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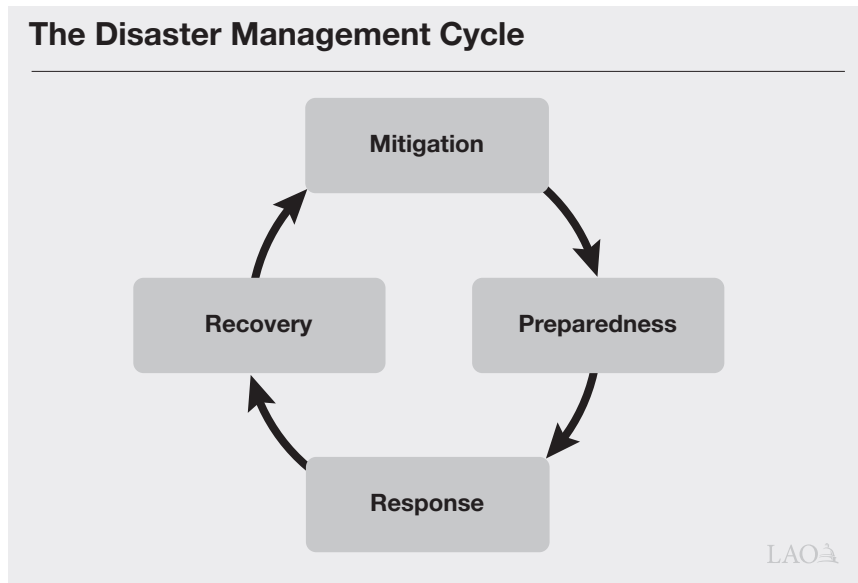
Wildfire Response and Recovery in California

PRESENTED TO: Assembly Budget Subcommittee No. 6 on
Public Safety
Hon. James C. Ramos, Chair



LEGISLATIVE ANALYST'S OFFICE

Phases of the Disaster Management Cycle



- **Cyclical Process.** The process of managing disasters is cyclical and can be divided into the following four phases:
 - **Response** occurs after the onset of an emergency or disaster. First responders provide emergency assistance, including firefighting, medical assistance, and search and rescue.
 - **Recovery** begins once the emergency period is over and includes activities intended to return systems to normal, including debris removal and rebuilding.
 - **Mitigation** includes activities designed to prevent or reduce the likelihood or severity of future emergencies, such as removing excess or dead vegetation to create defensible space around homes.
 - **Preparedness** focuses on planning for the most effective response, taking steps to reduce damages (such as forecasting and warning systems), and ensuring first responders are adequately equipped and positioned before emergencies occur (such as prepositioning fire trucks in key locations).



Phases of the Disaster Management Cycle

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- ***Phases Can Overlap.*** Although the model presents these phases as exclusive, in practice, there is often overlap.
- ***Focusing in on Response and Recovery.*** This handout provides information specifically on the response and recovery phases as they relate to wildfires.



Key Features of State’s Disaster Response System

State’s Mutual Aid System Guides Initial Response

- ***The State’s Disaster Response System Takes a “Bottom-Up” Approach.*** The state’s system of disaster response typically starts at the local level. Members of the public typically alert a local government about a disaster incident—such as a fire—through calls to the 9-1-1 system. Upon receiving such an alert, local first responders—such as police or fire departments—respond to the incident. Many smaller disaster incidents—such as small fires—are handled solely at the local level by these first responders.
- ***Provides Additional Resources Through Mutual Aid System.*** When disaster incidents are large enough that they overwhelm a local government’s capacity to respond, the local government can request additional resources—such as emergency responders or equipment—from other governmental entities in its mutual aid region through the state’s mutual aid system. Mutual aid refers to the practice of neighboring jurisdictions supporting each other during disasters. If the resources within a mutual aid region are insufficient, regional mutual aid coordinators work with state-level staff to request additional resources from other areas, including local governments in other parts of the state, various state agencies, other states, the federal government, or other countries.
- ***Response to Wildfires Can Vary Depending on Where They Start.*** In the case of wildfires, the disaster response approach can vary based on where the fire starts and which entity has wildfire response jurisdiction. For example, if a wildfire starts in an area where the state has jurisdiction, the state—rather than a local government—is often the first entity to respond.



