



Wildfire Management & Funding

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SUMMARY

- The Division of Forestry, Fire and State Lands (FFSL) is responsible for wildfire prevention, preparedness, mitigation, and management on nonfederal lands in the state.
- Local governments are responsible for wildfire suppression and the associated costs for wildfires on private or local government owned land within their jurisdictions.
- The state will pay wildfire suppression costs for local governments that participate in FFSL's cooperative wildfire system.
- The cooperative wildfire system requires participating local governments to undertake wildfire prevention, preparedness, and mitigation activities within their jurisdictions.
- The state has established three funds to pay for wildfire related activities, but most of the money is only available for suppression related costs.

Background

The Utah Division of Forestry, Fire and State Lands (FFSL) is responsible for fire management and conservation of nonfederal land in the state ([§65A-8-101](#)). In consultation with local authorities, FFSL must determine and execute the best method for protecting property through:

- Wildfire prevention, preparedness, and mitigation actions¹
- Wildland fire management, including to protect life and property
- Implementation of a limited fire suppression strategy, if FFSL determines that the strategy is appropriate for a specific area or circumstance
- Encouragement of landowner actions that conserve, protect, and manage land

While FFSL has statewide responsibilities related to fire management, local governments are responsible for fire suppression and its associated costs within their jurisdictions. A county is responsible for fire suppression on unincorporated private land and county owned land within its boundaries; a municipality is responsible for private land and municipally owned land within its boundaries. A county and municipality must also reduce wildfire risk within their jurisdictions through appropriate prevention, preparedness, and mitigation actions ([§65A-8-202](#) & [§65A-8-202.5](#)).



Cooperative Wildfire System

In the 2016 General Session, [S.B. 122](#) refocused the state’s wildland fire policy on wildfire risk reduction. In the revised policy, local governments that enter cooperative agreements with FFSL receive financial and wildfire management cooperation and assistance from FFSL ([§65A-8-203](#)).² A participating local government agrees to implement prevention, preparedness, and mitigation activities that reduce the risks and costs of wildfire. In exchange, the state pays suppression costs for extended attack wildfires.

Participating Entity Requirements

- Adopt and enforce a wildland fire ordinance on unincorporated land, if the participating entity is a county.
- Ensure its fire department (or contracted fire service provider) meets minimum standards for wildland fire training, certification, and suppression equipment.³
- Meet its “participation commitment” by investing in prevention, preparedness, and mitigation activities, as agreed to with FFSL, to reduce the risk of wildfire.⁴
- Report to FFSL annually on its prevention, preparedness, and mitigation activities, including the associated costs.
- Sign and return the annual financial statement to FFSL that details its participation commitment requirement and confirms participation for the upcoming fiscal year.
- Designate a fire warden, if the participating entity is a county.

FFSL Requirements

- Accept responsibility for managing a wildfire upon delegation of fire management authority.⁵
- Assume the participating entity’s costs for suppressing extended attack wildfire.
- Calculate the participating entity’s participation commitment (see Figure 1 on the next page) and send the participating entity an annual financial statement detailing the participation commitment for the upcoming fiscal year, including the agreed upon prevention, preparedness, and mitigation activities.

If the state accrues suppression costs on behalf of a local government that has not entered into a cooperative agreement, FFSL bills the entity for suppression costs accrued by the state within the entity’s jurisdiction. The amount owed is proportional to the number of nonfederal acres burned within the local government’s jurisdiction ([§65A-8-203.2](#)).⁶



Figure 1: Participation Commitment Calculation

Risk Assessment of Acres + Historic Fire Cost Average = Participation Commitment

Risk assessment of acres is calculated using FFSL’s Utah Wildfire Risk Assessment Portal ([UWRAP](#)). FFSL uses the UWRAP tools to assess the wildfire risk of land parcels within the participating entity’s boundaries. Risk is quantified for parcels categorized as high or medium risk:

For county land:	For municipal land:
High risk: \$0.40/acre	High risk: \$3.50/acre
Medium risk: \$0.30/acre	Medium risk: \$2.00/acre

The historic fire cost average is calculated based on past suppression costs accrued by the state on behalf of the participating entity. FFSL calculates a rolling 10-year average, dropping the highest and lowest cost years and adjusting for inflation.

The sum of the risk assessment of acres valuation and the historic fire cost average constitutes the participating entity’s participation commitment.

Source: Utah Administrative Code [R652-122-300](#), [R652-122-400](#), & [R652-122-500](#)

State Wildfire Funding

The Legislature has created three funds to direct resources to wildfire related activities. The largest fund, the Wildland Fire Suppression Fund, pays for suppression costs. Two recently created funds focus on risk reduction activities.

