

Wildfire Response Improvement Act

BACKGROUND

Annually from 2012 to 2021, there were an average of 61,289 wildfires, with an average of 7.4 million acres impacted and an average of 8,000 structures burned. In 2021, 58,968 wildfires impacted 7.1 million acres.¹

SUMMARY

The Wildfire Response Improvement Act directs the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) to update its regulations and guidance for the Fire Management Assistance Grant, Public Assistance, and mitigation programs to better respond to the unique challenges of wildfires and improve wildfire mitigation.

- Currently, emergency protective measures under the Federal Management Assistance Grant (FMAG) are not eligible expenses unless they occur during the incident period. As a result, efforts by local and state governments to protect property from mudslides and flooding from post-fire burn scars are not eligible for federal assistance yet similar measures taken in advance of other disasters are eligible under the Public Assistance (PA) program. This inequity places an undue burden on state and local governments responding to the threat and impact of wildfires. Within one year of enactment, FEMA must update its regulations for the FMAG program in order to harmonize the categories of eligibility and timelines with the PA program.
- Update the Public Assistance Program and Policy Guide to include guidance on wildfire-specific challenges, including debris removal, emergency protective measures and impacts to drinking water resources. Current guidance disproportionately favors other hazard events (floods, hurricanes, and tornadoes) while overlooking the unique aspects of wildfires. For example, there is no guidance for considering the effects of wildfire damage to trees.
- Modify and update the benefit cost analysis (BCA) for mitigation projects under the Building Resilient Infrastructure and Communities and Hazard Mitigation Grant programs to help eliminate the barriers often faced by rural and economically disadvantaged communities seeking to conduct and qualify for wildfire mitigation projects.

“This opportunity to update FEMA’s policies and procedures will fundamentally change how we address wildfires and more appropriately address the continually emerging risk of these events. Updates to the FMAG program, the Public Assistance guidance, and BCA process will bring wildfires on par with other disasters and level the playing field for state and local responders.”

*Erica Bornemann, President, National Emergency Management Association and
Director, Vermont Emergency Management*

¹ <https://www.crs.gov/Reports/IF10732?source=search&guid=ef4de314908c470cbbf022677186b1ae&index=5>