

# WILDFIRES IN NEVADA: AN OVERVIEW

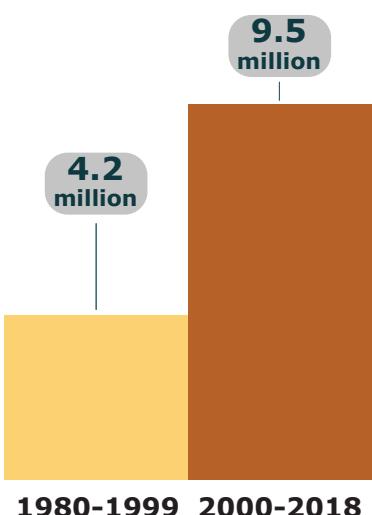
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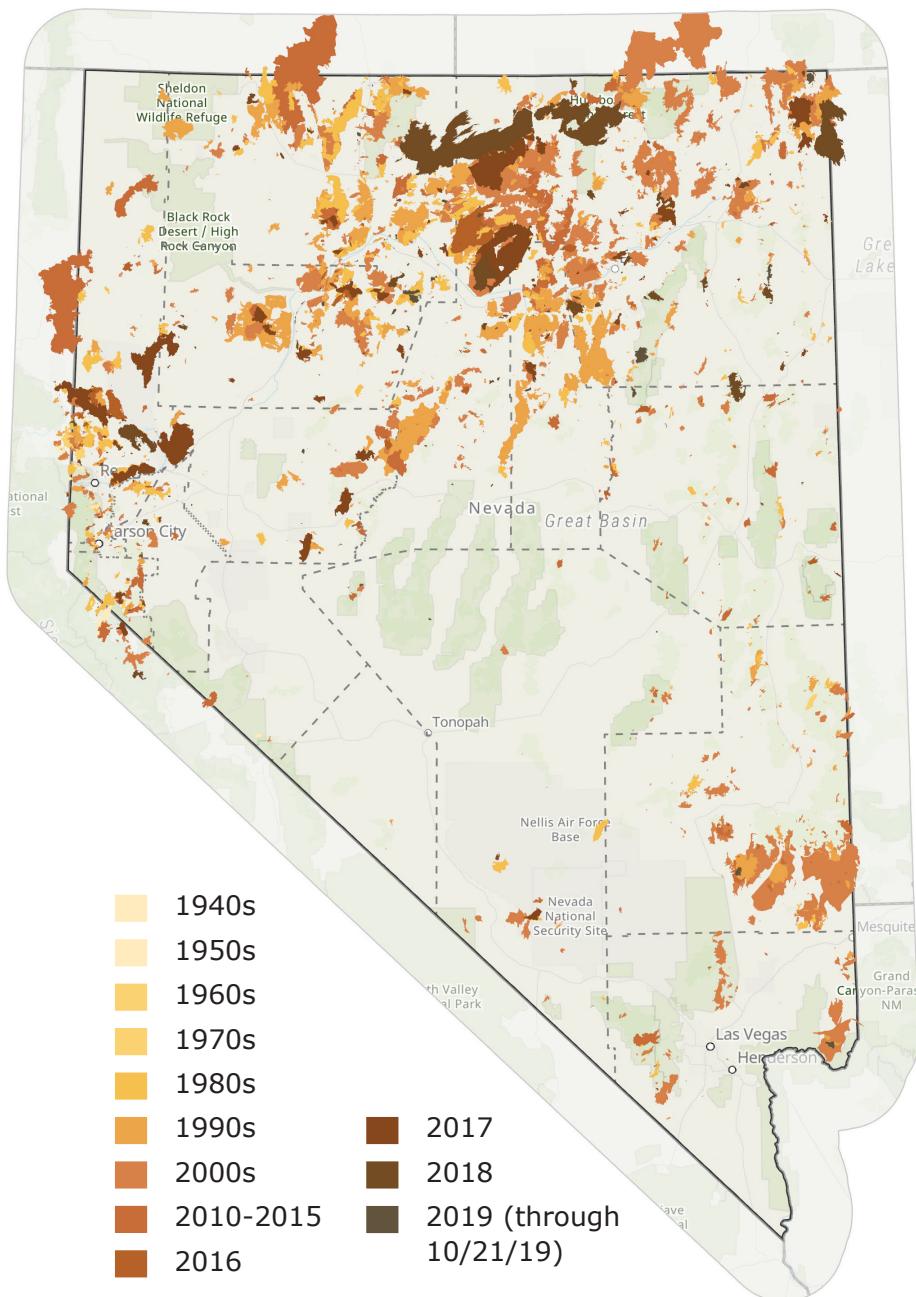
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Hundreds of wildfires occur each year in Nevada. During the last two years, the state has experienced especially devastating wildfires, with the 2018 Martin and Sugarloaf Fires alone burning nearly one million acres of land in northeast Nevada. Years of unusually dry conditions and the spread of invasive plants like cheatgrass have left the state particularly vulnerable to dangerous fire seasons. During drought years and after abnormally wet years, the acreage burned by wildfires typically increases. Large amounts of dry fuel contribute to more erratic burning conditions and increased fire intensity, and firefighting agencies may struggle to obtain the money and other resources necessary to suppress fires.

