

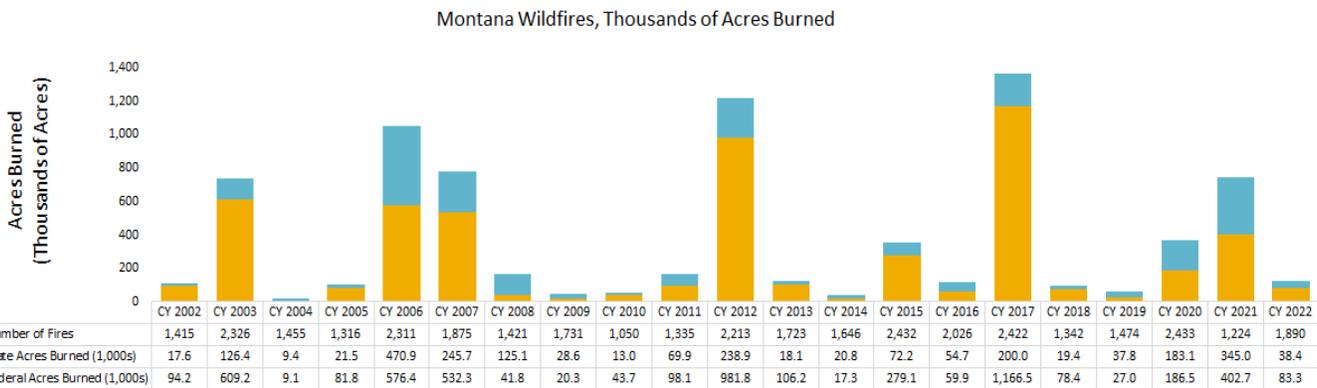
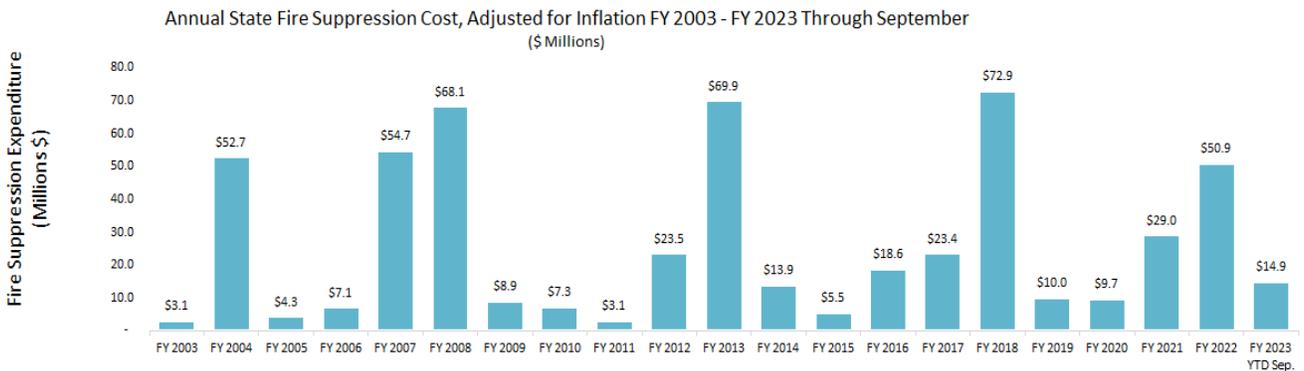


Wildfire Suppression

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 \$3.1 million in FY 2003 and FY 2011 to \$72.9 million in the summer of 2017, one of the worst fire years in recent memory. Fire cost for the current biennium is forecast to be \$66 million. This compares to the average fire cost for the previous five biennia of \$55 million.

The charts show the Montana fire suppression state costs and the total acres burned. (Costs are adjusted for inflation.)



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 invests \$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.

Considerable investment has been made in the management of wildland fire for infrastructure, training and initial attack suppression activities with the philosophy that in reducing or limiting fire costs, the best defense is to extinguish the fire quickly.

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

Montana has a threshold of \$100,000 per fire and a cumulative threshold of \$500,000. When the thresholds are met, and the governor has declared a disaster, FEMA provides 75% of the eligible costs. The actual amount is calculated after the fire has been extinguished.