

Towns could save themselves from wildfire—if they knew about this money

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Last year, Don Pratt fled from his home as a wildfire swept down the mountainside here in Washington's Cascade Range.

"Heading out, I thought it was the last time I was going to see the house," he said.

As residents evacuated and smoke engulfed the small mountain community, [fire](#) crews with bulldozers and hand tools cut fuel breaks around Packwood's Timberline neighborhood. The blaze came within half a mile of Pratt's home before a shift in the wind helped firefighters hold the line.

"We got lucky," said Lonnie Goble, chief of the local fire district. "The wind at the last second kind of quit, or it would have wiped out Timberline pretty easily."

As hot, dry conditions returned to the area this month, locals said they'll need more than just luck to survive the next fire. They're hoping to remove trees and brush to create a buffer space around houses and structures, while removing low-hanging limbs in residential areas. But that work is expensive, and they haven't been able to pay for it.

There's actually a huge pot of [federal money](#) available to communities across the country—an unprecedented amount that would allow towns to quickly tackle work that otherwise would take decades. But local leaders in Packwood, which has fewer than 1,200 residents, and some other areas say they haven't heard of the program, and most haven't drafted the protection plans needed to apply for grants.

The U.S. Forest Service, which oversees the conifer-covered mountainsides surrounding Packwood, is distributing \$1 billion to help communities protect themselves from wildfires. Some areas already have secured as much as \$10 million to carry out major projects, and officials say the grants have greatly increased their chances of avoiding catastrophe.

But even as the federal agency takes in applications for the second round of funding, wildfire experts acknowledge that many communities could be left behind. Forest Service officials said a congressional deadline forced them to send out the first round of funding in a hurry. For future grants, they're working to identify at-risk communities and proactively urge them to apply.

State and [federal officials](#) pointed to last week's deadly fire in Lahaina, Hawaii, as an example of how many communities don't realize the risk they're facing. And many that do know the danger, such as Packwood, are not yet poised to compete for the grants. As hundreds of millions of dollars are handed out over the next several years, the places that receive that money could be much better protected from burning to the ground.

Living with fire

Over the years, federal and state policymakers have made big investments to reduce wildfire hazards across vast swaths of public lands. But money has been in short supply for the places where those uninhabited landscapes mingle with cities and towns.

"To think we're going to stop every fire, that's just not the case," said Brad Simpkins, branch chief for cooperative fire programs with the U.S. Forest Service. "What we need to do is protect communities and mitigate the impact."

Experts say communities in fire-prone areas need to do massive amounts of work if they're to coexist with wildfire. That means removing vegetation around homes and structures. It also includes establishing evacuation corridors, creating fire breaks in surrounding forests and educating residents about the risks.

Under the infrastructure law Congress passed in 2021, the Forest Service

was given \$1 billion to help states, local governments, tribes, nonprofits and homeowners associations pay for projects to keep their communities safe from wildfires. The agency announced nearly \$200 million in grant awards this March, and it's currently taking applications for the second round.

Some advocates say the program represents an important shift, as wildfire spending has historically focused on things like helicopters and fire crews to put out fires. Extinguishing fires in some cases led to a buildup of flammable brush and trees and more severe fires.

"When we look back over the last few decades at budgets and how much went to suppression versus creating fire-adapted communities, it's not even close," said Megan Fitzgerald-McGowan, Firewise U.S. program manager with the National Fire Protection Association, a nonprofit that works to reduce fire risk. "But fire's going to happen on the landscape, so how do we live with it?"

The Firewise program provides criteria for communities to increase their wildfire preparedness. Some states have provided funding to participating Firewise sites, ranging from neighborhoods to cities, to help carry out their plans.

State officials say they're seeing rapid population growth in many rural and scenic areas that are surrounded by fire-prone landscapes. At the same time, hotter and drier conditions brought on by [climate change](#)—along with forests grown dense after a century of fire suppression practices—have dramatically increased wildfire risk.

In California's Tuolumne County, local officials secured \$10 million to create buffer space around nearly 1,300 homes and cut back vegetation along critical road corridors.

"We have to change the way we live; we have to respect it," said Dore Bietz, assistant director of the county's Office of Emergency Services. "We're having to make up for a lot of years that we just didn't focus on it."

The county's project is focused on three communities, but Bietz said many other areas face wildfire risk. Leaders are especially concerned about older and low-income residents who can't afford work to greatly reduce flammable vegetation on their properties. The county hopes to apply for more grants in future rounds of funding.

The Forest Service awarded Grant County, Oregon, \$9.9 million to apply herbicide to invasive grasses that are especially potent wildfire fuel. It also will use the money to clear brush along 308 miles of road that make up key evacuation routes.

"There's been a lot of work on the landscape, but not as much work in town," said Kyle Sullivan, district manager for the Grant Soil and Water Conservation District. "This is certainly the largest single grant we've ever secured."

Getting the word out

In some places, state agencies have taken the lead in helping [local governments](#) get the federal money.

The Washington Department of Natural Resources has been reaching out to community leaders and conducting webinars to help them apply for funding. The agency has also applied for its own projects.

In the first round of grant awards, Washington saw more projects funded than any state but California. Despite that success, [state officials](#) acknowledged the challenge in reaching every community that needs

help.

Packwood, for instance, does not have an updated Community Wildfire Protection Plan—a prerequisite for applying for the Forest Service grants. The federal program can provide money to develop such a plan, but local leaders hadn't heard of that possibility. Packwood is unincorporated, but community entities that could apply for grants include homeowners associations, the local fire district, a nonprofit or the county government.

"If we were aware of that, we would have obviously tried to get together with other communities in this area to apply for some of that money," said Pratt, who serves as treasurer for the Timberline Community Association. "That's what it's going to take—outside money to help people who can't do it for themselves."

Montana officials at the state Department of Natural Resources and Conservation have tried to make communities aware of the funding, while providing technical expertise on applications and co-sponsoring projects.

Simpkins, the Forest Service official, said less than 10% of communities that face wildfire risk have adopted a protection plan. The next round of grant funding will focus on helping local leaders draft those documents.

The grant program prioritizes low-income communities that have a high hazard potential and previously have been hit by disaster. The federal agency is working to create a map of those areas, which it will use to reach out to locals.

The Utah Department of Natural Resources has used social media and webinars to encourage communities to apply. In the first round of funding, the Utah department received nearly \$5 million to conduct risk

assessments for communities across a six-county region. That will help area leaders update their protection plans and apply for money to carry out the work.

In New Mexico, the Cimarron Watershed Alliance, an environmental nonprofit, received more than \$8 million to establish defensible space around homes and thin forests around some unincorporated Colfax County communities. Given the area's wildfire risk, some advocates think more investment is needed.

"We're trying to keep the county from burning down and turning into a moonscape," said Rick Smith, the group's executive director. "I'm pretty optimistic about getting more money. We're going to go after as much as we can."

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