



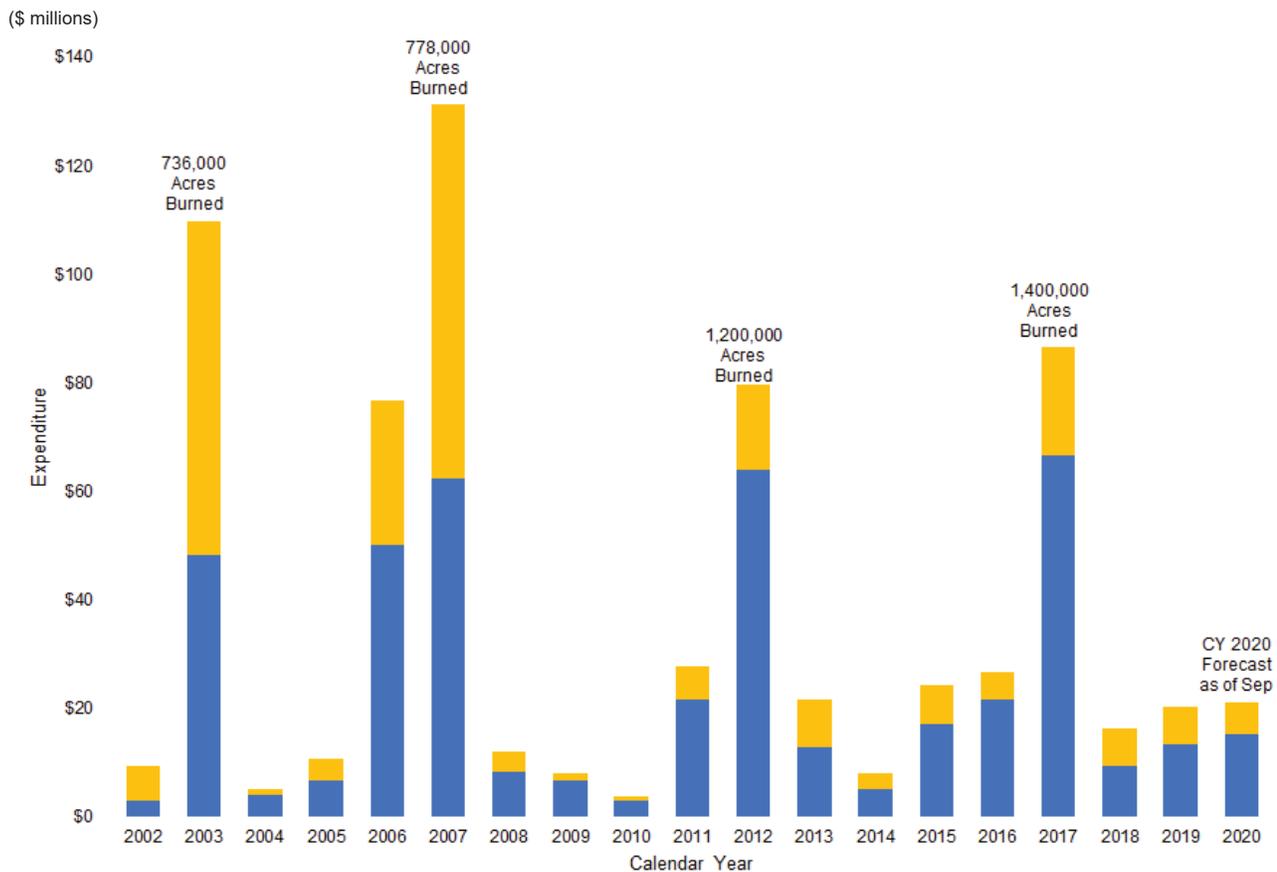
# Wildfire Suppression

Updated September 2020

## Wildfire Suppression Funding

In Montana, wildfires are expected. However, the location, severity, and ultimate cost to the state is difficult to predict. The graphic below shows that annual state fire costs, adjusted for inflation, range between \$2.8 million in 2002 to \$66.7 million in the summer of 2017, one of the worst fire years in recent memory.

