

# How can the rest of the country prepare for wildfires like those in California?

November 16 2018, by Molly Callahan

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Firefighters, legislators, and residents on the East Coast should watch carefully the way their California counterparts are dealing with wildfires tearing through the state. The combined forces that brought about the blaze are growing more and more present in the Northeast, said Stephen Flynn, founding director of Northeastern's Global Resilience Institute.

"The sooner we get our act together here, the better," Flynn said, speaking from the university's Boston campus. "There's a lot we can learn here on the East Coast."

Wildfires in northern and southern California have devastated broad swaths of the state, killing more than 60 people and destroying thousands of homes. While it's still unclear what sparked the fires, there are several factors that accelerated them, said Flynn, who last year published a report on the changing landscape of wildfires for the U.S. Department of Homeland Security.

First, as development spreads, housing and other buildings are encroaching upon what had previously been wilderness. This increases the likelihood that a [wildfire](#) will become fatal or otherwise destructive to homes, Flynn said.

Second, a changing climate is increasing the likelihood of extreme weather, Flynn said. This includes extended periods of drought and heat—conditions that prime forestland for fast-moving fires.

"Those combined forces are playing out in a very dramatic way in California," he said.

And they're conditions that are growing more and more present along the East Coast, and in New England specifically, Flynn said.

A good example of the changing conditions in New England can be seen in Connecticut, Flynn said.

Early settlers cleared 75 percent of the state's forestland in order to use it for family farms. Throughout the intervening centuries, those farms were sold or abandoned. By the late 1990s, 60 percent of Connecticut was back to forestland.

"When you drive up [Interstate] 395 from Norwich to the Massachusetts border, all you see is trees. That would've been open field back in the day," Flynn said.

The failure of family farms and subsequent reforestation of New England in general and Connecticut in particular means there are trees next to buildings that weren't there before, Flynn said. With those trees serving as fuel, this means that those developed areas are more vulnerable to wildfires.

"When you combine the risk of extreme heat and drought brought on by [climate change](#) with the built environment moving into the wilderness, they're twin factors that put the risk of [wildfires](#) at a far greater level," Flynn said.

This is a risk that New England isn't ready for, he added, because fighting forest fires is very different from traditional firefighting, and New England hasn't had to deal with many large-scale [forest fires](#).

"Volunteer [fire](#) departments aren't going to be enough," Flynn said.

There are steps New Englanders can take to prepare, though.

Homeowners can take cues from California residents and move ornamental bushes further from their homes and make sure their trees are properly trimmed. Fire departments can work together to have an organizational plan for attacking large conflagrations. State legislators can ensure fire departments have the money and resources they'll need.

"The risk is clearly rising," Flynn said. "Once it happens, we could be seeing a California-like scenario here."

Provided by Northeastern University

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