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Golden State Ablaze: Policy Recommendations for California's Wildfire Future

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<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/1rd662rj>

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Publication Date

2021-07-01

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Author's Note: This piece was originally [published](#) as an op-ed in Capitol Weekly during my internship. The following piece is an adaptation of that content, edited to include greater context to these policies.

Eight of the 10 [largest fires](#) in state history have burned in the past decade. The eventual resurgence of these fires year after year has become a common, numbing occurrence for Californians.

The 2018 Camp Fire was the deadliest wildfire in state history, until that record was broken last year by the [August Complex fires](#). It was only until Nov. 11 that the Complex – which burned [1,032,648 acres](#) and 935 structures, double the damage of Camp – was considered [100% contained](#).

Even if they are not at the forefront of a fire's devastation facing risk to life or property, people are inevitably in proximity to high concentrations of particulate matter or – at the very least – privy to the photos and videos of intense scenes of flame, smoke, and ash.

When pondering the next steps to take to protect Californians in the years to come from wildfires in the years to come, state political leaders have shown promise in taking this threat seriously.

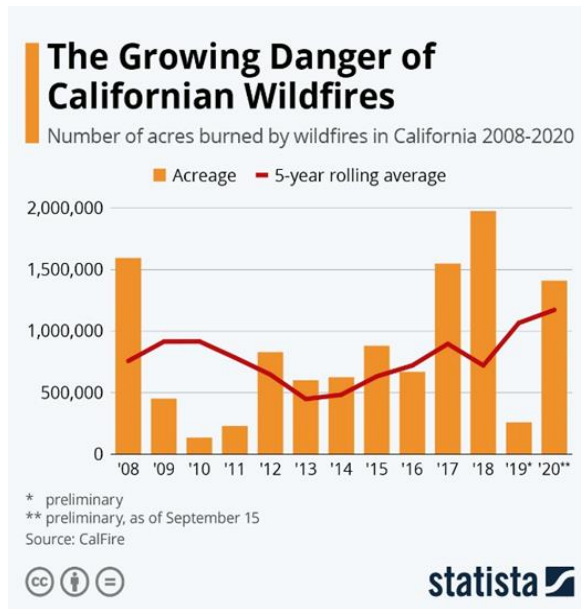
But they leave many crucial fire management questions unanswered.

In April, through bills [SB 85](#) and [AB 79](#), Gov. Gavin Newsom signed a [\\$536 million](#) wildfire mitigation package. This package draws revenue from the Greenhouse Gas Reduction Fund (\$125 million) and the General Fund (\$411 million).

Between the 2 bills, there are several beneficial initiatives, like proliferating Fire Prevention Grants to municipalities, greater coordination among local fire departments and the Office of Emergency Services, codifying data collection procedures, and granting the Director of Finance the authorization to redirect certain funds for fire suppression and detection.

The governor also expressed a hope that federal disaster prevention grants would help finance these initiatives. These goals include “forest health projects, improvements on defensible space, home hardening against fires, fire prevention grants, and prevention workforce training.”

More importantly, the [upcoming state budget](#) offers \$1 billion for wildfire prevention, \$3.7 billion to “get ahead of the emerging drought”, and another \$3.7 billion over 3 years to “make needed climate resiliency investments.” These commitments are crucial in a state that accounts for [over half](#) of the country's agricultural production and the world's [5th largest economy](#).



One key initiative that has received minor attention, but backing from [veteran firefighters](#), is the increase in quantity and frequency of controlled burns. As the name implies, [controlled burns](#) are the “planned application and confinement of fire to a preselected land area.” Their proliferation clears dense vegetation to serve as a “buffer zone” in the event of a fire breaking out.

Native American tribes situated in Northern California – like the Hoopa, Yurok, and Karuk – had been practicing controlled burn management on their native lands for generations. Forestry practices since colonization of the state have taken a very different turn, as a [culture](#) that views fire through a destructive lens rather than as a force for environmental management has proliferated.

The practice is now subject to intense [legal and political scrutiny](#); controlled burn regimes are challenged through channels of litigation and permitting, the latter of which is regulated by the California Air Resources Board (CARB).

Despite having hunting, fishing, and gathering rights in their respective reservations, those tribes do not have permission to conduct burnings on their own lands without being subject to administrative penalties. There has been progress, with the Yurok Tribe and Cal Fire developing a [working relationship](#) in burn management beginning in 2013.

As the regulatory regime stands, CARB facilitates controlled burns by evaluating daily conditions within individual air districts. [Annually](#), 125,000 acres of state lands are treated by prescribed burns.

Researchers [estimate](#) that fuel treatments like controlled burns are needed on 20 percent of state lands to prevent future wildfires.

If serious progress is to be made against the perennial threat of wildfires across our state, prescribed burns need to play a pivotal role. Preventive measures, rather than reactive responses post-fire, are the cornerstones of a successful and healthy state. In all of the previous legislative packages signed by Newsom, none contain explicit mention of controlled burns.

As of August 1st, the 2021 state wildfire season has seen [484,519 acres](#) burned.

The interconnected nature of keeping human-made climate change at bay, preventing uncontrollable large-scale wildfires, averting further statewide drought, preserving general welfare, and maintaining agricultural production means that these policy proposals necessitate intense logistical coordination. This web of environmental priorities is as delicate as it is crucial.

Spending on Fire Suppression vs. Prescribed Burn Treatment

The federal government spends more money fighting fires than it spends on prescribed burns

