

# THE WILDFIRE BURDEN:

WHY PUBLIC LAND SEIZURE PROPOSALS WOULD COST WESTERN STATES BILLIONS OF DOLLARS



Center for  
**Western Priorities**

# INTRODUCTION

A number of Western politicians have called on states to seize federal public lands.<sup>1</sup> While this rhetoric is red meat for some on the right, it is widely recognized that proposals to seize (or “transfer”) public lands are not only misguided and far outside of the mainstream, but they are also beset by major constitutional and logistical challenges.<sup>2</sup>

Since many Western states – including Utah, Idaho, Montana and Nevada – are spending taxpayer money to study and promote public land seizure efforts, it is important for taxpayers to understand the significant impacts these proposals would have on state budgets. One of the biggest is the cost of fighting wildfire.

By endorsing proposals to seize public lands, Western state politicians are committing their states to take on the liabilities and costs associated with managing public lands, including fighting wildfire. Our new research, presented here, shows that every year the federal government spends billions of dollars fighting wildfire in Western states. In 2013, \$3.5 billion were appropriated to the federal land management agencies to fight wildfire.<sup>5</sup> And since 2001, the federal government has spent, on average, \$3.13 billion annually to protect communities from wildfire.<sup>6</sup>

Wildfire suppression spending by the U.S. Forest Service (USFS) in each state is so large that it can exceed what many Western states spend on police protection and law enforcement (Figure 1).

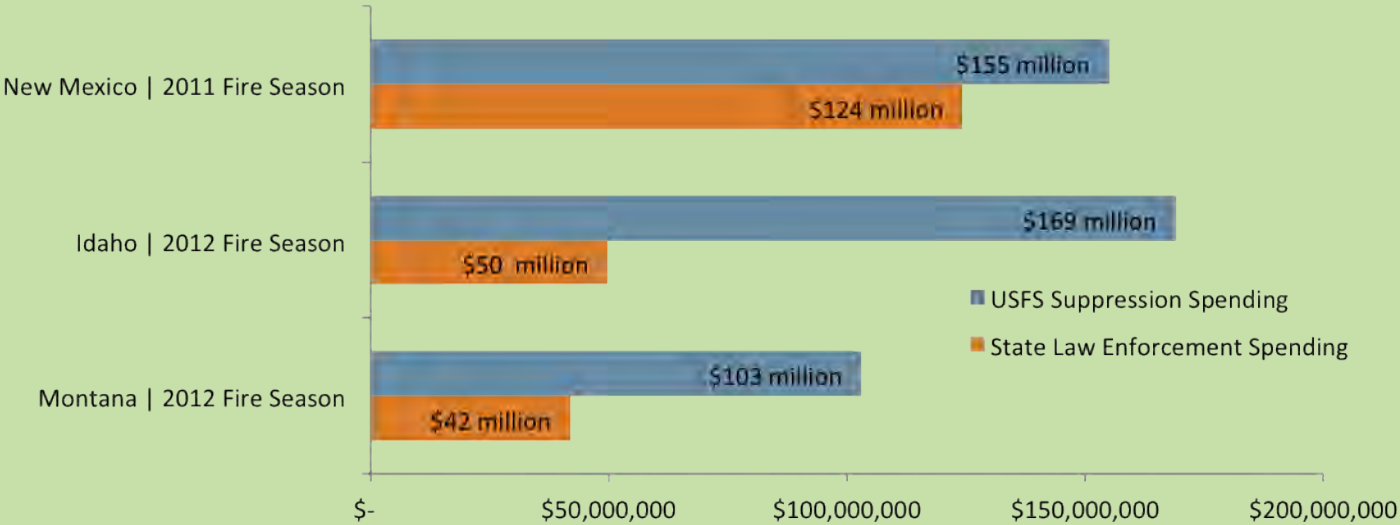
“Why are huge tracks of Utah owned by the federal government? Many of these public lands could be – and should be – administered by the state. States should be allowed to sell these defederalized lands to private entities.”<sup>3</sup>

- U.S. Representative Chris Stewart (R-UT)

“As a leader of the Sagebrush Rebellion, I’ve been fighting to turn federal lands in our state over to Utahns to own and control.”<sup>4</sup>

-U.S. Senator Orin Hatch (R-UT)

Figure 1 – Forest Service Suppression Costs Exceed Total State Law Enforcement Spending in Three Western States<sup>7/8</sup>



Notably, this data does not include the significant spending by the Department of the Interior (DOI) on fire suppression on Bureau of Land Management (BLM) lands, or the millions more spent by the USFS on wildfire preparedness, rehabilitation and hazardous fuels reductions. Adding in these costs increases federal wildfire spending in Western states vastly.

Money to pay rising wildfire costs – not to mention funding critical efforts to reduce wildfire risk, along with the necessary equipment, infrastructure and added personnel – will have to come from somewhere. States taking on these costs would place a significant burden on their cash-strapped budgets, with one bad fire season risking a state's financial solvency.