## NUMBER OF ACRES BURNED BY WILDFIRE IN NEVADA



## NEVADA WILDLAND FIRE HISTORY, 1941-2019



Sources: Bureau of Land Management (map);  
 Nevada's Division of Forestry et al., "[Wildland Fire in Nevada](#),"  
 presented to the Senate Committee on Natural Resources,  
 Feb. 14, 2019 (chart).

## AGENCIES RESPONSIBLE FOR PREVENTING AND FIGHTING WILDFIRES

Because of Nevada's large proportion of public lands, several agencies share responsibility for wildfire prevention and suppression in the state. At the state level, the [Division of Forestry](#) in the State Department of Conservation and Natural Resources provides fire protection. The Division implements fire suppression and prevention programs, as well as related emergency services.

At the federal level, the United States [Bureau of Land Management](#) (BLM) and the [United States Forest Service](#) (USFS) participate extensively in fire-related efforts throughout Nevada. These federal partners work hand in hand with state and local agencies to fight wildfires, rehabilitate burned vegetation, and prevent future fires by creating fuel breaks and removing hazardous fuels. Local fire protection districts and volunteer fire departments also are located across the state.

Finally, rangeland fire protection associations (RFPAs)—authorized by [Assembly Bill 163 of the 2015 Session](#)—are nonprofit associations that may be formed to protect Nevada rangeland from wildfire. The associations include a network of trained and certified fire teams that help to reduce fire risk by controlling fuel loads; rehabilitating and restoring burned areas; and working with federal, state, and local governments to implement a successful fire suppression strategy. The state forester firewarden is responsible for the routine evaluation and regulation of RFPAs relating to the formation, operation, and training of the members of an association.

The cooperation of these entities at all levels is significant and contributes greatly to successful fire prevention and suppression efforts.

### LAWS RELATED TO FIRE IN NEVADA REVISED STATUTES

[Chapter 472](#): State Forester Firewarden

[Chapter 473](#): Fire Protection Districts Receiving Federal Aid

[Chapter 474](#): County Fire Protection Districts

[Chapter 475](#): Crimes and Responsibilities Concerning Fires

[Chapter 476](#): Explosives and Inflammable Materials

[Chapter 477](#): State Fire Marshal

[Chapter 527](#): Protection and Preservation of Timbered Lands, Trees, and Flora

[Chapter 528](#): Forest Practice and Reforestation

## ACREAGE LOST TO WILDFIRES, 2017-2018

In 2017, wildfires resulted in:



more than  
**10 million**  
acres burned nationwide



more than  
**1.3 million**  
acres burned in Nevada

In 2018, wildfires resulted in:



more than  
**8.7 million**  
acres burned nationwide



more than  
**1 million**  
acres burned in Nevada

Sources: [National Interagency Fire Center](#); Nevada's Division of Forestry et al., "[Wildland Fire in Nevada](#)," presented to the Senate Committee on Natural Resources, Feb. 14, 2019.

## ECONOMIC IMPACTS OF WILDFIRE IN NEVADA

Wildfires can have a grave economic impact on local communities and the state. Not only are the costs of fighting wildfires high, but there can also be extensive costs associated with lost structures and burned agriculture and rangelands. Firefighting expenses—along with fire-associated losses in key sectors like the ranching industry—can cost rural communities tens of millions of dollars each year.

Wildfires also negatively affect ecosystems and the wildlife that depend on them. Damaged or destroyed

ecosystems, in turn, harm local economies that rely on outdoor recreation. Wildfires cause more complex and less quantifiable costs for Nevadans, as well. For example, it is hard to quantify the economic cost of adverse health effects from wildfire-smoke exposure.

***The total cost estimate for suppressing the 2018 Martin fire—the largest fire in Nevada that year—is \$10.3 million.***

Despite costly losses to rangeland and habitat from wildfire, Nevada is not always prioritized for federal recovery aid. This is largely due to the state's sparse population and an associated lack of fire-related structural loss relative to many other areas. Thus, Nevada often receives less recovery aid than other states.