Wildland Fire Suppression Fund

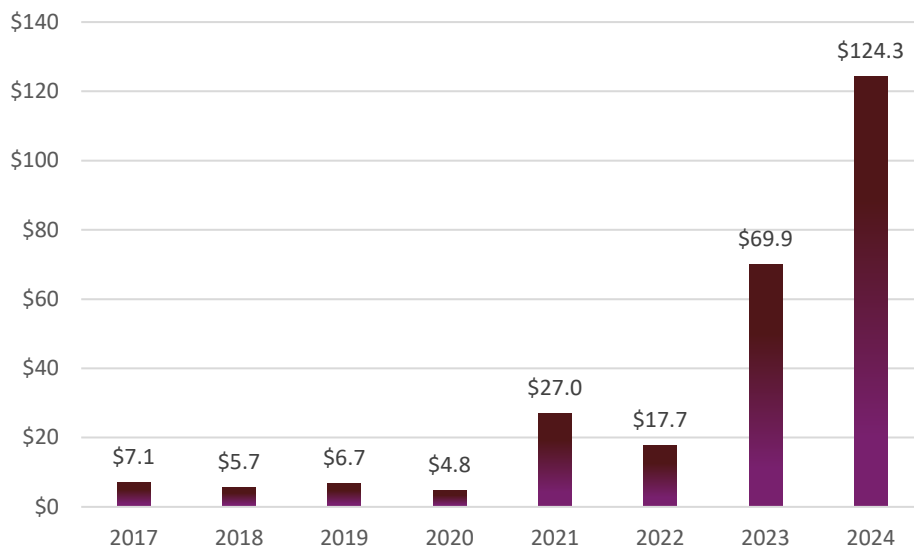
The Wildland Fire Suppression Fund ([§65A-8-204](#)) pays the state’s wildfire suppression costs, including for a participating entity that has entered into a cooperative agreement. Sources of fund money include:

- 30% of federal mineral lease bonus payments deposited in the Mineral Bonus Account from the previous fiscal year, up to \$2 million but not to exceed 20% of the amount expended from the Wildland Fire Suppression Fund in the previous fiscal year ([§59-21-2](#))
- The lesser of \$4 million and an amount necessary to bring the fund balance to \$12 million from a General Fund revenue surplus ([§63J-1-314](#))
- Legislative appropriations
- Federal funds received by FFSL for wildfire management costs
- Suppression costs paid by a local government that does not participate in a cooperative agreement



- Suppression costs paid to FFSL by another state agency
- Costs recovered from settlements and civil or administrative actions related to wildfire suppression
- Restitution payments ordered by a court following a criminal adjudication
- Interest and earnings from the investment of fund money
- Any money in the fund as of July 1, 2016

Figure 2: Wildland Fire Suppression Fund Balance (FY 2017 - FY 2024; millions)



Source: *Office of the Legislative Fiscal Analyst*

Wildland-urban Interface Prevention, Preparedness and Mitigation Fund

FFSL administers the Wildland-urban Interface Prevention, Preparedness and Mitigation Fund (WUI Fund) to pay the costs of prevention, preparedness, and mitigation activities on the state’s wildland-urban interface, to issue fire department assistance grants, and to pay, in cases of catastrophic need, costs that could be paid from the suppression fund ([§65A-8-215](#)).⁷

Sources of fund money include:

- The lesser of \$4 million and the amount necessary to make the balance equal to \$12 million from a General Fund revenue surplus, if no money is transferred from the General Fund revenue surplus to the Wildland Fire Suppression Fund
- Legislative appropriations
- Money received as direct payment of participation commitments
- Interest and earnings from investment of fund money



[H.B. 261](#) (2023 General Session) created the WUI Fund. The WUI Fund received a one-time appropriation from the Mineral Bonus Account of \$2 million for fiscal year 2024, and a one-time appropriation of \$4 million from the General Fund for fiscal year 2025.

