

Wildfires: New funding to reduce the risk of wildfire in Oregon, Washington

January 22, 2023



U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Secretary Tom Vilsack announced today expanded efforts to reduce wildfire risk across the western U.S., directly affecting national forests in Oregon and Washington.

The investments, made possible through the Biden Administration’s Bipartisan Infrastructure Law (BIL) and the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA), will directly benefit at-risk communities and critical infrastructure across 11 additional landscapes in Arizona, California, Idaho, Nevada, Oregon, Utah and Washington, according to a release from the USDA.

“It is no longer a matter of if a wildfire will threaten many western communities in these landscapes, it is a matter of when,” Vilsack said. “The need to invest more and to move quickly is apparent. This is a crisis and President Biden is treating it as one. Today’s announcement will bring more than \$490 million to 11 key landscapes across the western United States, and will be used to restore our national forests, including the restoration of resilient old-growth forest conditions.”

In the Forest Service Pacific Northwest Region, the Mount Hood National Forest in Oregon and the Colville National Forest in Washington were selected for increased funding.

The Mount Hood is being funded \$4.5 million and the Colville is being funded \$2.16 Million of from the Inflation Reduction Law.

The Mount Hood landscape covers one million acres in northwest Oregon and includes three firesheds, several wilderness areas, and the Bull Run watershed, which furnishes drinking water to nearly a million people in Portland and surrounding communities. More than a third of all Oregonians depend on water from this landscape.

The Colville landscape is on 1.6 million acres adjacent to the Colville Reservation in northeastern Washington. It includes critical infrastructure like State Routes 395 and 20 and large energy facilities. In addition, the landscape has vital habitat for species listed or proposed for listing under the Endangered Species Act, including Canada lynx, grizzly bear, whitebark pine, woodland caribou, and bull trout.

The Fremont-Winema National Forest in southern Oregon will be working with the Forest Service's Pacific Southwest Region to support the Klamath River Basin landscape. This landscape covers more than 52,000 acres in Oregon and Northern California and is being funded \$35.4 million.

This announcement complements the agency's 10 landscape projects announced in 2022 and the agency's broader strategy to address critical infrastructure, community protection, and forest resilience at risk to catastrophic wildfire.

Combined with the initial investment landscapes, these actions will span nearly 45 million acres across 137 of the 250 high-risk firesheds in the western U.S., with a total investment of \$930 million on 21 landscapes across 26.7 million acres in 2023. This work will mitigate risk to approximately 200 communities within these landscapes.

"Today's announcement is great news for Oregon and Washington and our Pacific Northwest National Forests," U.S. Forest Service Pacific Northwest Regional Forester Glenn Casamassa said. "These investments will allow us to do more work with tribes, the states, and our partner organizations to increase the health and resiliency of our forests and reduce the potential for devastating wildfires."

To meet this moment, Vilsack is also authorizing the Forest Service to utilize a new emergency authority in the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law, combined with strategic implementation of existing authorities. Doing so will enable the agency to move more quickly in applying targeted treatments to high-risk firesheds identified in the agency's Wildfire Crisis Strategy, as well as post-fire recovery areas most impacted the past several years.

These actions are required to be conducted in an ecologically appropriate manner that maximizes the retention of large trees, considers historically underserved communities and tribes, and is done collaboratively with communities and partners.

“Doing this work in the right place, at the right time, and at the right scale, combined with the use of emergency authorities, will accelerate our planning, consultation, contracting, hiring and project work to reduce wildfire risk and improve forest health and resilience,” U.S. Forest Service Chief Randy Moore said. “Collaboration with Tribes, communities and partners will remain a priority, and we will continue to use the best available science when carrying out this important work.”

The Forest Service Wildfire Crisis Strategy

The announcement comes on the anniversary of the launch of the Forest Service’s Wildfire Crisis Strategy, which debuted Jan. 18, 2022. In April, the agency introduced the initial 10 fire-prone landscapes that are now funded for the next five years through Bipartisan Infrastructure Law funds.

Since releasing its Wildfire Crisis Strategy one year ago, the Forest Service and its partners have used the best available science and data to identify the highest risk landscapes for treatment projects.

The Forest Service found that around 80% of the wildfire risk to communities is concentrated in less than 10% of “firesheds,” or areas where wildfires are likely to threaten communities and infrastructure. These targeted investments focus on firesheds of the highest risk, where projects are ready to begin or to expand.

The 10-year strategy calls for treating up to 20 million acres on national forests and grasslands and up to 30 million acres of treatments on other federal, state, Tribal, private and family lands.

Over the past 20 years, many states have had record catastrophic wildfires, devastating communities, lives and livelihoods, and causing billions of dollars in damage. More than 10 million acres – more than twice the size of New Jersey – burned each year across the U.S. in 2020, 2017 and 2015.

The Wildfire Crisis Strategy builds on current work, leverages congressional authorities and partnerships to support the department’s work to mitigate wildfire risk, and restore forest health over the next decade. In addition to State Forest Action Plans, the strategy also aligns with the Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Program, Tribal Forest Protection Act, Good Neighbor Authority, Joint Chiefs’ Landscape Restoration Partnership and Shared Stewardship agreements.

In June 2022, USDA released the Secretary’s Memorandum on Climate Resilience and Carbon Stewardship of America’s National Forests and Grasslands.

The Secretary’s memo builds on previous actions on climate change, equity, and forest resilience, but provides more specific and time-bound actions to integrate into agency programs. The Forest Service used the guidance in the Secretary’s memo to better inform the selection criteria for projects under the Wildfire Crisis Strategy, including equity, source water protection, community infrastructure, and wildlife corridors.

Recognizing that insects, disease, and wildfire are among the most significant threats to mature and old growth forests, in alignment with the Administration, the Forest Service will be targeting hazardous fuels reduction projects to address these threats to promote the recruitment, protection and restoration of mature or old-growth forests.

