

# Billions are being spent to turn the tide on the US West's wildfires. It won't be enough

June 27 2023, by MATTHEW BROWN, TERRY CHEA, CALEB DIEHL and CAMILLE FASSETT

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U.S. Forest Service crew members put tree branches into a wood chipper as they prepare the area for a prescribed burn in the Tahoe National Forest, Tuesday, June 6, 2023, near Downieville, Calif. The Biden administration is trying to turn the tide on worsening wildfires in the U.S. West through a multi-billion dollar cleanup of forests choked with dead trees and undergrowth. Credit: AP Photo/Godofredo A. Vásquez

Using chainsaws, heavy machinery and controlled burns, the Biden administration is trying to turn the tide on worsening wildfires in the U.S. West through a multi-billion dollar cleanup of forests choked with dead trees and undergrowth.

Yet one year into what's envisioned as a decade-long effort, federal land managers are scrambling to catch up after falling behind on several of their priority forests for thinning even as they exceeded goals elsewhere. And they've skipped over some highly at-risk communities to work in less threatened areas, according to data obtained by The Associated Press, public records and Congressional testimony.

With climate change making the situation increasingly dire, mixed early results from the administration's initiative underscore the challenge of reversing decades of lax forest management and aggressive fire suppression that allowed many woodlands to become tinderboxes. The ambitious effort comes amid pushback from lawmakers dissatisfied with progress to date and criticism from some environmentalists for cutting too many trees.

Administration officials in interviews and during testimony maintained that the thinning work is making a difference. Work announced to date, they said, will help lessen wildfire dangers faced by more than 500 communities in 10 states. But they also acknowledged finishing the task will require far more resources than what's already dedicated.

"As much money as we're receiving, it's not enough to take care of the problems that we are seeing, particularly across the West," said Forest Service Chief Randy Moore. "This is an emergency situation in many places, and we are acting with a sense of urgency."



Fire Battalion Chief Craig Newell carries a hose while battling the North Complex Fire in Plumas National Forest, Calif., on Sept. 14, 2020. The Biden administration is trying to turn the tide on worsening wildfires in the U.S. West through a multi-billion dollar cleanup of forests choked with dead trees and undergrowth. Credit: AP Photo/Noah Berger, File

## **BIG MONEY FOR BIG PROBLEM**

Congress in the last two years approved more than \$4 billion in additional funding to prevent repeats of destructive infernos that have torched communities including in California, Colorado and Montana.

By logging and burning trees and low-lying vegetation, officials hope to lessen forest fuels and keep fires that originate on federal lands from

exploding through nearby cities and towns.

The enormity of the task is evident in an aerial view of California's Tahoe National Forest, where mountainsides are colored brown and gray with the vast number of trees killed by insects and drought. After work on the Tahoe was delayed last year, Forest Service crews and contractors recently started taking down trees across thousands of acres.

"The forests as we know them in California and across the West, they're dying. They're being destroyed through fire. They're dying from drought, disease and insects," said forest Supervisor Eli Ilano. "They're dying at a pace that we're having trouble keeping up with."



U.S. Forest Service crew members put tree branches into a wood chipper as they prepare the area for a prescribed burn in the Tahoe National Forest, Tuesday,

June 6, 2023, near Downieville, Calif. By logging and burning trees and low-lying vegetation, officials hope to lessen forest fuels and keep fires that originate on federal lands from exploding through nearby cities and towns. Credit: AP Photo/Godofredo A. Vásquez

The scale of spending is unprecedented, said Courtney Schultz with Colorado State University. The forest policy expert said millions of acres have been through environmental review and are ready for work.

"If we really want to go big across the landscape—to reduce fuels enough to affect fire behavior and have some impact on communities—we need to be planning large projects," she said.

Key to that strategy is addressing forest patches where computer simulations show wildfire could easily spread to inhabited areas. Some areas have yet to get the extra funding for thinning despite facing high risk, including portions of California's Sierra Nevada range, Montana's Bitterroot Valley and around Mescalero Apache lands in southern New Mexico.

Only about a third of the land the U.S. Forest Service treated last year was designated with high wildfire hazard potential, agency documents show. About half the forest was in the southeastern U.S., where wildfires are less severe but weather conditions make it easier to use intentional burns, the documents show.



