

Fighting wildfires with legislation: Preparing congressional staffers to craft effective solutions

September 11 2024, by Rob Jordan



Congressional staffers tour fire damage in San Vicente Redwoods near Davenport, California. Credit: Lea Rosenbohm / Stanford University

The most effective tool to combat devastating wildfires may be the pen. Writing effective legislation will be key to slowing and even reversing the growth in destructive conflagrations throughout the Western U.S.

To better prepare policymakers for this challenge, the Stanford Woods Institute for the Environment recently hosted a first-of-its-kind two-day "[boot camp](#)" in which congressional staffers got a crash course from experts in climate, forestry, [fire](#) science, utilities, insurance and other wildfire-related topics.

"The recent explosion in wildfire risk and widespread smoke exposure is generating intense work on policy responses, at many levels," said boot camp instructor Chris Field, the Perry L McCarty Director of the Woods Institute. "We see programs like this bootcamp as critically important bridges from scholarship to practical applications," said Field.

Fifteen staffers from the U.S. House of Representatives and Senate, representing constituencies ranging from wildfire-prone regions to urban districts, learned from Stanford researchers and other California fire experts during on-campus seminars and visits to wildfire-affected communities and sites in the 2020 CZU Lightning Complex burn scar in the Santa Cruz Mountains near Stanford.

They focused on mechanisms and contributing factors that produce mega fires, as well as conditions required to maintain resilient, healthy forests.

"A highlight of the bootcamp was taking staff into the field to look at impacts and recovery from the lightning complex fires," said boot camp instructor Michael Wara, director of the Climate and Energy Policy Program at the Stanford Woods Institute for the Environment. "Learning about policies and then seeing their impacts on the ground really added value for staff."

Experts emphasized to the staffers that longer fire seasons, fueled by rising temperatures and prolonged droughts, are endangering communities, ecosystems, and public health nationwide.

Alongside scientific insights, presenters from Stanford, the U.S. Forest Service, local fire protection districts, and other organizations stressed the need for more coordinated responses and increased funding for fire prevention and recovery, as well as the need for legislative action to fill gaps in fire management and disaster preparedness.

Case studies from California and Colorado demonstrated how community-based fire mitigation programs—like fuel reduction and prescribed burns—can effectively reduce wildfire risks when well-implemented.

A significant part of the boot camp involved practical problem-solving. Congressional staffers worked in teams to analyze recent fire events and propose legislative solutions. These sessions focused on improving forest health, community preparedness, and fire response strategies. Staffers also emphasized the importance of securing more federal resources for agencies like the U.S. Forest Service.

"We aim to provide congressional staff with information that will help them craft legislation and respond to constituent needs related to wildfire mitigation and response," said Lea Rosenbohm, associate director of policy and engagement at Woods. "We also want to forge relationships between the staff and Stanford researchers who can serve as expert resources to Congress."

Field is also the Melvin and Joan Lane Professor for Interdisciplinary Environmental Studies in the Stanford School of Humanities and Sciences, a professor of Earth system science in the Stanford Doerr School of Sustainability, and a senior fellow at Woods and the Precourt

Institute for Energy. Wara is also senior director for policy at the Stanford Doerr School of Sustainability's Sustainability Accelerator.

Provided by Stanford University

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