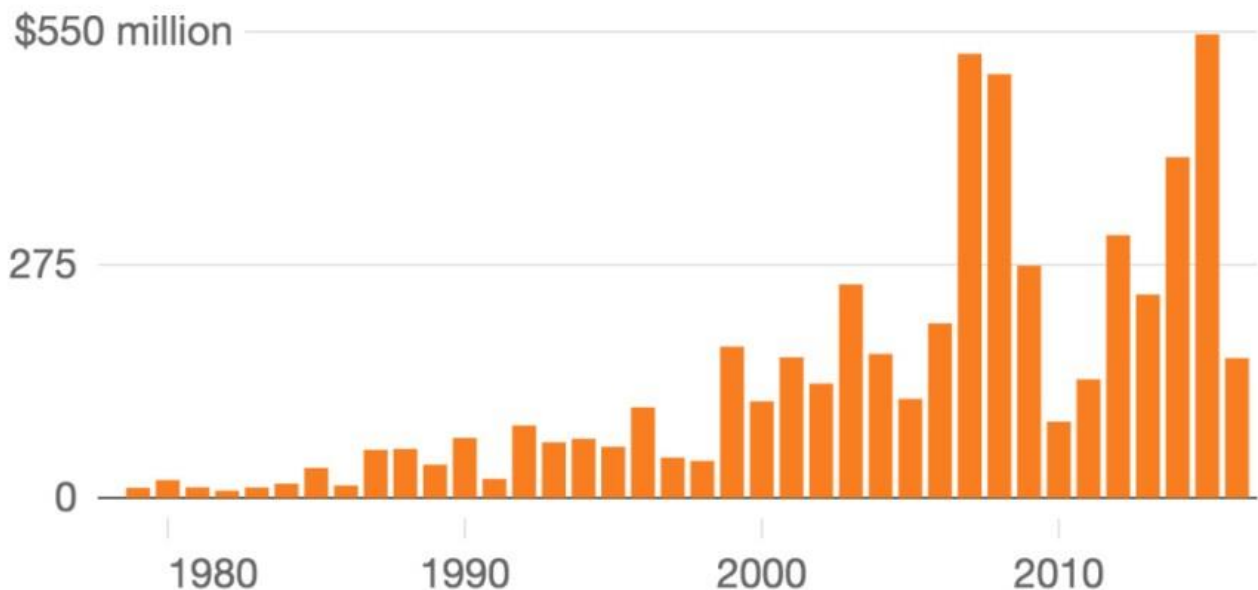
Fire fighters on the Blue Cut Fire in San Bernardino County on Aug. 16, 2016.

San Bernardino County Fire

Wildfires in California are notoriously expensive. The state has some of the highest total fire expenditures of any region in the country in a given year, according to research by the US Forest Service.

California also stands out for having the highest per acre fire suppression costs, along with Washington and Oregon. And things are only getting worse: in 2016, Cal Fire expects to spend the most on fighting fires than it has since at least 2000 (expenditure data prior to 2000 is not available).

Cal Fire's fire fighting costs increasing



KPCC using Quartz's Chartbuilder

Data: Cal Fire; dates show year fiscal year began; 2016 data is through 8/18

What makes California's wildfires so expensive? It's primarily that a lot of people live in the wilderness areas, according to Chris Mehl, policy director

with the Montana-based nonprofit research group [Headwaters Economics](#). Fire agencies often devote the majority of their resources to protecting homes: between 33 and 90 percent of the cost of suppressing fires is spent on structure protection, according to Mehl.

“So it’s significant no matter what,” he said. “But when you get a fire like [the [Blue Cut Fire in San Bernardino County](#)], that percentage goes way up because they’re using all their resources to try to protect structures and people.”

Compare that to a wildfire, even a much larger one, burning in a remote wilderness area in Montana. Fire agencies may let those fires burn, flying over them a few times a day to monitor them, Mehl said. The idea is that fire is a natural part of the ecosystem, and if it can burn without threatening communities or infrastructure, it should be allowed to do so.

That approach requires far fewer people and is much less expensive than active suppression, which is what Cal Fire does on all fires that ignite near developed areas in California, said Dave Calkin, a research forester with the US Forest Service who studies fire costs.

The "Wildland Urban Interface"

It doesn’t help that many homes in California, particularly in Southern California, are hard to defend. Tucked into verdant canyons and on hillsides golden with dry grass and bushes in what’s called the “wildland urban interface,” these homes require more resources to defend than densely-populated neighborhoods. At times, fire crews battling the Blue Cut Fire, for example, had fire engines parked on countless driveways along certain roads.

Home values also play a role in driving up cost, said Calkin. When more expensive homes are threatened, even up to 20 miles away, that increases fire suppression expenses.

Other factors that influence fire cost include what type of vegetation is burning: trees cost more to extinguish than grass fires. Also, California firefighters and contractors get paid more than in the interior West. And finally, hot, dry weather – and the Santa Ana winds – only add to the number of resources needed to keep fires from threatening homes.

It all adds up to a recipe for expensive fires, Mehl said.

“Southern California by its nature will be the most, or one of the most, expensive places in the country to fight fire,” he said. “You have all of the things wrapped together into one situation.”

California's Fire Budget

In anticipation of a hot, dry summer, Cal Fire budgeted \$429 million for fire fighting this year, the highest budget estimate since at least 2000. The agency has already spent almost 40 percent of its fire-fighting budget for the year, \$165 million, and Southern California’s traditional fire season hasn’t even begun yet.

The term “budget” is also misleading because there is no apparent limit to what Cal Fire can spend on fire fighting – the state Legislature will kick in more money if Cal Fire overruns its budget. That’s what has happened every single year since 2000 except for one, the 2010-2011 season, which followed a wet winter.

Staffing resources

California’s wildfires are resource-intensive in other ways, too – they require lots of fire fighters. And when there are a lot of fires burning at once, like there are right now, Cal Fire can begin to run out of people to fight them all.

When that happens, the agency is in “drawdown,” a technical term that means there aren’t enough fire fighters on reserve in a given unit to effectively respond if a new fire breaks out. To help fill the gaps, Cal Fire will turn to the National Interagency Fire Center in Boise, Idaho for help.

The NIFC monitors staffing levels on wildfires around the country, and decides where it’s safe to pull resources from. Right now, there aren’t a lot of fires burning in the Southwest or the Rocky Mountains, as those regions are entering their summer monsoon season, said Robyn Broyles, a communication specialist at NIFC. Approximately 60 out-of-state fire engines have come to help Cal Fire – from Arizona and New Mexico.

Lynne Tolmachoff, a spokesperson for Cal Fire, said they’re being used to cover fire stations while Cal Fire’s engines are out fighting wildfires.

While Cal Fire might be experiencing a staffing shortage, Broyles said there is plenty of wildland fire fighters nationwide. NIFC keeps a ranking from 1 to 5 to describe how many fires are burning in how many different regions, and what percentage of the nation’s fire fighters are dispatched to them.

On Friday the nation was at a level 3, which Broyles described as moderate. A day later, the NICF would raise the preparedness level to 4.

That means there's no need to look to other countries like New Zealand, Australia and Canada for help, and NIFC can meet all the requests for extra staffing with help from the military and around the country.