U.S. Forest Service crew members put tree branches into a wood chipper as they prepare the area for a prescribed burn in the Tahoe National Forest, Tuesday, June 6, 2023, near Downieville, Calif. By logging and burning trees and low-lying vegetation, officials hope to lessen forest fuels and keep fires that originate on federal lands from exploding through nearby cities and towns. Credit: AP Photo/Godofredo A. Vásquez

The infrastructure bill passed two years ago with bipartisan support included a requirement for the administration to treat forests across 10 million acres—15,625 square miles or 40,500 square kilometers—by 2027. Less than 10% of that was addressed in the first year.

"The Forest Service is obligating hundreds of millions of dollars, but not in the areas required by law," said Sen. Joe Manchin, a West Virginia

Democrat who chairs the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee.

Forest Service spokesman Wade Muehlhof said the agency was confident in the administration's strategy, but declined to say if it would meet the acreage mandates.

## **MIXED FIRST-YEAR RESULTS**

An AP analysis of federal data reveals the scale of the challenge: Hundreds of communities are threatened by the potential for fires to ignite on federal forests and spread to populated areas.



An air tanker drops fire retardant to battle the Dixie Fire in the Feather River

Canyon in Plumas County, Calif., July 14, 2021. The Biden administration is trying to turn the tide on worsening wildfires in the U.S. West through a multi-billion dollar cleanup of forests choked with dead trees and undergrowth. Credit: Paul Kitagaki Jr./The Sacramento Bee via AP

In California, thinning zones announced to date address the risk to only about one-in-five houses and other buildings potentially exposed to fires on federal lands, the analysis shows. In Nevada and Oregon, it's about half of exposed structures, and in Montana it's one-in 25.

Most areas identified as hot spots where forest fires have high potential to burn into populated areas won't be addressed for at least the next several years, according to government planning documents. And computer models project up to 20% of areas that need thinning will be hit by fires before that work occurs.

Architects of the Forest Service's strategy based it on tens millions of computer wildfire simulations being used to predict areas that pose the greatest risk. Those scenarios showed fires on only 10% to 20% of the land would account for 80% of exposure to communities.

"This is a mapped plan through time, where we can laser-focus on one highly important issue: the problem of communities being destroyed by wildfires started on public lands," said Forest Service fire scientist Alan Ager.





Tahoe National Forest supervisor Eli Ilano, foreground, points to western bark beetle mortality in the forest, Tuesday, June 6, 2023, near Camptonville, Calif. Using chainsaws, heavy machinery and controlled burns, the Biden administration is trying to turn the tide on worsening wildfires in the U.S. West through a multi-billion dollar cleanup of forests choked with dead trees and undergrowth. Credit: AP Photo/Godofredo A. Vásquez

## **FALLING SHORT IN A RISKY AREA**

In 2022, the Forest Service missed its treatment goals in four of 10 areas targeted as priorities. One was the Tahoe National Forest's North Yuba region, where the agency addressed only 6% of the acreage planned.

Small towns tucked into the forest's canyons escaped disaster two years

ago when the Dixie fire raged just to the north, destroying several communities and burning about 1,500 square miles (3,900 square kilometers) in the Sierra Nevada range. Those communities also escaped another fire to the south that burned more than 1,000 homes and structures. The previous year, yet another fire killed 15 people and torched more than 2,000 homes and structures in the region.

The same conditions that whipped those fires into infernos exist on the Tahoe forest—densely-packed trees and underbrush primed to burn following years of drought. And government computer modeling suggests it's among the U.S. communities most exposed to wildfires on federal lands.



Trees killed by drought and the western bark beetle are visible in the Tahoe National Forest, Tuesday, June 6, 2023, near Camptonville, Calif. By logging

and burning trees and low-lying vegetation, officials hope to lessen forest fuels and keep fires that originate on federal lands from exploding through nearby cities and towns. Credit: AP Photo/Godofredo A. Vásquez

Five million trees died on the Tahoe last year alone, said Ilano, the forest supervisor.

"What we're realizing is we're not moving fast enough, that the fires are burning bigger and more intense, more quickly than we anticipated," Ilano said.

Earlier this month, tracked vehicles including one known as a "harvester" worked through dense stands on the North Yuba, clipping large trees at their base and stripping them bare of branches in just seconds, then piling the trunks to be burned later. Elsewhere, work crews walked slowly behind a wood chipper as it was pulled along a forest road, stuffing the machine with small trees and branches cut to clear the understory.

The increased logging needed to reach the government's lofty goals has gained acceptance as the growing toll from wildfires softens longstanding opposition from some environmental groups and ecologists.



