January 28, 2025

Frequently Asked Questions About Wildfires in California

Updated February 13, 2025

The catastrophic January 2025 Southern California wildfires have led to increased interest in how the state historically has prepared for, responded to, and recovered from wildfires. In response to this interest, this post answers commonly asked questions related to wildfires in the state of California. This post does not explicitly discuss the recent Southern California fires and does not contain new LAO analysis or recommendations, but rather provides background information intended to help offer broader context on the state's historical wildfire-related activities, division of roles and responsibilities, and spending. We also discuss some traditional federal-level activities and processes, particularly related to disaster response and recovery. This post is organized into five sections: (1) Wildfire Resilience and Prevention, which involves activities the state performs to decrease the incidence, intensity, and impacts of wildfires before they occur; (2) Wildfire Response, which includes firefighting and protection actions the state undertakes when a wildfire occurs; (3) Wildfire Recovery, which includes typical steps that take place after a wildfire occurs; (4) Funding for Schools and Local Governments, which discusses actions the state has taken to

support local entities in response to previous wildfires; and (5) Insurance, where we describe the state-run “backstop” program for insuring against wildfire and other losses.

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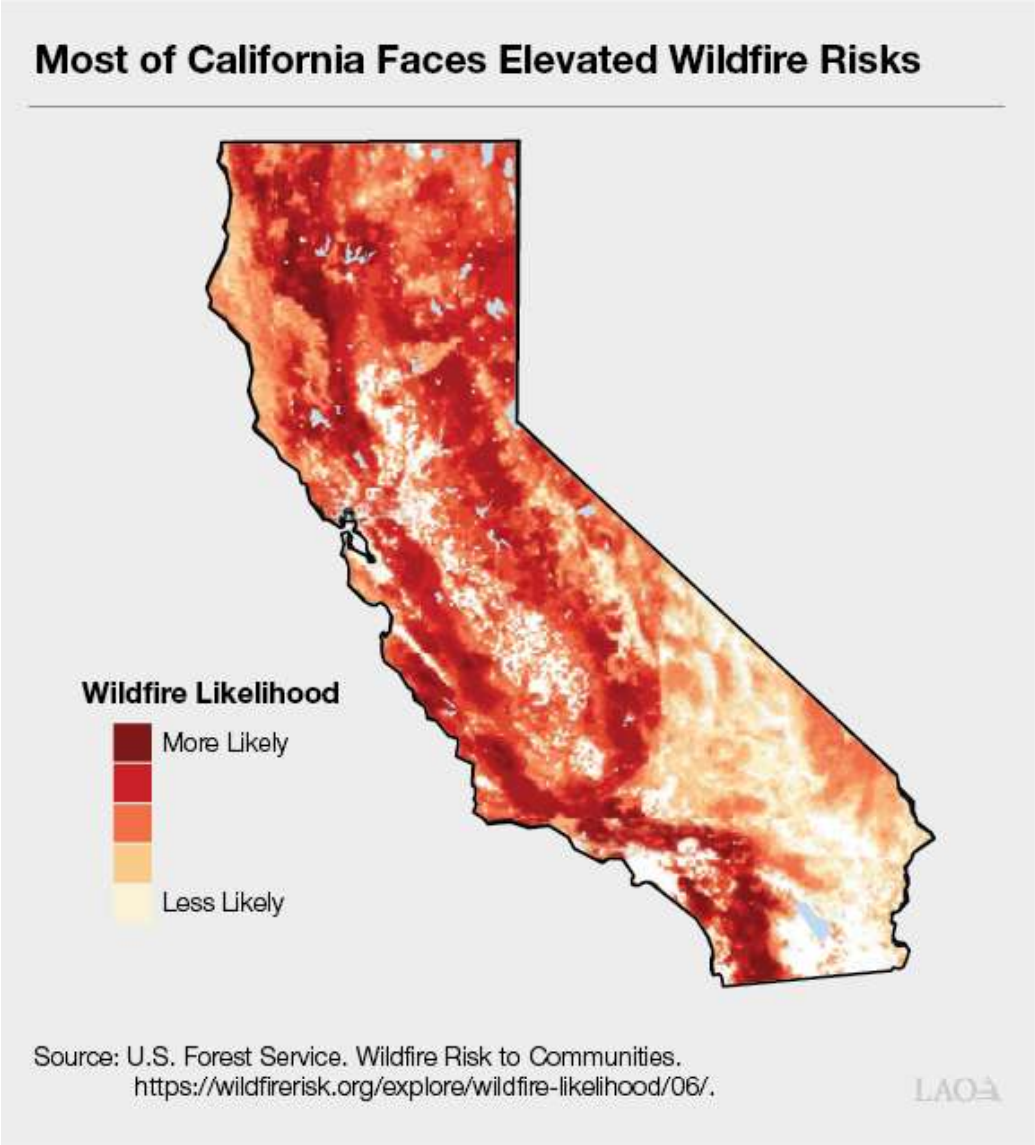
Wildfire Resilience and Prevention

