

The LA Fires: Observations and Lessons from an Intergovernmental Perspective

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There can be no debate that the ten LA fires that raged for over three weeks in January 2025, particularly the Eaton and Palisades fires, were catastrophic. Upwards of [40,000 acres](#) burned, damaging or destroying [over 16,000 residential](#) and commercial structures. Estimated direct damage from the fires has risen to almost [\\$54 billion](#), with indirect economic losses approaching [\\$150 billion](#). Worse, the fires claimed 31 lives. At the same time and given the scope of the fires, the fact that the loss of life was not worse is worth noting. It suggests that the evacuation of [approximately 200,000](#) people from affected areas saved lives.

Some have raised questions about why “government” did not respond more effectively, focusing on water pressure and availability, and planning deficiencies. However, the factors that gave rise to the severity of these fires points to two fundamental elements in the [current debate](#) over whether emergency management should be left to state and local governments: 1) disaster scale in a more hazardous world and 2) the need for capacity to cope with this changing environment. In truth, urban wildfires like these are simply not preventable, per se. Policy cannot stop lightning strikes, halt hurricane-force winds, or bring much-needed rain to areas in drought. Rather, we argue that we should shift our attention to understanding the mechanics of preparedness and hazard mitigation—and how that can be best accomplished through capacity-building across sectors and across levels of government. In other words, instead of asking how we can prevent this from happening again, we should instead be asking how we can manage the risk of wildfire disasters more effectively. And further, how can we continue to improve capacity in that regard.

The communities of Los Angeles live adjacent and within the wildland-urban interface (WUI), “[the geographical area where human development, including structures and other infrastructure, meets or intermixes with undeveloped wildlands](#).” The wildfire risk in the area increases significantly when the vegetation is dry—as it was this year due to extremely low rainfall—and when a wind pattern setup emerges that is unique to the area. [Santa Ana winds](#), dry, hot winds blowing from the inland desert regions toward the Pacific coast near Los Angeles, are a common weather phenomenon occurring during the winter months. As the initial fires ignited, their spread was extremely rapid, fueled by Santa Ana winds reaching up to 80 mph. These winds in combination with dry fuels made the fires unstoppable and firefighting by air impossible.

Extremely fast downslope winds and dry vegetation fueling urban fires are not unique to Los Angeles. The same scenario caused small grassfires to turn into deadly and catastrophic fires in [Gatlinburg, TN](#) in 2016 (Chimney Tops 2 fire) the [towns of Superior and Louisville in Boulder County, CO](#) in 2021 (Marshall Fire), and [Lahaina, HI](#) in August 2023. In each of these incidents, the National

Weather Service accurately warned communities of the critical fire weather conditions and issued Red Flag warnings. But the National Weather Service cannot predict WHERE the fires will erupt. Imagine being warned of hurricane conditions but not knowing where it will strike.

There is no single root cause to blame for the devastation caused in Altadena and Pacific Palisades. In fact, Los Angeles County [is \(was\) considered](#) to be among the best wildfire-prepared communities in the country with numerous [Firewise USA® neighborhoods](#).

Urban fire conflagrations cannot be stopped through traditional wildfire techniques such as creating fire breaks mechanically (which requires the clearing of fuel) or setting backfires. To manage wildfire risk, reducing exposure (i.e., avoiding development in high-risk areas), improving preparedness engagement across all levels of government, and involving all community stakeholders are central. [Retrofitting](#) older homes that are not yet compliant with Los Angeles County's strong building codes with, for example, fire-resistant roofing and siding materials and screening vents to stop flying embers would have helped, as would have the elimination of vegetation within five (5) feet of a home to create defensible space. But as necessary as they are, these are tough sells to residents both aesthetically and financially. And thus, these are a tough sell to politicians politically.

As [research](#) supported by the Climate Program Office of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration shows, fires in the wildland-urban interface are on the rise. California is not the only state with homes in the WUI. [According to the U.S. Fire Administration](#), Texas, Florida, North Carolina, and Pennsylvania are among the states with the most homes in the WUI, and numerous states in the Northeast and Southeast have substantial shares of their housing stock within the WUI. Wildfire risk is a problem for the United States as whole, particularly [in this era of climate change](#).

This means that the complexity of heightened risk associated with wildfire cannot be addressed by government actions alone. Active engagement by organizations in the public, private and nonprofit sectors, along with homeowners and other community stakeholders, are all required to participate in active governance to manage and mitigate wildfire risk. In 2011, the U.S. Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) adopted a [Whole Community Approach](#) to emergency management. The basic premise of this approach is that hazard risk management is a collective enterprise, one in which communities identify and assess their strengths and weaknesses. Through such intentional processes, they build and improve community resilience.

Both private economic activities and opportunities for cross-sector engagement, such as the [role of private insurance as a risk transfer tool](#), private sector development of [new technologies to reduce wildfire risk](#), and the [role of private investment to improve disaster resilience](#) underscore the merits of this approach. But it is important to recognize, in spite of the fact that [FEMA's future is currently in doubt](#), the federal government plays an essential role of coordinating and funding wildfire risk reduction (e.g., [Fire Management Assistance Grants \(FMAG\)](#), [Hazard Mitigation Grant Program Post Fire \(HMGP-PF\)](#)). In the case of wildfire, an effective tool is a [community wildfire protection plan](#), which serves as a multijurisdictional risk management mechanism focusing on preparation to

reduce hazard vulnerability, coordination of assets when incident response is required, and evacuation planning to move the public to safety.

Wildfire as a hazard represents an enormously complex risk management challenge. Market tools such as insurance, homeowner safety behavior, and the important [contributions made by nonprofit organizations](#) in disaster relief and recovery, are not by themselves sufficient to address community-scale vulnerabilities. There is only one actor that is designed to do just that: the public sector.

Wildfire does not recognize municipal, county, or even state boundaries. Like with pandemic preparedness, local jurisdictions play an important “front line” role, but the efforts must be coordinated by higher-level units of government, along with appropriate funding streams for that purpose. [Recognizing this reality](#), along with the need for continual improvement in preparedness and risk mitigation, also highlights the co-productive nature of this task: individuals in high-threat areas must actively engage. Similarly, this is an intersectoral challenge in which the public sector is but one set of players that needs to engage with the private and nonprofit sectors.

Fixed land assets and housing market pressures are not going to lead to a withdrawal from development in our WUI areas without politically unappealing policy interventions. But even those interventions would not be able to prevent these natural hazards from occurring. As such, shifting to an intergovernmental and intersectoral mindset focusing on risk mitigation and preparedness to address such inevitable occurrences is the most responsible direction for policy makers. Such policies should: 1) incentivize building human capacity and material assets, 2) better internalize risk by requiring appropriate insurance in WUI areas (which also raises equity issues), and 3) support building and maintaining resilient infrastructure and utilities. The public sector must also invest in recovery planning by shifting the goal from building back faster to one of building back better.

Additional Resources:

[LA Fire Evacuation Planning](#)

[Community Tools for Fire Risk Mitigation](#)

[NACo County Wildfire Playbook](#)

[Community Planning Assistance for Wildfires](#)