

Wildfires where homes meet forest are costly. Now Idaho will pay for more of them

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To stop a wildfire, an assortment of agencies must come together—federal, state, tribal and sometimes local firefighters. But when the smoke clears, they must determine who shoulders the costs of

the blaze, which can easily total millions of dollars.

The myriad agencies decide which lands they'll protect and how they'll pay for wildfires based on guidelines laid out in a master [fire](#) agreement. This month, the Idaho Department of Lands, which handles wildfires on state-owned land and some private forest land, signed a new agreement with federal and tribal partners—shifting more responsibility on the state.

The new agreement makes Idaho responsible for more areas where range land and forest meet growing [housing developments](#)—also known as the wildland-urban interface area. The change, created by trades between state and federal agencies, has raised concerns that Idaho could foot larger bills in areas known to attract costly wildfires. And Idaho does little to regulate building in those areas.

How are Idaho wildfires paid for?

Craig Foss, Idaho's state forester, told the Idaho Statesman the new agreement is "the first significant change" to the state's master fire agreement since the 1980s.

Idaho's new fire agreement parcels out agencies' jurisdiction over pieces of land. Typically agencies are solely responsible for the land they own. Others can still respond to those fires—but the agreement determines who is in charge when a fire starts and, often, who pays for it.

Agencies have always pitched in to fight fires in each other's jurisdictions, but that will become even more common under the new fire agreement, which expands the protocol to the entire state, Josh Harvey, Idaho Department of Lands fire bureau chief, told the Idaho Statesman.

"Essentially the whole state is under mutual aid," Harvey said. "And what that means in the most simple terms is, whoever is the closest resource is going to respond."

An agency can also be responsible for certain areas on another agency's property—with offset agreements. For example, the U.S. Forest Service will cover some private timberlands in North Idaho that would typically fall to the Department of Lands. That's because the Forest Service has more firefighting resources in the area and specializes in fighting forest fires. In that case, the Forest Service wouldn't send a bill to the state for offset firefighting costs.

For years, the Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management had offset jurisdiction over some state-owned wildland-urban interface areas. They were largely in remote locations or areas adjacent to federal land, including parcels near Horseshoe Bend, Riggins, Garden Valley and Coeur d'Alene.

During negotiations for the new fire agreement, the [federal agencies](#) said they wanted to hand jurisdiction in those areas back over to the Department of Lands.

"The Forest Service said, 'Our agency's mission, our fire responsibility is not private land, it's not the urban interface,'" Harvey said. "'Our responsibility and our agency's mission really is the federal national lands.'"

Harvey said the Department of Lands still needs to determine the exact acreage of wildland-urban interface returned to its jurisdiction. He said the department will have a clearer picture of the acreage in the fall. A preliminary map of the returned land appeared to show thousands of acres returned to the state agency.

Harvey said that doesn't necessarily mean the state is on the hook for the entirety of costly firefighting bills. The master fire agreement outlines options for "cost share agreements" that the agencies can use in more complex fires, during which multiple agencies respond or fire burns several jurisdictions or properties.

Those agreements can be based on combinations of expenditures, resources, ownership and more—meaning the administrative side of firefighting will become more complicated, Harvey said.

The change comes as the White House has indicated it's reticent to throw federal dollars at fires in the wildland-urban interface. In its 2023 Economic Report, President Joe Biden's administration said funding firefighting in wildfire-prone places reduces homeowners' perceived risk and can encourage people to live in areas where homes are more likely to burn.

Idaho taxpayers may face costlier firefighting bills

Harvey said he was concerned when federal partners said they wanted out of wildland-urban interface jurisdictions.

Many Idaho fires start on forest land when lightning strikes dry fuels. But increasingly, Harvey said, Idaho wildfires are caused by humans—ignited by campfires, fireworks, exploding firearm targets or other sources. Idaho's largest fire last year, the Moose Fire near Salmon, started as a campfire that wasn't extinguished. It burned more than 130,000 acres, and three firefighters died in connection with the fire.

That fire was on national forest land, but Harvey said most human-caused fires start in the wildland-urban interface.

According to data from the Boise-based National Interagency Fire

Center, the Department of Lands handles more human-caused fires every year than any other wildland firefighting agency. Though Idaho has had a string of mild fire years, the Department of Lands saw a record-breaking \$68 million firefighting tab in 2021.

Harvey said he thinks the new agreement will ultimately mean better firefighting responses in Idaho, even if it's possible the state bears more of the cost.

"The overall potential is that the state of Idaho is going to be paying a little bit more for fighting wildland fire going forward," he said.

Jonathan Oppenheimer, external relations director for the Idaho Conservation League, said that's concerning for Idaho taxpayers, noting that a Pew Research Center report published in December showed many states vastly under budget for firefighting costs.