This chart shows the Montana fire suppression **state costs** and the amounts **reimbursed by the federal government**. (Costs include 10-year inflation adjusted average.)



The 2007 legislature established the fire suppression fund to provide funds dedicated to fire costs (76-13-150, MCA). The fund is administered by the Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation (DNRC).

In addition to fire suppression, DNRC may use up to \$5 million from the fund each biennium for fuel reduction and forest restoration when the fund balance is above \$40 million.

The legislature provided three sources of revenue for the fund:

- The annual unspent general fund above 0.5% of the total state general fund appropriation
- The unused portion of the Governor’s \$16 million emergency appropriation at the end of each biennium
- The interest earned on the fund balance

## County Co-op Fire Protection Arrangement

All wildfires start out small and if fire suppression is early and effective, the likelihood that fire will grow into a major incident is reduced. Over the past 10 years, 96% of wildfires in Montana have been controlled before they reach 10 acres. Through the County Co-op Fire Protection Arrangement, local fire departments provide the initial attack on fires and extended attack in most cases. When a wildland fire exceeds the capacity of the county, DNRC will intervene to assist. The agency brings state and federal resources at no cost to the county providing organizational and technical assistance, equipment, training, and direct fire control assistance when needed.

Statistics include:

- County firefighters provide initial attack on over 2,000 wildland fires each year.
- In recent years, fires that escape initial attack and required assistance from DNRC cost the state \$745.36 per acre
- Over the years, DNRC has provided 360 fire engines and water tenders to local fire departments
- DNRC trains more than 3,000 local government firefighters each year
- All total, DNRC spends \$3 million/year on County Co-op Fire Protection

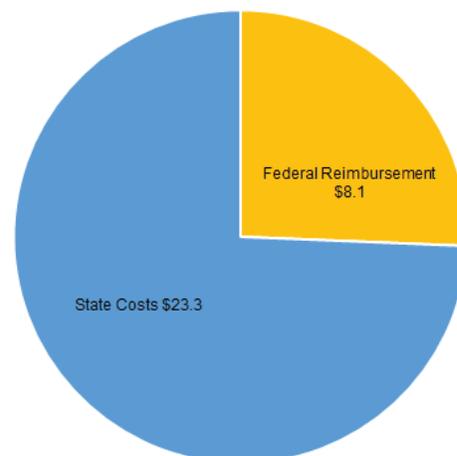
## Landowner Fire Protection Fee

Landowners within a direct protection zone provide funding for fire readiness by paying a fire protection fee.

This fee is set in statute with an upper limit of \$50 per parcel per fire district and a \$0.30 per acre fee for parcels over 20 acres. Landowners with less than 20 acres pay approximately 60% of the total fee. In FY 2018 this fee raised \$3.8 million.

The state also has signed an inter-agency agreement for cooperative wildfire management with federal fire agencies that also have fire protection responsibilities in Montana.

Average Annual Fire Suppression Cost  
Adjusted for Inflation FY 2011 - FY 2020  
(\$ Millions)



## Federal Assistance

Federal assistance for fire suppression is made available to the state when fire conditions meet federal thresholds.

The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) determines whether the threat posed by a fire or fire complex would constitute a major disaster. FEMA utilizes the following specific criteria:

- Threat to lives and improved property, including threats to critical facilities and/or infrastructure, and critical watershed areas (otherwise referred to as the 100 structure threshold)
- Availability of state and local firefighting resources
- High fire danger conditions, as indicated by nationally accepted indicators
- Potential major economic impact

A fire incident must meet certain eligibility criteria for the state to receive a Fire Management Assistance Grant (FMAG), including the threat to lives and improved property and whether the fire threatens to cause a major disaster. Within a calendar year, Montana must have incurred a \$100,000 expense threshold on a single incident or a \$500,000 multi-incident threshold to be eligible for a FMAG. Once Montana receives a FMAG declaration, FEMA reimburses 75% for eligible expenditures realized within the FMAG declaration period.