

# Montana Fire Preparedness Assessment – a private forest landowner perspective

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## Introduction

Clearly wildfire fire preparedness and fire suppression are important for the majority of Montana residents, and the greater the capacity to maintain fire preparedness, the greater the effectiveness of successful fire suppression and the lower the costs. The key question being addressed is who pays for fire preparedness? Past records indicate that wildfires can start with a wide range of variability regardless of location, vegetation type or population across Montana (DNRC Chart 20, May 2018). The current proposal is that private land-owners of range, agricultural and forest lands should pay the entire cost of DNRC wildfire preparedness through a simple fee assessment to individual land parcels, and the houses located on them. This proposal is simple in its application in that it relies on an existing Montana Department of Revenue database; however, it also appears to apply some considerable cost-benefit inequity for the following reasons:

1. Both research and past experience have shown that wildfires, if left uncontained, can affect both rural and urban Montana residents. Thus wildfires need to be contained somewhere, especially when they emanate from the extreme fuel conditions found across many federal wildlands. Currently urban structures may be more ignitable than rural structures simply because there has been an assumption that only houses in the WUI are susceptible to wildfire impacts. Burning embers can commonly be carried by wind or smoke plumes for over 1 mile outside the active fire perimeter, thus endangering urban dwellings as well as rural landowners. For example, it has been observed that a significant number of homes within the city limits of Helena and Missoula have highly flammable roof coverings and easily ignitable landscaping vegetation.
2. Many rural private forests are being managed for fuels reduction and have constructed access routes that allow for effective and cost-effective fire containment and suppression. The Montana Slash Hazard Reduction law requires that any harvested area must have fuels reduced to limit fire spread and intensity for which a state bond is posted by loggers and landowners until the work has been completed. This is different than unmanaged lands that typically have limited access and significant fuels build-ups. Since 1992 the Montana Forest Stewardship program has resulted in more than 2225 land ownerships developing forest management plans on over 1.2 million acres that include wildfire fuels management and access. Much of this work has been conducted at the landowner's expense. The existing and future work that helps suppress wildfires on rural private lands benefits all other Montana residents, even though the burden of these costs is often carried by the individual rural landowners who are, through the existing proposal, expected to also pay for the entire cost of DNRC fire preparedness.