How does wildfire risk vary across the state?

California's climate makes it naturally susceptible to wildfires. The state's rainfall is highly seasonal, usually falling mostly in the late fall and winter. Starting in the spring, much of the state typically experiences low levels of rainfall and increasingly warm conditions. These conditions begin to dry out vegetation, which makes the state increasingly susceptible to wildfires during the summer and early fall—or even later in years when dry conditions persist through the winter. Some areas of the state face a particularly high risk of severe wildfires due to factors such as the type of vegetation present, the local weather patterns, and the topography. Many of the areas with the highest risk are where human development abuts or intermingles with undeveloped wildlands (commonly referred to as the wildland-urban interface, or WUI). These spaces often contain smaller communities, but some more populated areas near wildlands also can be highly susceptible to wildfires, such as during high wind conditions.

The Figure displays wildfire likelihood across the state as estimated by the federal government <https://wildfirerisk.org/explore/wildfire-likelihood/06/> . This reflects the estimated probability of a wildfire burning in any given year (based on fire behavior modeling across

thousands of simulations of possible fire seasons). This research estimates that California has, on average, greater wildfire likelihood than any other state in the nation.



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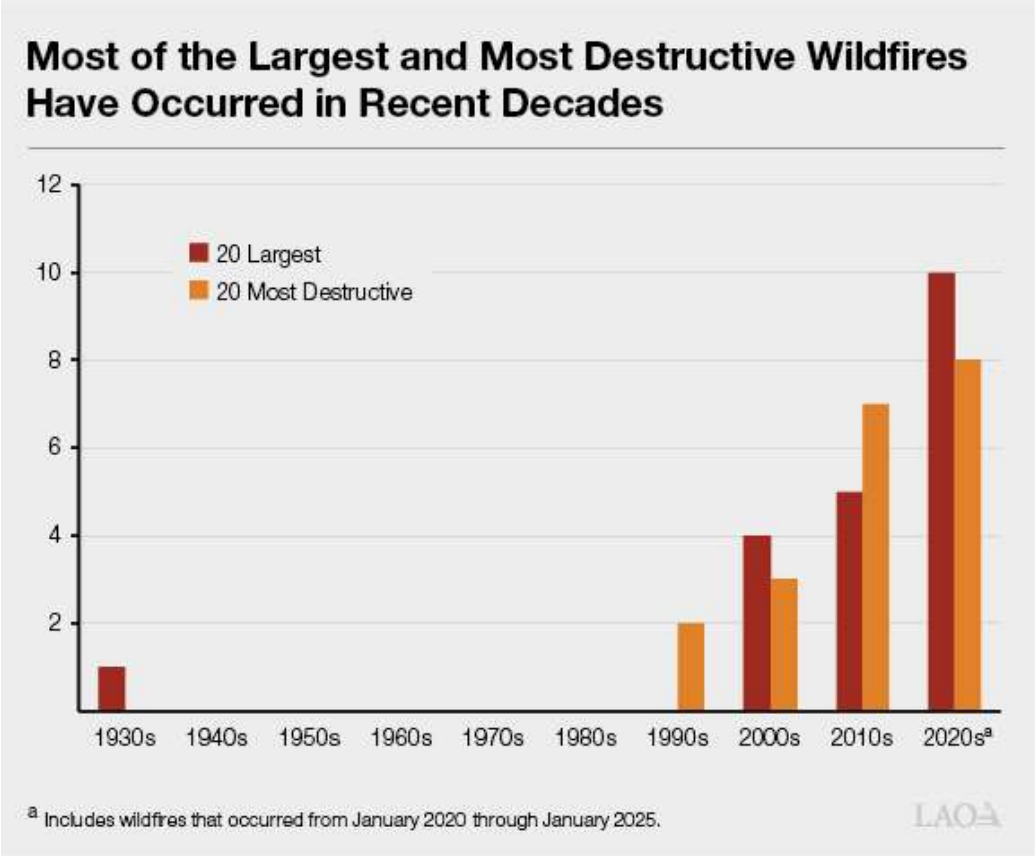
How has the size, destructiveness, and severity of wildfires in California changed over time?