**FEMA fire management assistance grants, which repay 75 percent of state costs for suppression of large fires, are based on four criteria:**

- 1. Threat to lives and property, including critical infrastructure and watersheds;**
- 2. Availability of state and local firefighting resources;**
- 3. High fire danger conditions; and**
- 4. Potential major economic impact.**

## RECENT NEVADA LEGISLATION CONCERNING WILDFIRES

**2013**

**WILDLAND FIRE PROTECTION PROGRAM**  
Through the state budget bill ([AB 507](#)) and General Authorizations Act ([SB 521](#)), the Legislature approved funds for the Division of Forestry to establish a voluntary Wildland Fire Protection Program. This program allows the state to provide financial assistance and other resources to participating fire protection districts during and after a wildfire.

**2011**

**TEMPORARY WATER PERMITS FOR FIRE-RESISTANT VEGETATIVE COVER**  
[Senate Bill 361](#) authorized the state engineer to issue a temporary permit to appropriate water to establish fire-resistant vegetative cover in certain areas. Under this bill, property owners or interested organizations may apply for a one-year temporary irrigation permit to help establish replanting in burned areas or to create "green strips" designed to contain a fire or prevent it from jumping into new areas.

## RECENT NEVADA LEGISLATION CONCERNING WILDFIRES (CONT'D)

### 2013 (CONT'D)

#### FEDERAL ASSISTANCE

[Assembly Joint Resolution 4](#) urged the BLM and the USFS to assist Nevada with the prevention and suppression of wildfires and repeat wildfires in the state.

### 2019

#### INTERIM STUDY CONCERNING WILDFIRES

[Assembly Concurrent Resolution 4](#) establishes an interim committee to conduct a study concerning wildfires. Pursuant to the resolution, the committee must study methods of reducing wildfire fuels, issues related to early responses to wildfires, and the economic impact of wildfires on the state and local communities.

#### NATURAL DISASTER PROTECTION PLANS

[Senate Bill 329](#) requires an electric utility to submit a natural disaster protection plan to the Public Utilities Commission of Nevada. The plan must contain certain information, procedures, protocols, and measures relating to the efforts of the electric utility to prevent or respond to a fire or other natural disaster.

#### FORESTRY PRACTICES

[Senate Bill 56](#) revises and updates provisions relating to forestry practices in order to reflect national fire industry standards.

#### 2019 LEGISLATIVE APPROPRIATIONS

[Senate Bill 525](#) makes appropriations to the Division of Forestry for equipment necessary for fighting wildfires, and [SB 508](#) appropriates \$5 million for wildfire prevention, restoration, and long-term planning.

### 2015

#### CREATION OF RFPAS

[Assembly Bill 163](#) allowed the creation of RFPAs. The bill authorized counties and fire protection districts to approve petitions to create RFPAs submitted by persons or business entities within the relevant county or district, if the petitioners meet certain requirements.

#### TRANSFER OF STATE PROPERTY TO FIRE PROTECTION DISTRICTS AND COUNTIES

[Assembly Bill 34](#) authorized the state land registrar to transfer title to certain real property owned by the state, with restrictions, to qualifying local fire protection districts and counties. The bill also clarified that if the state forester firewarden determines a fire is the result of an unavoidable accident, then the entity that caused the fire cannot be charged the costs of extinguishing the fire.

## THE WILDLAND URBAN INTERFACE: RESOURCES FOR HOMEOWNERS AND COMMUNITIES

Homeowners and communities located in places “where humans and their development meet or intermix with wildland fuel,”<sup>1</sup> the so-called wildland urban interface (WUI), are especially vulnerable to wildfire risk. Several helpful resources are available for those living in the WUI in Nevada.

### **NEVADA NETWORK OF FIRE ADAPTED COMMUNITIES**

Nevada's Division of Forestry runs the [Nevada Network of Fire Adapted Communities](#) program to provide people living in such high fire-hazard locations with the resources needed to prepare their homes and communities before a wildfire occurs. The Network provides member communities with education, enables them to develop [Community Wildfire Protection Plans](#), and facilitates collaboration between communities and stakeholders.

### **LIVING WITH FIRE PROGRAM**

The University of Nevada Cooperative Extension provides homeowners with information and resources through its [Living With Fire](#) program. The program promotes awareness to wildfire risks and, among other things, encourages homeowners and communities to create evacuation plans and defensible space around structures. As part of this program, the Extension produces region-specific publications in its “[Fire Adapted Communities: The Next Step in Wildfire Preparedness](#)” series. These documents outline best practices for protecting communities in the WUI and provide guidance for evacuation planning.

## NEXT STEPS IN NEVADA WILDFIRE MANAGEMENT

Wildfires will almost surely continue to be an issue of special concern in Nevada, and measures to build on existing policy will likely be considered in future legislative sessions. At the 2021 Session specifically, the Legislature will receive results of the wildfire study created by ACR 4 (2019) and consider any legislation that may be recommended by the study committee.

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<sup>1</sup> "Federal Register," Vol. 66 No. 3, January 4, 2001, pp. 752-53.