Harvey said Idaho has "taken some steps to get ahead, or at least get caught up" on those costs. The Department of Lands has a firefighting budget it uses for prescribed burns and other mitigation efforts. It pays for firefighting costs separately through "rainy day funds" set aside by the Legislature.

Still, Harvey said, the unpredictable nature of wildfire seasons could quickly impact those funds. In the next five to 10 years, smaller fires could become more expensive because they're in wildland-urban interface areas. Though the Department of Lands doesn't battle structure fires—like burning homes—firefighters expend a lot of resources to dig fuel breaks, drop fire retardant and other use techniques to prevent flames from reaching homes.

"We're going to be paying for more fires that historically we would not have," he said. "And just overall, you know, the state of Idaho is growing

so fast. How do you account for all of the urban interface that's expanding?"

New state fire jurisdiction is especially expensive

Research shows protecting homes in the wildland-urban interface is expensive—and doing so in rural areas, where homes are more spread out, is especially pricey. Judson Boomhower, an environmental economist at University of California San Diego, coauthored a study published in January that found Idaho is among the most expensive states in the West when it comes to government wildfire protection spending per home.

"(The data is) particularly important in places that we should expect to have repeated costly large fires and places where the density of development is really low," Boomhower told the Statesman in a video interview. "If you have a cluster (of homes), the cost per house is lower than if you have very low-density homes."

His research found that in places like Riggins, Garden Valley and Coeur d'Alene—where the Department of Lands regained jurisdiction of swaths of wildland-urban interface land—it can cost the federal government between \$50,000 and \$100,000 to protect a single home from wildfire over the lifetime of the home.

Boomhower noted that many people who live in fire-prone areas aren't aware of just how risky their location is.

"It's a collection of ugly policy problems that are all coming together," he said.

Oppenheimer said it's "a matter of when" some wildland-urban interface areas will be impacted by fire. That means Idaho should be stepping up

to address building in fire-prone places, Oppenheimer said.

"From a policy perspective, there's kind of this increasing onus now, this weight upon the state that (it has) more of a role in protecting and safeguarding these communities," Oppenheimer said.

Idaho zoning provides little guidance

Bob McLaughlin, spokesperson for the Division of Occupational and Professional Licenses, told the Statesman that Idaho state laws have no regulations to address wildfire risk in construction.

Statewide, Idaho follows the 2018 International Building Code. McLaughlin noted that the International Code Council has a wildland-urban interface code that some Idaho cities, like Boise and Ketchum, have adopted. It includes rules related to building locations and materials, defensible space around homes and water availability for firefighting.

But many of the highest-risk areas haven't adopted such codes. Horseshoe Bend and Garden Valley are in Boise County, which doesn't address wildfire anywhere in its building codes. In Idaho County, where houses can cost tens of thousands of dollars to defend from fire, no building codes other than state requirements exist outside of city limits.

"So many times in Idaho County, I've seen houses burn down (where) I was like, 'Why in the world would you build right there?'" Harvey said.

Harvey said the Department of Lands now has jurisdiction over wildland-urban interface in Idaho County's Salmon River Corridor that is "super ugly ground to fight fire in." It's a steep stretch of ground on either side of U.S. 95 between Riggins and Whitebird, where fires are fast-moving and hot.

He said the state regaining jurisdiction in that area, which had long been Forest Service jurisdiction, "was a topic of intense negotiation for a long time."

"There'll be a lot of cost shares and I think additional expense to the state of Idaho to provide fire protection (there)," Harvey said.

Could Idaho wildfire codes change?

Changing Idaho's zoning and building codes to address wildfire risk would require buy-in from the state building code board, the public, and the Idaho Legislature. It would be a heavy lift, Oppenheimer said.

"There's a love for private property rights in Idaho," he said. "That needs to be balanced with, 'How are we all paying as taxpayers for some of these choices that individuals make?'"

Boomhower said there's a bit of an incentive mismatch when it comes to wildland-urban interface regulations. States typically make decisions about where people can build, the materials they must use and the fire plans they may need to have. When the federal government is footing the bill for firefighting in those areas, smaller governments have less incentive to create those policies.

It's hard to reconfigure that incentive, Boomhower said. Many state and local governments wouldn't be able to pay for wildland firefighting costs if the burden suddenly shifted.

He said one possibility for building in fire-prone areas is "some kind of development fee or upfront payment that basically equals the expected (firefighting) cost over the life of a development." Boomhower noted that, under a previous policy, some California homeowners in high-risk areas had to pay the state's firefighting agency to offset firefighting

costs. He said the program was "enormously politically unpopular."

Harvey said he thinks some of the responsibility falls to local government to at least advise and educate homeowners about wildfire risk.

"(Local government should) regulate what it needs to look like as far as where somebody builds a home. It's a free country, but what people need think about is, 'Can a fire engine get in here if something happens?'"

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