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2000 Wildland Fire Season

FINDINGS

- The 2000 season has been the worst wildland fire year since 1910; nearly 7 million acres have burned.
- In terms of acres burned and acres burned per fire, wildland fires in 2000 were twice the national average.
- The value of land lost to 2000 wildland fires coupled with other economic losses could exceed \$10 billion.
- At least 15 firefighters have died during wildland operations.
- Firefighting has been significantly taxed; Army and Marine Corps personnel, as well as other nations, have joined civilian firefighters.
- The current policy of prescribed burning and mechanical thinning is being expanded as a measure to limit the severity of future wildland fires.

In the course of the 2000 wildland fire season, nearly 80,000 fires burned upwards of 7 million acres throughout the United States.¹ Twice the yearly average (Figure 1), these statistics and the devastation caused by wildfire have led President Clinton to make federal disaster assistance available in several western states, including Montana and New Mexico, under major disaster declarations.² Over 30,000 personnel, including fire-

fighters from various international, federal, state, and local agencies were involved in efforts to control these fires.³ According to the USFA National Fallen Firefighters Memorial Database, at least 15 firefighters died in 2000 while engaged in wildland firefighting. Many experts predict that some fires will not be completely extinguished without snowfall. By the time this occurs, it is estimated that the value of land lost combined with other economic losses could exceed \$10 billion.⁴

Figure 1. Current Wildland Fire Season Vs. 10-year Average⁵

	2000 SEASON	10-YEAR AVERAGE
Number of Fires	92,250	66,120
Acres Burned	7,393,493	3,128,669
Acres Burned per Fire	80.0	47.3

The 2000 wildland fire season began officially in mid February with large grass fires in New Mexico and Virginia. By the end of February, fires were reported in Texas, Louisiana, and Missouri. A month later several fires were burning in Oklahoma; additional large fires were reported in Georgia, Florida, Alabama, Missouri, Ohio, Minnesota, and Indiana. In April, California's wind-driven Cabbage fire in the Mendocino National Forest, and the Coon Creek fire in the Tonto National Forest in Arizona were active.

Large fires also burned in Minnesota, Wisconsin, Mississippi, New Mexico, Missouri, Kentucky, Florida, Colorado, North Carolina, and North Dakota.

On May 4, a prescribed fire was initiated at Bandelier National Monument near Los Alamos, New Mexico. By the time this fire (now known as the Cerro Grande Fire) was controlled several weeks later, thousands of acres and hundreds of homes were burned and destroyed.⁶

By mid-July, numerous large fires were reported throughout the country, leading the National Inter-agency Fire Center (NIFC) to declare a planning level of 5 (the highest possible). Other large fires were reported in the following months, significantly straining firefighting resources. Army troops and Marines from Fort Hood, Texas, and Camp Pendleton, California (among others) joined civilian firefighters on the firelines. Other countries—notably Canada, New Zealand, Australia, and Mexico—also provided assistance.⁷

Although these fires burned throughout the United States, some states have been more affected than others have. Figure 2 shows those states where more than 200,000 acres were burned.

Figure 2. States With Greater Than 200,000 Acres Burned⁸

STATE	NUMBER OF FIRES	ACRES
Arkansas	351	751,233
California	7,283	235,248
Florida	6,572	200,980
Idaho	1,599	1,361,459
Montana	2,437	949,817
New Mexico	2,466	519,177
Nevada	1,078	635,715
Oregon	2,006	477,741
Utah	1,929	227,827
Washington	1,116	256,781
Wyoming	651	279,583

Fire management experts have speculated widely as to why the 2000 season was particularly devastating. Generally, most agree that a convergence of environmental and political factors has resulted in a situation ideal for wildland fire. Over the past 2 years, the United States has been affected by the La Nina weather pattern, which is generated by a pool of cold water in the Pacific Ocean. This weather caused dry conditions throughout the southern tier. These conditions were exacerbated by a lack of seasonal monsoons in the Southwest, record-low fuel moistures, and persistently hot, dry weather.

Many large fires occurred on federal land. The federal government has maintained a policy of land management that includes extinguishing all fires, regardless of severity. Traditionally, federal land managers have not emphasized the use of "prescribed burns," which are fires ignited under certain, predetermined conditions to meet specific objectives related to the mitigation of hazardous fuels or habitat improvement. These fires are intended to reduce the levels of accumulated underbrush, thin trees, and reduce the overall fuel load of wildlands. Prescribed burns require a written, approved fire plan and

must meet specific National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) requirements prior to ignition.

Prescribed burns have been successful in mitigating wildland fires. A prescribed burn completed in 1998 has been credited with halting the 2000 Eldorado wildfire outside of Boulder. When the fire reached the area that had been burned, it was slowed by open stands of trees and low grass, which allowed firefighters to halt its progress.

In one of the season's most well publicized wildland fires, officials at the Bandelier National Monument initiated a prescribed burn in June 2000. The fire "escaped" and became known as the Cerro Grande Fire, which destroyed 235 structures and burned 47,650 acres in and around Los Alamos, New Mexico. In the wake of this fire, the Secretary of the Interior suspended all federal prescribed burning west of the 100th meridian. The burn ban was lifted for all federal agencies except the National Park Service on June 12, 2000.⁹

In September 2000, governors from six western states (Utah, Oregon, Idaho, Montana, Wyoming, and South Dakota) met with senior members of the Clinton administration to discuss federal fire relief and wildland fire management. After the meeting, the Secretary of the Interior called the 2000 season the worst since 1910. As a result of negotiations at this meeting, the governors agreed to back an administration plan to ask Congress for nearly \$2.8 billion for wildland fire prevention and to replenish the monies spent by states in the course of the current wildfire season.

Wildland fire prevention is central to the plan endorsed by the administration, western governors, and

many forestry experts. The current policy of prescribed burning would be expanded and mechanical thinning of forests (removing the smallest, most fire-prone trees while leaving larger, fire-resistant ones alone) would increase significantly. Responsibility for implementing the plan's strategies would be shared across all levels of government, with local agencies performing the work in the forests.

Footnotes

1. "Burning Money," *U.S. News Online*, September 11, 2000.
2. Federal Emergency Management Agency, Major Disaster Declarations.
3. *Wildland Fire Season Overview*, National Interagency Fire Center, August 2000.
4. "Burning Money," loc. cit.
5. National Interagency Fire Center, Total Number of Wildland Fires and Acres From January 1 to December 29, 2000, By State.
6. *Bandelier National Monument/Cerro Grande Prescribed Fire Investigation Report*, May 2000.
7. *Wildland Fire Season Overview*, loc. cit.
8. National Interagency Fire Center, loc. cit.
9. "Park Service Fire Ban," ABCNews.com, May 20, 2000.