Land seizure proponents across the West are conveniently silent on how they intend to fund wildfire protection and suppression without the federal government, without selling off lands, without raising taxes, and without raiding important parts of a state's budget, such as K-12 education. This question needs to be answered before policymakers waste any more time or effort promoting public land seizures.



# BACKGROUND ON THE COSTS OF FIGHTING FIRES

Drive almost anywhere in the West during the summer months and you are sure to see a USFS or BLM fire truck patrolling the country, heading from fire to fire, trying to make sure small blazes stay small. For more than a century, federal land managers have controlled wildfire, protecting life, property and important natural resources from the negative impacts of fire.

In eight Western states, the federal government manages nearly 255 million acres of public lands – which includes handling the firefighting duties – with the DOI overseeing 159 million acres and the USFS overseeing 96 million acres.<sup>9</sup>



BLM

Two-thirds of all forests in the West lie on public lands<sup>10</sup> and so a majority of wildfires occur on public lands. In Idaho, for example, 98 percent of the acres burned over the last decade have been on federally managed lands.<sup>11</sup>

The USFS and agencies within DOI spend billions of dollars each year fighting fire across the West. The agencies spend hundreds of millions more on wildfire preparedness and hazardous fuels reduction (Figure 2). Last year alone, the federal government spent \$3.5 billion on wildfire suppression and protection.

Figure 2 – Total Wildfire Appropriations to USFS and DOI in FY2013<sup>12</sup>

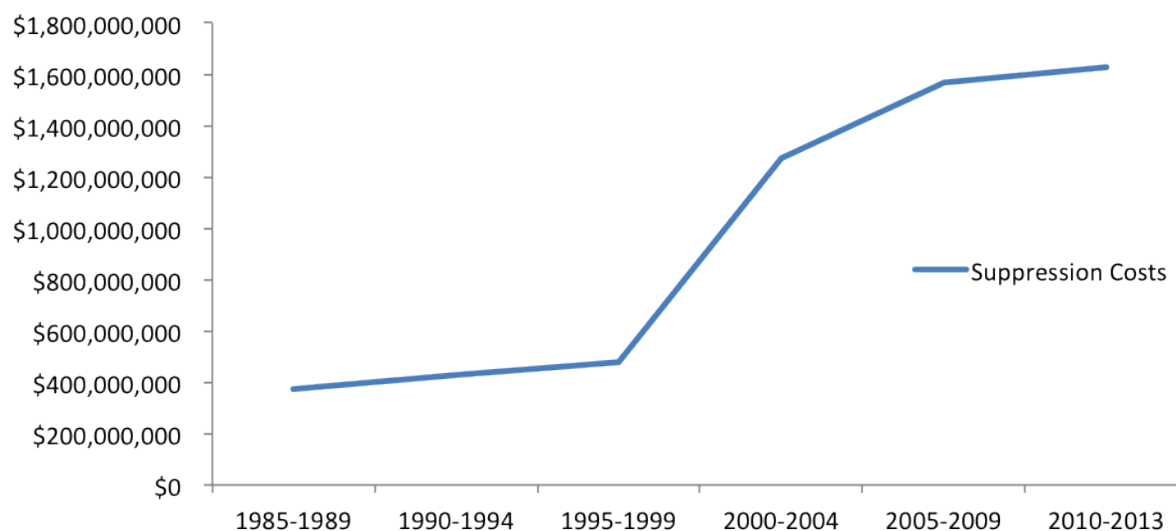
Total Funding	Fire Suppression	Fire Preparedness	Fuels Reduction	Other
\$3.5 Billion	\$1.6 Billion	\$1.3 Billion	\$462.4 Million	\$140.4 Million

In recent summers, bigger and more destructive wildfires – called “megafires” – have made headlines.<sup>13/14</sup> Wildfire is a natural part of Western ecosystems, but a number of factors – including the widespread build-up of fuels due to historic management practices and a warming climate resulting in hotter, drier summers and longer fire seasons – have led to larger and more costly wildfires.<sup>15</sup>

Since 1960, the eight largest fire years by acres burned have all occurred since 2000.<sup>16</sup> In the past decade, annual appropriations for federal wildfire suppression and protection have more than tripled the funding levels since the 1990s.<sup>17</sup>

Over the last thirty years, USFS and DOI spending on wildfire suppression has risen precipitously, increasing more than fourfold (Figure 3). Again, these figures do not account for the billions spent on wildfire preparedness and hazardous fuel reductions.

Figure 3 – Increasing Federal Firefighting Costs: Average DOI and USFS Suppression Costs 1985-2013<sup>18</sup>



## Reducing Fuels and Restoring America’s National Forests

According to the Congressional Research Service, there are more than 230 million acres of federal lands at moderate or high risk of ecological damage from wildfire.<sup>19</sup> One of the biggest challenges facing land managers is treating these lands and reducing fire risk.

