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FOREST SERVICE SPENDING ON LARGE WILDFIRES IN THE WEST

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Federal spending on wildfire suppression in the United States has grown over the past decade, but outside of land management agencies, little is known about how funds are spent, which activities are contracted out, and where this spending occurs. Decisions about suppression spending affect economies both near and far from wildfires. This research examines patterns of USDA Forest Service suppression spending on large wildfires in the West.

Approach

We examined Forest Service suppression spending data for a sample of 135 wildfires that cost the Forest Service more than $1 million in total suppression costs from 2004-2008.

Results

The Forest Service spent a net of $1.19 billion on our sample of large wildfires. Contractual services made up the largest portion of net expenditures (39 percent); 26 percent went to federal personnel and 16 percent went to flying contracts (Table 1).

Contracted services included direct fire attack services such as contract fire crews, and support services such as janitorial, food catering, temporary medical, portable facility setup, and other like services. Total expense of a wildfire and geography influenced the portion of suppression spending that went to contractors on any given fire. A greater proportion went to contractors when fires occurred in the northwestern part of our study area than in the southeastern part (Figure 1).

The portion of suppression spending that was spent locally varied considerably between fires, but was generally low overall–an average of nine percent. Some types of suppression spending were more likely to be captured near wildfire locations than others (Table 1). Contractual services had the highest levels of local and regional capture, followed by agreements with states.

Conclusion

This study serves a starting point for understanding the economic impacts of large wildfires by showing how the Forest Service spends suppression dollars, and where the money goes. Both the amount spent on suppression contracts and the amount of local and regional spending varied greatly between fires. Additional research may reveal more about why certain fires had much higher local and regional spending than others.

More information

The complete report can be found in the EWP Working Paper #41, "Forest Service Spending on Large Wildfires in the West," which is available at **ewp.uoregon.edu/publications/working.**

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Figure 1 Portion of total suppression costs going to contractors

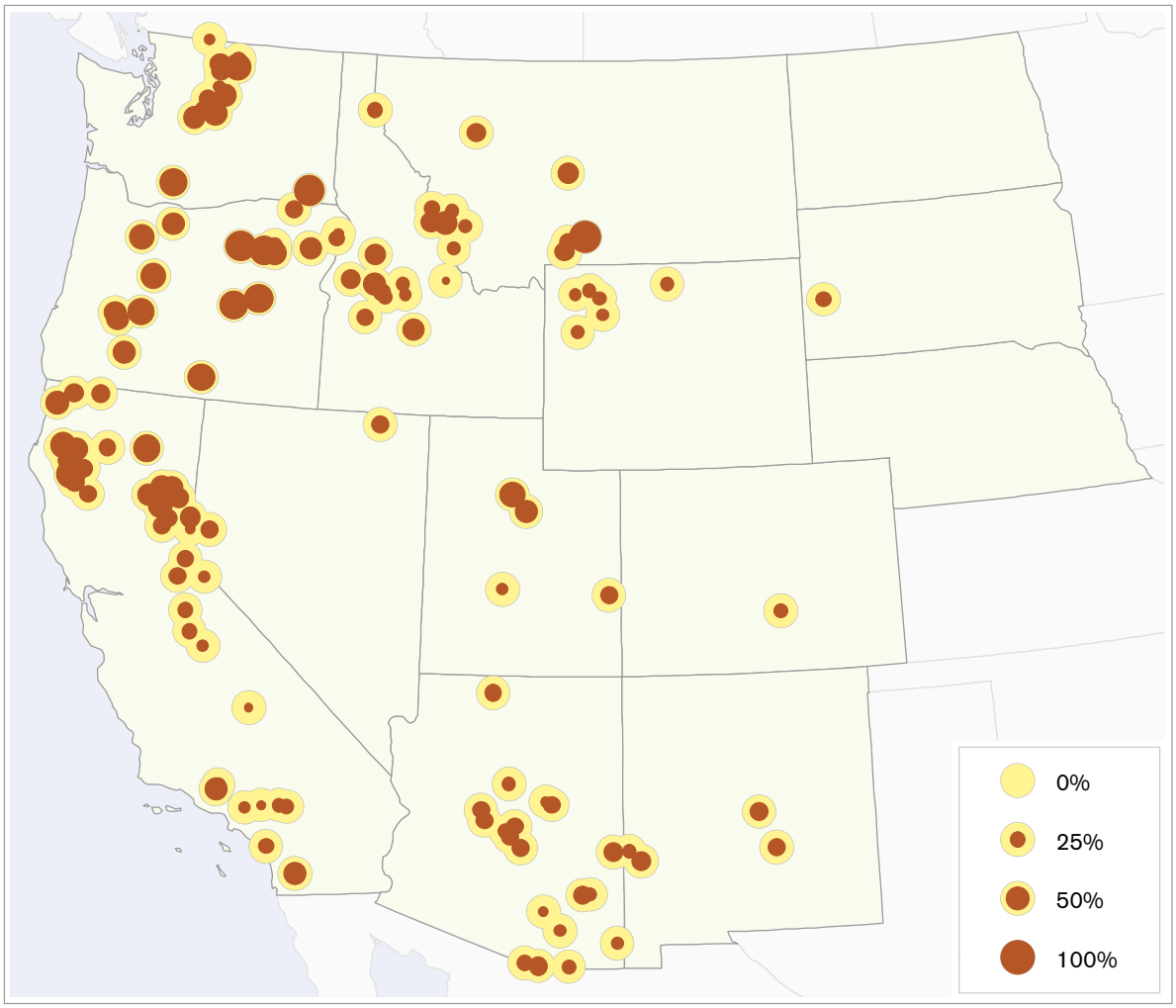

Table 1 Net expense and local and regional spending by expense category

Expense category	Net expense ($)	Percent of total	Percent awarded locally	Percent awarded regionally
Contracted services	462,904,153	39	12	22
Federal personnel	307,697,276	26	10	13
Flying contracts	191,122,421	16	1	4
Agreements with states	126,737,458	11	11	11
Supplies / materials	36,317,035	3	2	2
Other expenses	69,831,053	6	2	4
Overall	**1,194,609,396**	**100%**	**9%**	**14%**

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