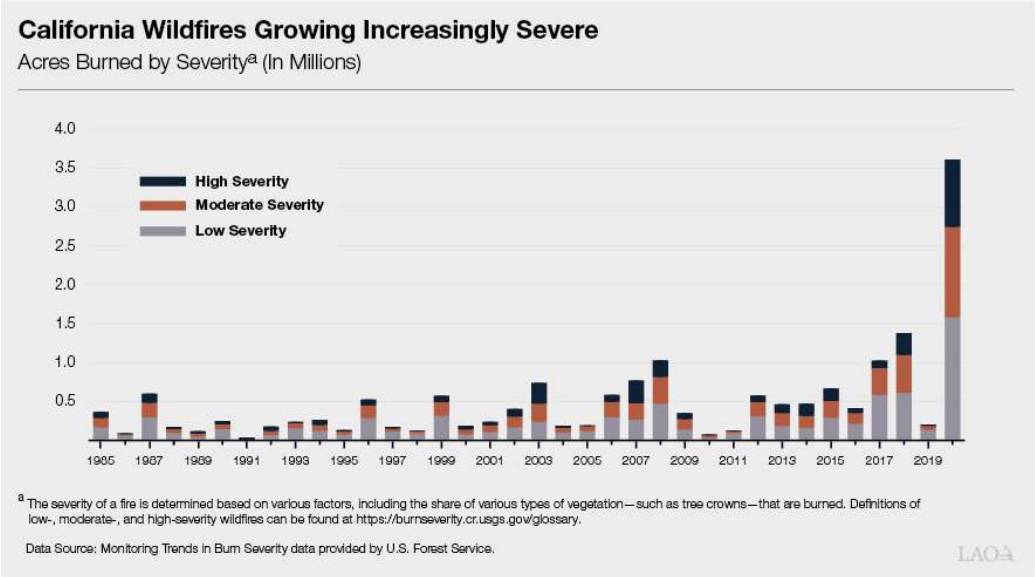
As shown in the Figure, most of California's largest and most destructive wildfires have occurred in recent decades. (The state compiles these data measured by the number of acres burned and the number of structures destroyed.) This trend has been particularly

notable over the last several years, which have seen some of the worst wildfires in the state's recorded history. For example, eight of the most destructive wildfires occurred from August 2020 through January 2025. This includes the Eaton and Palisades fires, for which specific damage totals still were being refined as of this writing.



While the state has experienced particularly large wildfires within the last several years as compared to over the past century, the number of acres burned in recent decades still is notably less than the historical average. Historically, significant parts of the state would burn annually, especially during the warm, dry months of the year. In the 1700s, for example, an estimated 4.5 million acres burned each year, on average. This is more than four times the average annual amount of acreage that has burned in recent decades, due in large part to the state's focus on suppressing wildfires. Many plant and tree species native to California adapted to these regular, low- and moderate-intensity wildfires. These fires played an important role in keeping the state's forests and landscapes healthy by periodically

clearing underbrush and contributing to regrowth of native plant species. Because of the change in fire prevalence, when wildfires do occur now, they often burn at higher severity than would naturally be the case. The next Figure shows the increase in acres burned by severity level over the past few decades. High-severity wildfires can be problematic, particularly for forested landscapes, because they often denude landscapes, leaving large areas with mostly charred remnants. (The severity of a fire is determined based on various factors <https://burnseverity.cr.usgs.gov/glossary> , including the share of various types of vegetation—such as tree crowns—that are burned.) In contrast, lower-severity wildfires typically burn underbrush and smaller trees, but leave intact many larger, well-established trees and species that have adapted to withstand fire.



