

Building Wildfire Resilience Through Policy Action

Key Recommendations for Congress from
The Nature Conservancy-Aspen Institute
Roadmap for Wildfire Resilience and the
Wildland Fire Mitigation and Management
Commission Report to Congress

October 2023

Two new policy reports agree that
the wildfire crisis demands:

- An **all hands, all lands** approach that supports cooperative wildfire resilience efforts across jurisdictions;
- The **return of beneficial fire** to the landscape, including through controlled burning, to restore healthy ecosystems and mitigate the impacts of extreme wildfires;
- Coordinated support and **dedicated resources for community preparedness** to address the resilience of the built environment; and
- Sustained and predictable **funding for wildfire resilience.**



Background

Wildfire is a natural ecological process in many forest and grassland ecosystems. Yet shifting climate conditions and decades of fire suppression have increased the frequency and severity of wildfires, bringing greater levels of risk to human communities and natural systems. On the heels of the nation's deadliest wildfire in over 100 years, and a summer where wildfire and smoke risks spanned nearly all corners of the country, two new reports now offer insights for lawmakers on the greatest opportunities to confront this crisis.

The Nature Conservancy (TNC) and the Aspen Institute recently partnered to develop a set of transformative wildfire resilience policy solutions, culminating in the publication of the [Roadmap for Wildfire Resilience: Solutions for a Paradigm Shift](#) in March 2023. Congress also recognized the urgent need for action on this issue by establishing the Wildland Fire Mitigation and Management Commission, which was charged with identifying policy actions to effectively build resilience to wildfire and delivered a final report to lawmakers in September 2023. These two initiatives draw many aligned conclusions and offer a clear set of policy solutions for decision makers. Further details on both efforts can be found on the back cover.

TNC PUBLIC OPINION POLLING RESULTS

- Wildfire is a **top-tier concern** for American voters, just behind issues like inflation
- 4 in 5 voters support **increased federal investment** in wildfire resilience efforts on par with those included in IIJA and IRA
- 39% of voters know someone who has been **personally impacted by wildfire** or smoke

See [American Voter Views on Wildfire and Forest Management](#) for more information

Purpose

This report highlights some of the highest priority policy recommendations from the TNC-Aspen Institute Roadmap and the work of the Wildfire Commission. Each key insight references aligned portions of the two initiatives. This report should be used as a guide for Congress to identify high value opportunities for near-term policy action to help build resilience to wildfire in the United States.

- 👤 Recommendation from *On Fire: On Fire: The Report of the Wildland Fire Mitigation and Management Commission*
- 📖 Recommendation from the TNC-Aspen Institute *Roadmap for Wildfire Resilience*

COVER PHOTO: A burn area in Oregon on the Pacific Crest Trail
© Nok Yan Joshua Leung/TNC Photo Contest 2021

THIS PAGE: The Nature Conservancy's Great Western Checkerboards
Project Area, Crown of the Continent, MT © Steven Gnam

KEY INSIGHT 1: Wildfire knows no boundaries; therefore, new solutions must further improve risk mitigation and coordination across jurisdictions with an all hands, all lands approach. Piecemeal funding structures inhibit effective project planning and implementation, constraining treatment based on ownership footprints instead of treating areas at greatest risk.

Congressional Policy Priorities:

- Allow for a percentage of hazardous fuels funding above agency base levels to be used across ownership boundaries—including through voluntary engagement of private landowners—based on demonstrated needs for integrated project implementation to address risks. (Commission 25 and Roadmap 1A1) 🌐 🗺
- Commission the Government Accountability Office, or some other entity, to review existing programs, rules, and authorities that enable or inhibit cross-boundary work. (Commission 24) 🌐
- Establish a new cost-share authority, allowing for states, Tribal Nations, and federal partners to use a certain percentage of appropriations to enter into cooperative cost-share agreements that allow for cross-boundary fuels projects to be implemented and funded in accordance with a cost-share formula based on a project’s ownership profile and treatment types as a means to preposition resources for rapid deployment. (Roadmap 1A4) 🗺
- Ensure that federal agencies have the directive, capacity, and authority to enter into equitable and meaningful co-stewardship and co-management agreements for multi-jurisdictional lands, and to support Tribal self-governance in order to address wildfire risk reduction, management, and recovery, and to enable beneficial fire practices. (Commission 29 and Roadmap 6D3) 🌐 🗺

KEY INSIGHT 2: Beneficial fire is an underused and under-resourced tool for effective wildfire mitigation strategies. New resources to train and support multi-jurisdiction resourcing of prescribed fire would improve the scale and responsiveness of treatments. While escape rates of prescribed fire are low, damages will infrequently occur to third parties even when best practices and precautions are taken. Nimble funding in these instances, particularly for uninsured or underinsured losses to private landowners, would offer needed relief to address unavoidable risks.