Key Features of State's Disaster Response System

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Various Types of Disaster Declarations, Which Affect Funding

- ***Disaster Declarations Depend on Type and Severity of Disaster.*** For example, the Governor can proclaim a state of emergency when local resources have been exceeded. Additionally, the President can declare a National Emergency or Major Disaster for certain types of disaster events beyond the state's capacity.
- ***Disaster Assistance Typically Varies Depending on Type of Declaration.*** There are various disaster assistance programs offered by the state and federal government. Some are available without a disaster declaration (such as mutual aid for fires), but many are only available if a state or federal disaster declaration is made. The declaration for each disaster typically sets out the types (and terms) of aid made available for that specific disaster.



Public Notification and Emergency Alert Systems

- **Federal State and Local Officials Use a Variety of Alert Systems.**
 - **Integrated Public Alert and Warning System (IPAWS).** IPAWS is an overarching, federal system through which alerting authorities may send various types of alerts, including Wireless Emergency Alerts, Emergency Alert System messages, and others.
 - **Wireless Emergency Alert System.** Wireless emergency alerts are sent through mobile carriers by authorized government alerting authorities, including federal, state, and local public safety officials. These alerts are concise, text-like messages designed to get people’s attention in critical situations, including imminent threat to life or property. The authorized government alerting authority designates a geographic area to receive a message and anyone in that area with a cell phone receives the message, which includes a special tone and vibration.
 - **Emergency Alert System.** The Emergency Alert System is a national public warning system that requires radio and television systems to allow the President to address the public during a national emergency. The system also may be used by state and local authorities to deliver important emergency information, such as wildfire alerts targeted to specific areas.
 - **Subscription Alert Services.** Local public safety agencies also have community notification systems to alert people about emergency events and other public safety information. People sign up to receive alerts through telephone calls, text messages, and/or emails for events that might affect addresses of interest, such as their home, work, or child’s school address. These alerts can complement other emergency alerts. For example, because wireless emergency alerts are limited in length, subscription alert services could be used to provide additional information.



Public Notification and Emergency Alert Systems

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- ***The Governor’s Office of Emergency Services (OES) Operates the California State Warning Center and the Alert and Warning Program.*** The California State Warning Center is the state’s primary intelligence hub for monitoring and disseminating information about threats to life and safety for the purposes of issuing notifications. The Alert and Warning Program provides training, lessons learned, best practices, and similar types of support to alerting authorities (which are entities that have the authority to issue public alerts). OES also issues statewide alert guidelines and a model “Local Alert and Warning Plan” that is designed to provide planning guidance to alerting authorities.



Key Entities Involved in Wildfire Response

State	
California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection (CalFire)^a	Main state entity involved in wildfire response. Main entity responsible for protecting State Responsibility Areas, which cover about one-third of the state's acreage and mostly include privately owned wildlands.
Governor's Office of Emergency Services	Monitors and coordinates wildfire and other disaster response, including tasking other agencies with carrying out specific activities and coordinating mutual aid. Administers various programs that support wildfire response, such as by providing fire engines to local agencies for use in the mutual aid system and pre-positioning resources in advance of periods of high fire risk known as "red flag warnings."
California Military Department	Provides support—such as additional firefighting aircraft—to assist with combatting large fires. Under the supervision of CalFire, operates hand crews that conduct activities such as fire suppression through a program known as "Task Force Rattlesnake."
California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation	Under the supervision of CalFire, operates hand crews—staffed by people committed to state prison who are housed at conservation camps—that conduct activities such as fire suppression.
California Conservation Corps	Under the supervision of CalFire, operates hand crews—staffed by young adult corpsmembers—that conduct activities such as fire suppression.
Local and Federal	
U.S. Forest Service	Main federal entity involved in wildfire response. Main federal entity responsible for protecting Federal Responsibility Areas, which generally include lands owned or managed by the federal government.
Various Local Agencies^a	Entities such as city and county fire departments and local fire protection districts typically are primarily responsible for protecting Local Responsibility Areas, which include incorporated cities and agricultural lands.

^a In some cases, CalFire and local agencies provide primary response and prevention services in each other's jurisdictions under contractual relationships.



