

Wildfires across the United States are becoming hotter, more destructive, and more deadly. Longer fire seasons, accumulated forest fuels, and drought are intensifying fire behavior, threatening lives, homes, drinking water supplies, wildlife habitat, and local economies—while suppression costs and losses from fire and post-fire flooding continue to rise.

A Century Without Fire Changed the Landscape

Despite the current wave of destructive fires, many landscapes across the country were historically shaped by naturally and human-ignited, low-intensity fire. These frequent fires created resilient forests by limiting fuel buildup, recycling nutrients, and maintaining open, fire-adapted ecosystems. Decades of fire exclusion, however, disrupted these processes, leaving forests dense with small, flammable growth, stressed, and vulnerable to extreme wildfire.



Beneficial Fire Builds Resilient Forests



Beneficial fire is intentionally applied or carefully managed fire that meets objectives of supporting healthy ecosystems, protecting watersheds, and reducing risk to cities and towns. By consuming accumulated forest fuels, often during cooler parts of the year, **beneficial fire reduces future wildfire behavior**—making fires easier to control, safer for firefighters, less severe, and less damaging, while **limiting catastrophic losses and long-term recovery costs from extreme megafires**.

Beneficial fire includes,

- **Prescribed fire:** planned, professionally managed burns conducted under specific weather and fuel conditions to reduce hazardous fuels and restore ecosystem function; and
- **Cultural fire:** the application of fire by Indigenous practitioners to support ecological health, food systems, and cultural practices, informed by generations of place-based knowledge.

Beneficial fire is most effective when paired with strategic forest thinning, workforce investment, and community fire adaptation. Thinning reduces hazardous fuel loads and enables beneficial fire to burn more safely and effectively, while community adaptation—such as defensible space, fire-resistant construction, and land-use planning—reduces risk to lives and homes. Together, these proven approaches deliver healthier forests, safer communities, and fiscally responsible wildfire management.

The Most Effective Path to Wildfire Resilience

Active fire management is essential under certain weather conditions and when wildfire threatens lives and communities—but it is not enough on its own. Proactive tools—thinning, community adaptation, and beneficial fire—must be strengthened to reduce risk before and after fire season, and sustained investment in these approaches is the only way to change the long-term trajectory of wildfire costs, losses, and ecosystem health.



Policy Foundations for Wildfire Resilience

Enable sustained, cross-boundary wildfire risk reduction at landscape scale: Support policies that facilitate hazardous fuels reduction, beneficial fire, forest restoration, and watershed protection across jurisdictions through coordinated, place-based approaches. Programs like Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Program demonstrate the effectiveness of sustained, partner-driven approaches.

Provide stable, multi-year funding structures for restoration and mitigation: Establish budget mechanisms that align with the long-term nature of forest treatments and maintenance, recognizing that wildfire resilience requires sustained investment rather than short-term or annual funding cycles.

Expand the use of beneficial fire as a core land management tool: Create enabling conditions—planning capacity, regulatory alignment, and operational support—for prescribed fire, and cultural burning at a large scale as part of integrated land management systems.

Build and sustain a skilled prescribed fire and land management workforce: Invest in recruitment, training, and retention pathways for fire practitioners across federal, Tribal, state, local, and nonprofit sectors, ensuring workforce capacity matches the scale of restoration needs. Address barriers to workforce recruitment and retention.

Reduce barriers and manage risk for practitioners implementing beneficial fire: Develop policy frameworks that address liability concerns, clarify risk-sharing, and provide mechanisms to manage unintended outcomes when best practices are followed—enabling broader participation in prescribed and cultural burning.

Strengthen cross-boundary governance and shared stewardship implementation: Support policies that enhance coordination among federal, Tribal, state, local, and private partners, enabling shared decision-making and scaling of collaborative, place-based efforts.