Congressional Policy Priorities:

- Create a new State Prescribed Fire Assistance Program and a budget line item within the State, Private, and Tribal Forestry program designed to provide financial assistance to state foresters to increase their workforces, training processes, and dedicated equipment resources, in support of their planning and implementation of prescribed fire programs. (Roadmap 2A1) 🗺

- Advance legislation to support a compensation or claims fund for burn damages to third parties that can quickly provide financial relief in instances when burn practitioners adhere to identified best practices. (Commission 10 and Roadmap 2B2) 🌐 🗺

KEY INSIGHT 3: Communities need dedicated support and coordinated resources to address the resilience of the built environment. Both the Commission report and Roadmap conclude that current programs and approaches designed to reduce wildfire risk to residential communities are insufficient. Many communities lack the expertise, resources, and capacity to implement and maintain the necessary mitigation measures needed at the local level.

Congressional Policy Priorities:

- Establish a Community Wildfire Risk Reduction Program via an interagency coordinating partnership including the U.S. Forest Service, the Federal Emergency Management Agency, the United States Fire Administration, the Office of Wildland Fire on behalf of the Department of the Interior’s land management agencies, and the National Institute of Standards and Technology as principal agencies, to proactively address wildfire risk reduction actions and increase ignition resistance of the built environment. (Commission 1 and Roadmap 3A2, 3A3, and 3B2) 🌐 🗺

KEY INSIGHT 4: Amid mounting costs and risks, predictable funding is necessary to meet identified needs. The recent surge in proactive wildfire mitigation investments represent only a down payment of what is needed to address this crisis. On federally administered lands alone, the Forest Service estimated in 2020 that restoration of national forest lands would cost \$65 billion over 10 years, while the Department of Interior estimates a need for \$20 billion to 30 billion over the same time frame. Investments must be sustained in predictable ways to achieve desired outcomes.

Congressional Policy Priorities:

- Provide advanced appropriations for wildland fire mitigation and management on a multiyear, rather than annual, cycle. (Commission 120) 🌐
- Make permanent the Wildfire Suppression Operations Reserve Fund (Commission 121) 🌐
- Sustain wildfire resilience investment at the scale established by the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act and Inflation Reduction Act, such that federal land management agencies and programs are sufficiently resourced to successfully and proactively reduce growing wildfire risk. (Commission 130 and Roadmap 1C1 and 2A4) 🌐 🗺

Roadmap for Wildfire Resilience: Solutions for a Paradigm Shift

The Nature Conservancy and the Aspen Institute partnered in 2021 to identify and develop a series of policy recommendations that would support a paradigm shift in how we manage wildfire in the United States. The work included close collaboration with more than 250 individuals across 120 organizations from diverse sectors, including all levels of government; Tribal Nations; community-based environmental organizations; and representatives from the timber, recreation, utilities, insurance, innovative finance, and technology industries. The result of these efforts, published in March 2023, is the [Roadmap for Wildfire Resilience: Solutions for a Paradigm Shift](#). The Roadmap includes 88 policy recommendations for Congress and federal agencies to proactively build the resilience of human and ecological systems to wildfire. Scan or click the QR code below to read the Roadmap and learn more.

On Fire: The Report of the Wildland Fire Mitigation and Management Commission

Congress established the [Wildland Fire Mitigation and Management Commission](#) as part of the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act in 2021. The Commission was developed as a nonpartisan body with members from diverse geographies, backgrounds, and sectors, including representatives from federal agencies; state, local, and Tribal governments; nongovernmental entities; academia; and the private sector. Marek Smith, North America Fire Director for TNC, was chosen as one of two representatives of 501(c)3 organizations with expertise in forest management and conservation to serve on the 50 member commission. Congress granted the Commission one year to complete the expansive task of broadly developing policy solutions to address all facets of the wildfire crisis. The Commission's final report included 148 consensus recommendations for lawmakers and was transmitted to Congress in September 2023.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- [Roadmap for Wildfire Resilience: Solutions for a Paradigm Shift](#) | The Nature Conservancy and Aspen Institute | March 2023
- [On Fire: The Report of the Wildland Fire Mitigation and Management Commission](#) | Wildland Fire Mitigation and Management Commission | September 2023
- [American Voter Views of Wildfire and Forest Management](#) | FM3 Research and New Bridge Strategy | October 2022

PROJECT TEAM

- Cameron Adams *Team Lead*
- Brent Keith
- Marek Smith
- Jay Lee
- Katie Lyon
- James Miller
- Patrick Holmes
- Karen Hardigg

FOR MORE INFORMATION CONTACT:

Brent Keith

Land Policy Team Lead
North America Policy & Government Relations
brent.keith@tnc.org

Marek Smith

North America Fire Director
marek_smith@tnc.org

nature.org/wildfireresilience



Mary Lata, a Forest Service fire ecologist, monitoring prescribed fires in Arizona
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