Typical Sources of State Funding for Immediate Wildfire Response-Related Costs

- **Annual State Agency Budgets.** Some funds for emergency-related activities are included in the annual budgets of state departments tasked with responding to emergencies—primarily the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection (CalFire), OES, and the California Military Department.
- **Emergency Fund (E-Fund).** The Department of Finance (DOF) has authority to allocate more state General Fund to CalFire to pay for the costs of responding to large wildfires (regardless of the existence of a state of emergency) if the administration finds that the budgeted amount will not be sufficient to cover its costs. The 2025-26 budget proposes roughly \$600 million for the E-fund, which includes about \$250 million in anticipated reimbursements.
- **Disaster Response-Emergency Operations Account (DREOA).** Upon the Governor’s declaration of a state of emergency, existing statute authorizes DOF to transfer funds from the Special Fund for Economic Uncertainties (SFEU) to DREOA and allocate funds from DREOA to state departments for disaster response operations costs. The SFEU is the state’s discretionary budget reserve of the General Fund. The Governor’s proposed 2025-26 budget includes \$4.5 billion in the SFEU.
- **Authority to Access Any Available State Funds.** Upon the Governor’s declaration of a state of emergency, existing state law also gives the Governor the authority to spend any available state funds to respond to the emergency. When redirecting special funds that are otherwise dedicated for a specific purpose, state law requires that the funds be repaid.
- **Other Options.** The Legislature also has broad authority to provide additional funding for disaster and wildfire response. This funding typically comes from the state General Fund. For example, the Legislature appropriated up to \$2.5 billion from the General Fund specifically for the January 2025 Southern California wildfires. Additionally, under the emergency provisions of Proposition 2, the Legislature can withdraw additional funds from the Budget Stabilization Account (BSA)—the state’s rainy-day reserve—to pay for disaster-related costs such as those related to wildfires. The Governor’s proposed 2025-26 budget includes \$10.9 billion in the BSA.



Typical Sources of Federal Funding for State and Local Wildfire Response-Related Costs

- **Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) Fire Management Assistance Grant (FMAG).** Often the first federal aid that the state receives for wildfire response comes through FEMA's FMAG program. The FMAG program reimburses states for eligible costs—such as mobilization, equipment, and supplies—incurred during the first 90 days after grant approval. FEMA typically reimburses 75 percent of eligible costs through the FMAG program. The FEMA Regional Administrator is authorized to grant FMAGs. An FMAG was authorized for the January 2025 Southern California wildfires on January 8, 2025.
- **FEMA Public Assistance (PA) Program.** If the President issues a National Emergency or Major Disaster declaration, state and local agencies may be eligible for reimbursement for a portion of certain wildfire response and recovery costs through FEMA's PA program. Under a National Emergency declaration, the PA program typically provides aid for certain types of emergency response-related activities and specific recovery costs (such as debris removal). If the President issues a Major Disaster declaration—as was done for the January 2025 Southern California Wildfires—the PA program can also provide funding for certain infrastructure and other costs. FEMA typically reimburses 75 percent of eligible costs through the PA program. However, the President has the authority to adjust the percentage up to 100 percent. For example, FEMA is currently covering 100 percent of certain eligible costs related to the January 2025 wildfires for an initial 180-day period. However, the state and local governments often do not receive every dollar they request as some costs are deemed ineligible.
- **Federal Reimbursement Timing Can Vary.** The time it takes for the state and local governments to receive FEMA reimbursements varies. Some payments are made within the budget year, while others take years to recoup because payment only occurs after a project is complete.



Typical Sources of Federal Funding for State and Local Wildfire Response-Related Costs

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- **Federal Disaster Relief Fund.** Funding for FMAGs and the PA programs comes primarily from FEMA's Disaster Relief Fund (DRF), which Congress and the President have historically funded through augmentations provided as needed in response to specific disasters. The DRF received an influx of funding in late December, 2024, but even with the additional funding, was still projected to end the 2025 federal fiscal year with a negative balance. This means the DRF was facing insolvency even before the January 2025 Southern California Wildfires began. The DRF Fund Condition report for April indicates that FEMA obligated about \$2.7 billion to California for the Southern California Wildfires as of March 31, 2025.



