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Policy Brief - Ranchers

How the 2024 Farm Bill Can Support Wildfire Preparedness and Recovery

The Farm Bill offers financial assistance, risk management tools, and support for farmers and ranchers, promoting the stewardship of natural resources and sustainable agricultural production. It also allocates resources for disaster prevention and recovery, which is particularly important in wildfire-prone regions like California.

Here, we present key findings from a 2023 California rancher survey to highlight how the 2024 Farm Bill can best serve wildfire-impacted ranchers. The survey, centered on wildfires between 2017-2022, incorporates responses from **116 ranchers spanning 49 California counties**.

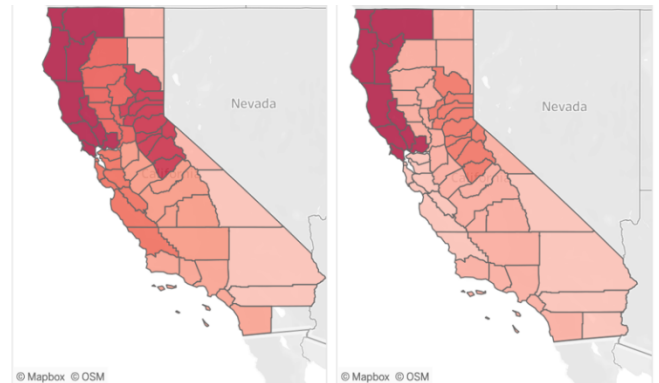
Wildfire Impacts

-  **82%** reported wildfires negatively impacted their physical or mental health.
-  **80%** encountered business disruptions (market closures, property access issues, missed workdays, and labor shortages), and **66%** reported significant impacts on operating income and financial stability.
-  **57%** experienced losses in production or quality of pasture, rangeland, or hay.
-  **55%** of ranchers surveyed experienced loss or damage to ranch infrastructure, including fencing (**52%**) and watering systems (**31%**).
-  **48%** experienced impacts to essential natural resources, such as water contamination or degradation (**22%**), soil contamination (**15%**), erosion and topsoil loss (**20%**), increased runoff and reduced water infiltration (**26%**), and sedimentation of waterways and ponds (**26%**).

Disaster Assistance and Recovery

Ranchers reported significant losses due to wildfires (n= 69)

-  **58%** did not use USDA disaster assistance and **48%** did not use any USDA program (disaster assistance or crop insurance). Of those, **46%** reported that they did not qualify and **44%** were unaware of available programs.
-  Only **39%** used forage, livestock, or ranch insurance; **46%** did not use either insurance or USDA programs. While **60%** of first-generation ranchers did not.
-  To recover from wildfires ranchers relied on personal savings (**67%**), USDA disaster assistance programs (**42%**), business savings (**39%**), and private insurance (**32%**).
-  **62%** of first-generation ranchers stated that they “did not qualify” for USDA disaster assistance compared to **22%** of multi-generational ranchers.



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Ranchers by Region 5 39

Total Region Burned 142,344 1,237,936

Surveyed ranchers impacted by wildfires and total acres burned (2017-2022). All respondents were impacted by wildfires in some way, and 52% directly experienced wildfires on their properties.

Primary Wildfire Impacts

1. Physical and mental health
2. Business disruptions
3. Forage loss
4. Infrastructure damage

58% of ranchers
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Wildfire Risk Reduction

-  Surveyed ranchers prioritized fuel load management (grazing, thinning, burning; **89%**) and maintaining defensible space around infrastructure (**82%**) as their top risk management practices.
-  **53%** expressed concern about fuel loads on neighboring private and public properties jeopardizing defensible space.
-  **90%** emphasized the critical importance of access to equipment such as tractors, irrigation systems, and generators during wildfires.

2024 Farm Bill can Support Wildfire Preparedness and Recovery

Survey results highlight the need for a comprehensive understanding of opportunities and challenges within Farm Bill disaster recovery programs and underscore the importance of investing in fire-resilient landscapes to safeguard natural resources, people, businesses, and communities. Priorities for Farm Bill-funded programs in conservation and environmental sustainability, disaster and risk management, and outreach and education should include:

-  Enhance the **Environmental Quality Incentive Program (EQIP)**, the Farm Bill's flagship conservation program, by adding flexibility to quickly incorporate grazing for wildfire risk reductions. This could include promoting cost-sharing for essential grazing management infrastructure like perimeter fencing in ecosystems with demonstrated benefits.
-  Invest permanently in the **Emergency Conservation Program (ECP)** to facilitate recovery from wildfire damage through cost-sharing practices such as debris removal, rangeland restoration, and repair/replacement of grazing management and water conservation infrastructure. Consider providing funding support across all wildfires to address significant natural resource problems within 90 days.
-  Establish permanent investments in the **Emergency Assistance for Livestock, Honeybees, and Farm-Raised Fish Program (ELAP)** to provide emergency relief for wildfire-induced losses of pasture, rangelands, hay, and other feeds. Improve ELAP to consider pasture-based losses and significant natural resource problems, rather than solely focusing on total grazing acres.
-  Most survey respondents endured multiple disasters during 2017-2022. **Consider adjusting future disaster claim limitations for inflation and ensure limitations apply to individual disaster events.**
-  **Expedite wildfire recovery funding** by allocating resources for additional technical support staff to meet growing regional needs for outreach and education, application assistance, engineering, and permitting.
-  **Elevate technical assistance, outreach, and research by investing in USDA agency collaborations** with local organizations (*e.g.*, Cooperative Extension) to raise awareness, expand access to assistance programs, and provide science-based solutions for wildfire recovery.
-  Prioritize **physical and mental health during disaster recovery**. Invest in training for staff and partner organizations to learn trauma-informed approaches to aid farmers and ranchers affected by disasters.

RESEARCH PROJECT TEAM

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