A tree processor is used to cut logs to correct size before being transported to a mill, Tuesday, June 6, 2023, near Camptonville, Calif. Using chainsaws, heavy machinery and controlled burns, the Biden administration is trying to turn the tide on worsening wildfires in the U.S. West through a multi-billion dollar cleanup of forests choked with dead trees and undergrowth. Credit: AP Photo/Godofredo A. Vásquez

"Gone are the days when things were black and white and either good or bad," said Melinda Booth, former director of the South Yuba River Citizens League. "We need targeted treatment, targeted thinning, which does include logging."

Others think officials are going too far. Sue Britting with Sierra Forest Legacy says the North Yuba plan includes about nine square miles (23

square kilometers) of older trees and stands along waterways that should be preserved. Yet for most of the work, Britting said it's time to "move forward" on a thinning project years in the making.

## OBSTACLES TO THINNING STRATEGY

Hindering the Forest Service nationwide is a shortage of workers to cut and remove trees on the scale demanded, government officials and forestry experts say. Litigation ties up many projects, with environmental reviews taking three years on average before work begins, according to the Property and Environment Research Center, a Bozeman, Montana think tank.



Tahoe National Forest supervisor Eli Ilano talks about how the piles of cut down

trees, left, will be burned as part of their efforts to make the forest more resistant to wild fires and droughts, Tuesday, June 6, 2023, near Camptonville, Calif.

"The forests as we know them in California and across the West, they're dying," Ilano said. Credit: AP Photo/Godofredo A. Vásquez

Another problem: Thinning operations aren't allowed in federally designated wilderness areas. That puts off limits about a third of National Forest areas that expose communities to high wildfire risk and means some thinning work must be carried out in a patchwork fashion.

Keeping track of progress presents its own challenges. Acres that get worked on are often counted twice or more—first when the trees are cut down, again when leftover piles of woody material on the same site are removed, and yet again when that landscape is later subjected to prescribed fire, said Schultz of Colorado State University.

Even where thinning is allowed, officials face other potential constraints, such as protecting older groves important for wildlife habitat. A Biden inventory of public lands in April identified more than 175,000 square miles (453,000 square kilometers) of old growth and mature forests on U.S. government land.



Cut down trees are visible at the site of a timber sale in the Tahoe National Forest, Tuesday, June 6, 2023, near Camptonville, Calif. By logging and burning trees and low-lying vegetation, officials hope to lessen forest fuels and keep fires that originate on federal lands from exploding through nearby cities and towns.  
Credit: AP Photo/Godofredo A. Vásquez



Tahoe National Forest supervisor Eli Ilano, foreground, walks past a pile of cut down trees, Tuesday, June 6, 2023, near Camptonville, Calif. "The forests as we know them in California and across the West, they're dying," Ilano said. Credit: AP Photo/Godofredo A. Vásquez





The stump of a tree can be seen in the Tahoe National Forest, Tuesday, June 6, 2023, near Camptonville, Calif. Using chainsaws, heavy machinery and controlled burns, the Biden administration is trying to turn the tide on worsening wildfires in the U.S. West through a multi-billion dollar cleanup of forests choked with dead trees and undergrowth. Credit: AP Photo/Godofredo A. Vásquez



A crew member uses a tree processor to strip bark and branches from logs before being transported to a mill, Tuesday, June 6, 2023, near Camptonville, Calif. Using chainsaws, heavy machinery and controlled burns, the Biden administration is trying to turn the tide on worsening wildfires in the U.S. West through a multi-billion dollar cleanup of forests choked with dead trees and undergrowth. Credit: AP Photo/Godofredo A. Vásquez



Trees are visible from the town of Downieville, Calif., Tuesday, June 6, 2023. By logging and burning trees and low-lying vegetation, officials hope to lessen forest fuels and keep fires that originate on federal lands from exploding through nearby cities and towns. Credit: AP Photo/Godofredo A. Vásquez

The inventory will be used to craft new rules to better protect those woodlands from fires, insects and other side effects of climate change. But there's overlap between older forests and many areas slated for thinning. That includes more than half of the treatment area at North Yuba, according to an AP analysis of mature forest data compiled by the conservation group Wild Heritage.

"What's driving all of this is insect infestation, drought stress, and all of that is related to the climate," said Wild Heritage chief scientist

Dominick DellaSalla. "I don't think you can get out of it by thinning."

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Citation: Billions are being spent to turn the tide on the US West's wildfires. It won't be enough (2023, June 27) retrieved 28 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2023-06-wildfire-west-stumbles.html>

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