Key Stages of Wildfire Recovery

- ***Addressing Immediate Needs, Returning Access to Properties, and Documenting Damages.*** The initial stage involves local or other government officials assessing damaged homes and businesses and clearing them for re-entry, if possible. Property owners begin documenting damages and initiating insurance claims. Lead response agencies start identifying what the community needs to recover and begin directing relevant staff and agencies to provide services, funding, or technical assistance. For example, local governments may organize city and county recovery staff; state government may direct agencies to begin clean-up work; and the federal government may authorize specialized aid, such as unemployment insurance for disaster survivors or housing counselors.
- ***Removing Debris.*** The debris removal process begins with the removal of hazardous waste, such as batteries, paint, and asbestos. The process then moves to general clean-up, which includes the removal of burnt structures, foundations, and contaminated soil, as well as any other measures necessary to prepare a site for re-building. Some property owners may choose to remove nonhazardous debris on their own or pay private debris removal professionals. However, many property owners choose to partner with government for debris removal services, typically at no cost to the property owner. This process is a joint effort that can include federal, state, and local agencies. In some fires, state agencies such as the Department of Toxics and Substance Control and the California Department of Resources Recycling and Recovery, are the main agencies tasked with debris removal. In other cases, federal agencies such as the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers or the Environmental Protection Agency may lead.



Key Stages of Wildfire Recovery

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- **Rebuilding Homes and Businesses.** The central actors in rebuilding homes and businesses are property owners working with private general contractors, architects, and engineers. These specialists work with local government entities (such as permit and planning departments, health and safety inspectors, and related public agencies) to replace damaged structures. Local governments may establish temporary “one-stop” disaster recovery centers to help initiate the recovery and rebuilding process for households and businesses affected by the fires. Property owners also work with the federal, state, and local governments to obtain (often limited) assistance with rebuilding costs not covered by insurance. (Many of these costs are ultimately paid by property owners and their insurers.)
- **Rebuilding Community Facilities.** The federal, state, and local governments work together to repair damages to community facilities, government property, and infrastructure. For example, the state Office of Public School Construction may work with local school districts to replace schools and the California Department of Transportation may be brought in to repair or replace state roads.



Key Federal and State Entities Involved in Wildfire Recovery Activities

Entity	Primary Responsibilities
Federal	
Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA)	Acts as the primary federal disaster recovery agency. Provides funding and in-kind support to state, tribal, territorial, and local governments; as well as to individuals and households. Major programs include the Public Assistance program (for governments) and the Individual Assistance program (for households and businesses). FEMA support levels vary by federal disaster declaration type.
Environmental Protection Agency	Assists in the cleanup of hazardous waste. Provides clean-up crews and safe disposal of hazardous materials such as paint, cleaners, batteries, oils and pesticides from burned properties.
Housing and Urban Development	Provides housing-related support for individuals and households, including mortgage insurance for disaster victims and housing counselors. Also administers the Community Development Block Grant Disaster Recovery program, which provides funds to help cities, counties, and states recover from declared disasters.
Small Business Administration	Offers low-interest loans to individuals and businesses for homes, personal property (including cars), businesses, and economic injury.
United States Army Corps of Engineers	Assists with the removal of contaminated debris—such as ash and fire debris—from burned properties. Includes the removal, reduction, and disposal of residential or commercial structures.
United States Department of Agriculture	Administers various programs to help individuals, communities, farmers, and businesses. Programs focus on livestock assistance and farm loans, farmland and forest repair and restoration, and crop losses.
State	
Governor's Office of Emergency Services	Acts as the primary state disaster response agency. Coordinates recovery efforts and acts as the state's fiscal agent for federal disaster recovery funds provided to state and local governments.
California Department of Education	Provides resources to local education agencies for recovery from disasters, including guidance on reopening schools after wildfires, displaced students, provisions for students with disabilities, waivers from average daily attendance rules, and more. Also provides technical support to local education agencies rebuilding schools.
California Department of Food and Agriculture	Works with various partners to provide care to animals and livestock affected by disaster.
Department of General Services	Provides technical assistance on contract development and state procurement processes to support recovery efforts, including construction-related procurements. The Division of the State Architect and the Office of Public School Construction provide technical support and grant funding to local education agencies rebuilding schools.
California Department of Housing and Community Development	Provides technical assistance to support local governments and housing developers in recovery efforts. Administers housing-related federal disaster recovery funds.
California Department of Insurance	Enforces mandatory one-year moratorium on insurance cancellations in areas near wildfire. Provides consumer assistance for wildfire claimants; including assistance related to insurance fraud and complaints made against agents and firms.

