

Californians unwilling to subsidize wildfire prevention

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The 2018 Woolsey fire cost \$6 billion and burned over 96,000 acres. A new poll at Stanford shows that though a majority of Californians are impacted by wildfire, they are unwilling to pay to prevent it. Credit: U.S. Forest Service/ Peter Buschmann

With blazes raging across the state, smoke impacting the Bay Area and

the largest power utility shutting off electricity to avoid ignitions, California is experiencing another devastating fire season. As state, federal and local officials try to figure out what policies to implement to address the state's wildfire crisis, a [new poll](#) conducted by the Bill Lane Center for the American West at Stanford University reveals where the public stands on regulations and other public policy measures to prevent wildfires.

Knowing what the public is likely to support can help policymakers gauge what to invest in as they try to protect the state's population and avoid billions of dollars in [wildfire](#) damages.

Among the survey's most sobering findings: One in four Californians have either experienced a wildfire event personally or know someone who did. "Given that so many people are being impacted, we really wanted to understand what the public supports with respect to wildfire policy," said Iris Hui, a senior researcher at the Bill Lane Center who worked on the survey.

In addition to personal and property safety, the researchers looked at [health threats](#), finding that 52 percent of California respondents were exposed to wildfire smoke in the last year. Inhaling smoke from wildfires can cause respiratory and cardiovascular problems. The vast majority of respondents (83 percent) dealt with the threats from smoke by staying indoors while about a third used dust masks, respirators or air purifiers.

Development in what scientists call the wildland urban interface intensifies wildfire danger and damages. Residents of these communities are often economically vulnerable people who fled higher housing prices in more densely populated areas.

Sixty-two percent of survey respondents support restricting [residential](#)

[development](#) in fire-prone areas, but only 22 percent support prohibiting owners from rebuilding homes destroyed by wildfire, and only 28 percent support relocating current residents out of fire-prone areas. Relocation of communities under significant threat from [climate change](#) and environmental disaster is referred to as managed retreat.

"Managed retreat is a controversial topic in discussions about climate change," said Bruce Cain, a professor of political science and director of the Bill Lane Center. "But wildfire is a climate change-related threat that may eventually have to involve relocation."

While the researchers found a majority of Californians favor requiring property owners to undertake prescriptive burns and other fuel reduction measures to reduce wildfire risk, they found only modest support (36 percent) for requiring property owners to buy wildfire insurance.

Restrictions are one thing, but when it comes to actually paying for wildfire prevention, Californians are less likely to buy in. While no policies to subsidize wildfire prevention received a majority of support, the poll shows Californians are most willing to accept subsidizing home upgrades (48 percent) and insurance (41 percent), especially for low-income individuals. But there was not much support for subsidizing managed retreat or buyouts.

"Despite so many people being affected by these fires and the large dollar damages they produce, there is still a lot of resistance among the public to do more than require property owners to better protect their properties and restrict development in wildfire-prone areas," said Hui.

More information: Public Opinion on Wildfire Policies in California: [west.stanford.edu/sites/g/file ... blcsurveyoct2019.pdf](https://west.stanford.edu/sites/g/file.../blcsurveyoct2019.pdf)

Provided by Stanford University

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