But over the past decade, the USFS has had to transfer critical funds for forest restoration and other important projects to fund fire suppression.<sup>20</sup> In some Western states, like New Mexico, Arizona, and Idaho, hazardous fuels treatment programs have been deferred or cancelled because funds were transferred to fight wildfire.<sup>21</sup>

By seizing public lands, states would not only be taking on the costs of fighting wildfire, but also the need to actively manage lands to reduce wildfire risks. Land seizure proponents have yet to explain how states can afford fuel reduction projects and restore Western forests – particularly given the financial challenges of forest restoration – without selling off lands or raising taxes.

## FEDERAL FIREFIGHTING SPENDING BY STATE

Because of how the USFS and DOI track wildfire costs, it is difficult to know precisely how much money the federal government commits to fighting wildfire in each Western state.<sup>22</sup> The USFS did, however, provide the Center for Western Priorities with a limited amount of data – requested last year by the Congressional Research Service – showing the agency’s wildfire suppression spending by state (Figure 4).

The data highlights USFS costs in Western states during fiscal year 2011 and fiscal year 2012. For context, USFS suppression costs are compared with law enforcement spending in each state in the chart below.



It is important to note that the full costs of federal wildfire spending are likely at least two or three times higher than what is shown in the chart because the USFS data leaves out DOI spending on fire suppression, and does not include federal spending on wildfire preparedness, rehabilitation or hazardous fuels reductions.

Figure 4 – Forest Service Suppression Cost – FY2011 and FY2012<sup>23/24</sup>

State	FY11 USFS Suppression Spending	FY12 USFS Suppression Spending	FY11 State Law Enforcement Spending (for comparison)
ARIZONA	\$ 230 million	\$ 64 million	\$ 229 million
COLORADO	\$ 27 million	\$ 92 million	\$ 130 million
IDAHO	\$ 49 million	\$ 169 million	\$ 50 million
MONTANA	\$ 46 million	\$ 103 million	\$ 42 million
NEVADA	\$ 9 million	\$ 33 million	\$ 95 million
NEW MEXICO	\$ 155 million	\$ 86 million	\$ 124 million
UTAH	\$ 18 million	\$ 58 million	\$ 140 million
WYOMING	\$ 16 million	\$ 55 million	\$ 49 million

Fire suppression spending by the USFS underscores the enormous liability that a severe fire year would have if Western states seize public lands and thereby take on the costs of fighting wildfire. Take Utah as an example: While wildfire suppression costs in 2011 and 2012 were relatively affordable, the state’s budget is not likely to easily absorb the costs of a severe fire years – like New Mexico experienced in 2011 or Idaho in 2012 – which will undoubtedly come.<sup>25</sup>

# THE COST OF DOING BUSINESS: COVERING WILDFIRE COSTS IN WESTERN STATES

Western states would have few options to finance their new wildfire burden: they could sell off public lands; raise fees on ranchers and other public land users;<sup>26</sup> increase the pace of large scale logging; or rapidly develop lands with oil wells, mines and roads at the expense of other important uses of public lands like hunting, hiking and camping.

Such drastic measures are wildly unpopular – according to one poll, 74 percent of Western voters are opposed to public land sell-offs.<sup>27</sup>

And ironically, selling public lands to private owners for housing and other development might result in even greater wildfire costs. Protecting homes and structures from wildfire is a significant contributor to the federal wildfire budget and grows with more development in fire prone areas.<sup>30</sup>

Practical lawmakers recognize that state land seizure efforts are misguided. For example, Montana state Representative Pat Connell, a certified forester and a Republican, recently told a reporter, “While I have spent a career encouraging and promoting better management of federal lands, I do not advocate the wholesale transfer of federal lands’ responsibility to the states due to the incredible liability risks to the taxpayers of Montana such action would create.”<sup>31</sup>



“We need to take back our federal lands and return control back to the states. In New Mexico alone, we have millions of dollars tied up in these lands...”<sup>28</sup>

- State Representative Yvette Herrell (R-UT)

“There are considerable abundant resources locked up in these federally controlled public lands.”<sup>29</sup>

- State Representative Ken Ivory (R-UT)

## CONCLUSION

There are a variety of reasons – written about in great depth elsewhere – that quixotic efforts to seize federal public lands are misguided: it is unconstitutional, Westerners are opposed to the idea, and public lands belong to all Americans. It is also an extremely expensive proposition, as this paper on federal wildfire spending shows.

A recent editorial in a Utah newspaper explained it this way: “[The state of Utah] can’t take over management of federal lands and expect the federal government to pay for anything associated with the lands Utah wants to control.”<sup>32</sup>

The costs of fighting wildfires are significant and they are on the rise. Land seizure proponents across the West need to carefully explain how they plan to cover the hundreds of millions of dollars needed to protect communities from wildfire – not to mention all of the other land management costs – without the federal government and without burdening state taxpayers. Until this critical question is answered, state land seizure proposals should not be considered by any serious politician.



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