# The US has a new plan to confront its ‘wildfire crisis’

Federal authorities have a new plan to protect communities across the western US from increasingly explosive infernos by fighting fire with fire. In a shift from old-school firefighting strategies that attempted to stamp out naturally occurring blazes, the USDA and Forest Service will focus on thinning out forests to minimize “mega fires.”

The agencies released a 10-year strategy today that includes removing trees and using “controlled burns” to reduce the amount of vegetation that feeds flames. The plan is to treat up to 20 million more acres of national forest land than is currently managed, plus work with partners to employ the tactics on an additional 30 million acres on other federal, state, tribal, and private lands. All in all, it’ll take an estimated $50 billion to accomplish, the *Associated Press* reports. The USDA did not immediately respond to a request from *The Verge* to verify that estimate.

*A “national emergency”*

The US’s “wildfire crisis” is described as a “national emergency” in the newly released 10-year implementation plan. Supersized blazes are increasingly devouring huge areas. California’s 2020 fire season was record-smashing; more than 4.2 million acres burned that year compared to the previous record of nearly 1.9 million acres set in 2018. “Fire has always been a natural part of forest ecosystems, but the mega fires that we’ve been experiencing are unlike anything we’ve seen before,” Senator Mark Kelly (D-AZ) said during a press

conference for the new wildfire plan in Arizona today. “Today’s fires — they burn hotter, and they burn longer.”

They’re also far more destructive. The running five-year average number of homes and buildings destroyed by wildfires in the US has jumped four-fold, according to the USDA, from 2,873 in 2014 to 12,255 in 2020.

Wildfires have grown more ferocious, according to the plan, because of climate change, which is warming and drying out landscapes and priming them to burn. More urban sprawl in fire-prone areas also plays a role. Notably, so does historical fire suppression strategies that helped turn today’s dry landscapes into tinderboxes full of fuel.

Before European settlers arrived, some Native American tribes, like the Karuk Tribe in California, maintained a practice of intentionally starting controlled blazes. The method reduced the amount of tinder on forest floors so that when uncontrolled fires sparked, they didn’t burn as intensely. California, the state that loses the most structures to wildfires, recently passed measures that allow for more “cultural burns,” for which tribe members might have previously faced fines and criminal charges.

*“We needed the jumpstart.”*
Now, authorities plan to expand similar practices to quell conflagrations. “We’re not talking about stopping fires. We’re talking about having that fire behave as it does its natural thing across the landscape,” Forest Service Chief Randy Moore said at today’s press conference.

Their new efforts will be concentrated in the Pacific Northwest, Colorado, California’s Sierra Nevadas, and the Southwest. They’ll home in on “high-risk” areas where wildfires pose the greatest threats to people. Less than 10 percent of fire-prone forests account for a whopping 80 percent of fire risk to communities, according to the USDA.

The bipartisan infrastructure law passed last November will help the 10-year plan get off the ground with about $3 billion in badly needed funding. But that’s not even enough to cover a nearly $6 billion backlog of deferred maintenance. “There just simply is not the resources being developed and allocated to the forest service to do everything we wanted to do,” Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack said at the press conference today. “So we needed the jumpstart.”

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