



# Too Hot to Handle

Climate Denial Is Driving Up the Dangers  
and Costs of Western Wildfires

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# Introduction and summary

In the American West, catastrophic wildfires have grown increasingly frequent, damaging, and dangerous. In the first nine months of 2015, wildfires burned more than 9 million acres of land in the region—an area more than four times larger than Yellowstone National Park.<sup>1</sup> Two of the year’s most damaging fires destroyed a combined 2,853 homes and structures, resulted in five deaths, and prompted President Barack Obama to issue a major disaster declaration.<sup>2</sup> By the start of September, the U.S. Forest Service had spent its entire firefighting budget for the year, forcing the agency to transfer money away from other fire prevention and forest restoration programs to pay the costs of battling blazes in the West.<sup>3</sup>

Congress’ response to wildfire seasons has become predictable and inadequate. Lawmakers commit to helping communities rebuild, backfill some of the Forest Service’s budget to pay for the costs of fighting wildfires, and then—when the embers cool to ash—shift their attention elsewhere, ignoring both the causes of worsening wildfires and the long-term solutions that are needed.<sup>4</sup> This failure to address both the growing costs of and damage from wildfires is partly rooted in some lawmakers’ unwillingness to acknowledge that human-caused climate change is making wildfires hotter, deadlier, and more expensive. Their determination to ignore the role of climate change in Western wildfires is contributing to bad budgeting, resource shortages, and additional risks for local communities.

This report reviews climate change’s impact on Western wildfires, discusses their rising costs and increasing size, and projects that in order to fight them, the Forest Service will have to spend nearly twice as much every year over the next decade. It then outlines three policy changes necessary to confront the increasing severity and frequency of wildfires:

1. Reform Congress' broken budgeting system for wildfire suppression
2. Help Western communities prepare for and adapt to the impacts of climate change, including wildfires
3. Reduce U.S. greenhouse gas emissions

The final section illustrates how these changes are set to be undermined by climate inaction—and how they will prove impossible unless lawmakers accept the scientific consensus about climate change and act to confront its costs and causes.

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