

# Wildfires impose massive expenses

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Think fighting wildfires is expensive? Ha! You don't know the half of it —maybe not even one-thirtieth of it.

In fact, the economic damage inflicted by wildfires generally totals 2 to 30 times more than the direct costs, according to a recent study by the Western Forestry Leadership Coalition.

That suggests that the \$9 million cost of fighting the still smoldering Schultz Fire near Flagstaff will end up somewhere between \$18 and \$270 million, by the time the impact on tourism, health, watershed and the economy are tallied.

"The true costs of wildfire are shown to be far greater than the costs usually reported to the public: total expenses range from 2 to 30 times reported suppression costs," the study concluded.

The study suggests that even expensive, widespread thinning projects that dramatically reduce wildfire risks could prove much more cost effective than previous estimates suggested.

The study based its conclusions on an in-depth study of six major western wildfires, including the 2002 Rodeo-Chediski Fire.

That massive blaze cost about \$46 million to fight and inflicted \$122 million in other direct costs. The study's authors concluded the full economic impact of the fire exceeded \$308 million. That means the costs of actually fighting the fire accounted for only about 15 percent of the full cost, the study concluded.

A steady rise in the size and cost of fighting fires has consumed much of the Forest Service's budget in recent years.

In 2008, the Forest Service spent \$1.46 billion on fighting fires — more than half of its total budget, the report concluded.

Ironically, that required the Forest Service to divert hundreds of millions from other programs — including thinning programs intended to reduce the danger of wildfires.

The study also cited a study by the state of Washington, which concluded that the economic benefits of thinning fire-prone forest stands exceeded the costs by \$1,000 to \$2,000 per acre.

In Rim Country, a coalition of public officials, environmentalists and loggers is pushing a plan to thin more than 700,000 acres in the region by offering timber companies long-term contracts to thin dangerously overgrown forests and use the millions of small trees for things like biofuel power plants, particle board and poles. An existing effort in the White Mountains is floundering for lack of the \$500 to \$1,000 per-acre subsidy the timber companies say they need to thin about 20,000 acres annually.

The study of the Rodeo-Chediski Fire suggests that people throughout the region may pay a much steeper price than they thought for fires that get out of control in the thickly grown forests produced by a century of grazing and fire suppression.

That massive, 462,000-acre blaze was started by an out-of-work Apache firefighter and a lost traveler trying to signal for help.

The June 2002 fire quickly escaped control and ultimately consumed 490 buildings and forced 30,000 people to flee their homes.

The full costs of the fire included:

- \$43 million to \$50 million in direct suppression costs
- \$123 million in direct costs, including property damage.
- \$139 million in landscape rehabilitation costs trying to prevent massive erosion afterward.
- \$8.1 million in job losses, mostly two lumber mills that shut down on the White Mountain Apache Reservation.

Researchers concluded they had no good way to quantify other costs, like the damage to the watershed, health problems due to all the smoke in the air, later health problems caused by exposure to chemicals, ash and fire retardant and damage to wildlife — including the loss of critical habitat for endangered species.

Rim Country forest managers have been scrounging for the money to thin buffers around forest communities, but have struggled for funding since the direct cost to fight fires has increased dramatically in recent years.

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