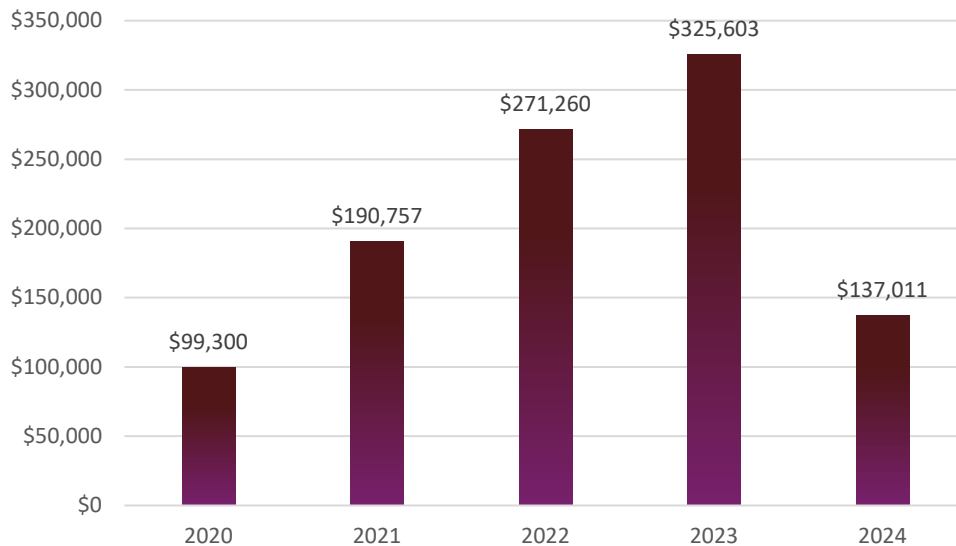
Wildland Fire Preparedness Grants Fund

Created by [H.B. 135](#) (2019 General Session), the Wildland Fire Preparedness Grants Fund ([§65A-8-213](#)) provides grants to local fire departments or volunteer fire departments to build capacity for wildland fire suppression.

Sources of fund money include:

- 10% of the costs related to wildfire suppression recovered annually from settlements, civil or administrative actions, and restitution payments
- Legislative appropriations
- Voluntary contributions
- Interest or other earnings from investment of the fund

Figure 3: Wildland Fire Preparedness Grants Fund Balance (FY 2020 – FY 2024; thousands)



Source: [Office of the Legislative Fiscal Analyst](#)



Conclusion

Utah's cooperative wildfire system provides state support to local governments for wildfire suppression while prioritizing wildfire risk reduction. The state pays local government wildfire suppression costs for extended attack fires. In exchange, a local government invests in activities approved by FFSL and designed to reduce the risk of future wildfires. In recent years, the Legislature has also moved toward a focus on risk reduction by creating two funds that provide money for prevention, preparedness, and mitigation activities. Much of the state money designated for wildfire activities, however, is only available for wildfire suppression.



ENDNOTES

¹ The [National Wildfire Coordinating Group](#) provides definitions of key wildland fire terms, including:

- *Extended attack*: actions on a wildfire that has exceeded the initial response.
- *Initial attack*: an aggressive action to put the fire out by the first resources to arrive.
- *Mitigation*: actions that are implemented to reduce or eliminate . . . risks to persons, property or natural resources. These actions can be undertaken before and during a wildfire.
- *Preparedness*: activities that lead to a safe, efficient, and cost-effective fire management program . . . through appropriate planning and coordination.
- *Prevention*: activities directed at reducing the incidence of human-caused wildfires, including public education, law enforcement, personal contact, and other actions taken to reduce ignitions.
- *Suppression*: all work and activities connected with control and fire-extinguishing operations, beginning with discovery and continuing until the fire is completely extinguished.
- *Wildfire*: a wildland fire originating from an unplanned ignition, such as lightning, volcanos, unauthorized and accidental human caused fires, and prescribed fires that are declared wildfires.
- *Wildland fire*: Any non-structure fire that occurs in vegetation or natural fuels, including wildfires and prescribed fires.
- *Wildland urban interface (WUI)*: the line, area, or zone where structures and other human development meet or intermingle with undeveloped wildland or vegetative fuels.

² Entities eligible to participate in the program include a county, municipality, special service district, special district, or service area with wildland fire suppression responsibility and wildland fire suppression cost responsibility and taxing authority for a specific geographic jurisdiction. Certain political subdivisions established by one of these entities may also be eligible upon approval by FFSL ([§65A-8-203](#)).

³ Minimum standards for fire training, certification, and equipment are found in [Utah Administrative Code R652-122-1400](#) and [R652-122-1500](#).

⁴ A participating entity may meet its participation commitment requirement through direct expenditure of funds or by in kind expenditures in support of prevention, preparedness, or mitigation efforts ([R652-122-600](#)). In some cases, the value of the participation commitment activities may carry-over to next fiscal year ([R652-122-700](#)).

⁵ If any of the following events occur, FFSL, or its designee, becomes responsible for coordinating suppression actions: 1) state or federally owned lands are involved in the incident; 2) firefighting resources are ordered with an Interagency Fire Center (beyond 'pre-planned' dispatch); 3) at the request of the participating entity having jurisdiction by the local fire official on the scene; or 4) by decision of the state forester (FFSL director) after consultation with local authorities ([R652-122-1200](#); [§65A-8-203.1](#))

⁶ The number of acres burned within the local government's borders is divided by the total number of nonfederal acres burned and then multiplied by the state's total wildfire suppression costs for that wildfire.

⁷ Fire department assistance grants may not exceed, in aggregate, 10% of the money in the Prevention, Preparedness, and Mitigation Fund each fiscal year.