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Key Federal and State Entities Involved in Wildfire Recovery Activities

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Entity	Primary Responsibilities
California Department of Resources Recycling and Recovery	Removes ash, debris, and contaminated soil on impacted parcels and properties and identifies and removes fire-damaged trees in danger of falling on public property or deemed a hazard to crew safety.
California Department of Water Resources	Assists with fire and watershed mitigation, repairs damage to water infrastructure, and works to prevent flooding that can follow wildfires.
California Health and Human Services Agency	<p>Takes actions to prevent disruptions in access to health care delivery, prescription medications, medical devices, and behavioral health services for Medi-Cal members affected by wildfire, among other activities.</p> <p>The Department of Managed Health Care, the regulator of managed care health plans, can direct health plans to help plan members impacted by wildfires access all medically necessary services.</p> <p>The California Department of Public Health works with local public health departments to monitor ongoing public health risks and conducts visits of evacuated licensed skilled nursing facilities to ensure that patients and staff can return safely.</p> <p>The Department of Health Care Access and Information, which oversees health care facility construction standards, provides emergency assessments of hospitals and skilled nursing facilities in emergency areas and can arrange for priority approval for repairs of damaged facilities.</p>
Department of Social Services	Coordinates with local entities to provide mass shelter. Supports community care facility licensees (such as child care providers and adult and senior residential care providers) impacted by disasters. Provides temporary nutritional benefits through Disaster CalFresh. Provides disaster case management to help impacted individuals navigate and attain services. Provides one-time grants up to \$10,000 to assist individuals and families with rebuilding, replacement of personal property, or rental assistance.
Department of Toxic Substances Control	Removes household hazardous waste, asbestos, and e-waste found on impacted parcels and properties.
Employment Development Department	Distributes federal funding under the Disaster Unemployment Assistance program to individuals whose unemployment was a result of disaster.
State Water Resources Control Board	Monitors water quality and ensures that debris removal activities include measures to contain debris and prevent ash and other materials from entering rivers, creeks, and streams.
Others	In addition to the above-listed state departments and agencies, a wide variety of other state entities can be involved with wildfire recovery duties, such as the Department of Motor Vehicles, Department of Fish and Wildlife, Franchise Tax Board, the California Department of Tax and Fee Administration, Infrastructure Bank, Contractors State License Board, California Department of Transportation, and the California Department of Veterans Affairs.



Main Types of Wildfire Recovery Assistance

Type of Disaster Assistance	Federal or State ^a	Type of Program		
		Grant or Reimbursement	Loan	Other Assistance
Assistance Provided to Governments				
Public Assistance Program	F	✓		
California Disaster Assistance Program	S	✓		
Hazard Mitigation Program	F	✓		
Assistance Provided to Individuals, Households, or Businesses				
Individuals and Households Program	F	✓		
Rural Development Disaster Assistance Program	F	✓	✓	
State Supplemental Grant Program	S	✓		
Small Business Administration loans	F		✓	
IBank Disaster Relief and Jump Start Loan	S		✓	
Income tax relief	Both			✓
Property tax relief	S			✓
Disaster Unemployment Assistance Program	F			✓
National Dislocated Worker Grants (for employment services)	F			✓
Disaster Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program and other food assistance	F			✓
Legal, counseling, and other services	F			✓

^a In some cases, federal programs are administered by state agencies.
 F = Federal; S = State; and IBank = California Infrastructure Economic Development Bank.



Main Types of Wildfire Recovery Assistance

(Continued)

- ***Aid Varies by Recipient, Program, Purpose, and Provider.*** Disaster recovery assistance is wide-ranging and may be categorized by type of recipient (such as individual, government, or business), type of program (such as grants or loans), purpose of aid (such as debris removal or tax relief), or provider of aid (such as state, local, federal, or nonprofit). The figure above includes the main types of federal and state disaster recovery assistance that have been offered in recent years. While some of these programs are available for all declared disasters, other types of assistance (such as property tax backfills) are offered at the discretion of policy makers.