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What types of factors contribute to wildfire risk?

The conditions and causes for each wildfire vary, as do the subsequent impacts. Weather, human activities, and location characteristics can all affect both fire ignitions and resulting damage. As of this writing, information was still being collected regarding which specific contributors led to the January 2025 fires in Southern California. However, some of the significant factors that have

contributed to the statewide trends of wildfires becoming deadlier and more destructive in recent decades include:

- ***Increased Development in Fire-Prone Areas.*** Over time, as the state's population has increased and more development has occurred, more communities have built up in forested and rural areas that previously had limited development. This intersection of developed areas and the wildlands is known as the "wildland-urban interface," or WUI. Continued development in the WUI means that more people and property are located in areas prone to wildfires. For instance, between 1990 and 2020, the number of housing units in California's WUI grew from 3.6 million to 5.1 million (a 42 percent increase). Besides placing more people and structures in locations with higher wildfire risk, increased development and activity in the WUI can also raise the chance of human-caused fire ignitions.

- ***Climate Change.*** Scientists have found that climate change is contributing to hotter weather and longer dry seasons in California than was previously typical. Warmer weather and more frequent droughts can, in turn, lead to drier vegetation and greater numbers of dead or dying trees, both of which are prone to igniting. Notably, extremely dry conditions in combination with high winds can be particularly high risk for wildfires. This is because high winds can result in embers from a wildfire being blown miles away from the main fire. In such cases, wildfires have jumped across fire breaks, roadways, and bodies of water.

- ***Utility Infrastructure Management.*** Only about 10 percent of wildfires are started by utility equipment, and many of those fires result in little or no property damage. However, some of these fires can cause significant damage, as has occurred in recent years. Utility powerlines caused at least 8 of the 20 most destructive fires in California's history. (As of this writing, the role that utility infrastructure played in the January 2025 Southern California wildfires still is under investigation.) Wildfires caused by powerlines can be particularly damaging, in part because some of the factors that cause utility ignitions—such as high winds

damaging electrical lines—also contribute to a rapid spread of fire that is difficult to control. For example, Pacific Gas and Electric equipment started the 2018 Camp Fire in Butte County.

- ***Unhealthy Forests.*** Much of the state's forestlands are unhealthy, which means they tend to be dense with small trees and brush. These serve as "ladder fuels" to carry wildfires into tree canopies, increasing their spread. Comparatively, a healthy forest typically has less brush and fewer trees, and those trees that are present are larger and more established. Healthy forests tend to have less severe wildfires that burn through the brush and may leave tree canopies intact. Many forestlands are in an unhealthy condition as a result of historical failure to implement logging best practices and years of suppressing naturally occurring wildfires.

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Who owns most of the forestlands in California?

Forestland is defined as land that is at least 10 percent stocked by forest trees of any size, or land that formerly had such tree cover and is not currently developed for a non-forest use. Forestlands can include a variety of types of landscapes. As shown in the Figure, close to 60 percent (nearly 19 million acres) of forestlands in California are owned by the federal government, including by the U.S. Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management, and National Park Service. Private nonindustrial entities own about one-quarter (8 million acres) of forestland. These include families, individuals, conservation and natural resource organizations, and Native American tribes. Industrial owners—primarily timber companies—own 14 percent (4.5 million acres) of forestland. State and local governments own a comparatively small share—only 3 percent (1 million acres) combined. This kaleidoscope of ownership has implications for management responsibilities and also makes coordination important when conducting both wildfire resilience and response activities.