

Wildfire Risks and Capacity in the Northeastern US

In the US, western wildfires often dominate headlines, but fire also plays a role in eastern forests. Numerous small wildfires ignite each year in the northeastern states, along with occasional more significant blazes. Examples include 2024’s 5,000-acre Jennings Creek Fire along the New York-New Jersey border, and the Jones Road Fire which burned 15,300 acres in the New Jersey Pinelands in spring 2025, forcing the evacuation of thousands of area residents. Since the Northeast is the most densely populated region in the country, even minor fires can pose serious threats to homes and communities.

Northeast Wildfires by the Numbers

FIRE FOR 20 NORTHEASTERN OCCURANCE STATES	
AVERAGE NUMBER OF FIRES PER YEAR	AVERAGE ACRES OF LAND BURNED PER YEAR
10,000	78,000
SPRING AND FALL ARE THE MOST ACTIVE FIRE SEASONS	59 OF NORTHEAST % WILD OCCUR FIRES IN APRIL AND MAY

Sources: NIFC 2024, Pollina et al. 2013

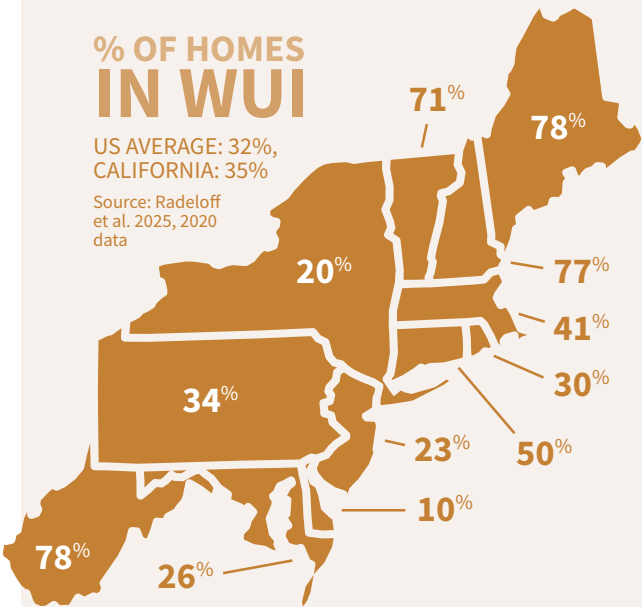
Values at Risk

As the most densely populated region of the country, the Northeast has a high proportion of land in the wildland-urban interface (WUI), the zone where human development meets or intermingles with wildland fuels.

% OF HOMES IN WUI

US AVERAGE: 32%, CALIFORNIA: 35%

Source: Radeloff et al. 2025, 2020 data



CT: 53%

NH: 42%

MA: 42%

RI: 38%

STATES WITH THE HIGHEST SHARE OF LAND IN WUI NATIONWIDE

US AVERAGE: 8%, CALIFORNIA: 7%

Source: Radeloff et al. 2025, 2020 data

Regional Wildfire Management

A national strategy for wildfire management, mandated by Congress in 2009, identified three goals: developing effective firefighting response, restoring landscapes, and supporting fire-adapted communities.⁸ The Northeastern Regional Strategy Committee (NE RSC), which is incharge of implementing this national plan, prioritized investment in each goal (Table 1).⁷ The NE RSC’s priorities acknowledge the importance of a rapid, effective response to wildfire in the Northeast, where relatively large amounts of wildland-urban interface lead to complex firefighting scenarios with high levels of risk to life and property.

TABLE 1. NE RSC INVESTMENT PLAN

GOAL	LEVEL
DEVELOPING EFFECTIVE FIREFIGHTING RESPONSE	40-50%
RESTORING LANDSCAPES	30-35%
SUPPORTING FIRE-ADAPTED COMMUNITIES	20-25%

Achievements

Since the development of the national wildfire management strategy and the prioritization of goals in the Northeast, the following actions have been accomplished:

WILDFIRE RESPONSE

- Improving and maintaining firefighting expertise through annual deployment of up to 2,000 northeastern interagency firefighters on wildfires throughout North America.³
- Addition of a second high-level incident management team in the Eastern Region, which can manage fires beyond the capabilities of local fire departments or agencies.³

RESILIENT LANDSCAPES

- Prescribed burning of more than 300,000 acres each year, which helps to restore ecosystem health and reduce fuel hazards.¹
- The NE RSC Prescribed Fire Coordination Work group is working to address barriers to prescribed fire identified in a 2020 survey by improving training facilities, increasing interagency collaboration, and diversifying funding sources.⁴

FIRE ADAPTED COMMUNITIES

- The Northeast Regional Strategy Committee published a **Northeast Wildfire Preparedness Resource Guide** to help homeowners, fire departments, and community leaders prepare for wildfires.
- More than 390 communities in the Northeast have developed Community Wildfire Protection Plans (CWPPs), which identify and prioritize actions to help reduce risks of wildfire, mitigate fire damage, coordinate firefighting, and organize post-fire restoration efforts.³

- 127 northeastern communities participate in the Firewise USA program, which requires them to organize, plan, and take action to reduce wildfire risks. Communities in the program must have a firewise board, create a CWPP, provide educational risk-reduction opportunities for residents, and renew plans periodically.³

LOOKING AHEAD

The Northeast Regional Strategy Committee's priorities for strengthening wildfire preparedness in the Northeast³ include:

- Integrating the National Cohesive Wildland Fire Strategy into state forest action plans.
- Expanding resource-sharing systems for firefighting staff and equipment.
- Promoting liability protections for agencies engaged in firefighting efforts.
- Scaling up prescribed burning efforts and using a science-based approach to understand how changes in climate may impact the safety and effectiveness of fuel treatments.
- Establishing additional training facilities for wildland firefighting and prescribed fire, and training opportunities on technologies for fuels data reporting.
- Improving and coordinating data collection systems for reporting climate data, fuel risks, wildfires and prescribed burning.
- Enhancing public education and integrating wildfire planning into broader emergency management.

The Northeast-Midwest State Foresters Alliance has developed an **online risk assessment portal** that can help communities identify wildfire risks and make plans to address them.

Literature Cited

- ¹ Melvin, M. A. 2020. **2020 National Prescribed Fire Use Report**. Coalition of Prescribed Fire Councils Technical Bulletin 04-20.
- ² National Interagency Coordination Center (NIFC). 2024. **Wildland Fire Summary and Statistics Annual Report 2024**.
- ³ Northeast Regional Strategy Committee (NE RSC). 2020a. **The National Cohesive Wildland Fire Management Strategy: Northeast Regional Action Plan – Five Year Update**.
- ⁴ Northeast Regional Strategy Committee (NE RSC). 2020b. **Prescribed Fire Training Needs Survey Report**. Prescribed Fire Coordination Work Group, October 2020.
- ⁵ Pollina, J. B., B. A. Cole, and J. J. Charney. 2013. **Climatology and meteorological evolution of major wildfire events over the northeast United States**. Weather and Forecasting. 28:175-193.
- ⁶ Radeloff, V., M. Mockrin, and D. Helmers. 2025. **Mapping Change in the Wildland Urban Interface (WUI) 1990-2020**. Version 4. Sate Summary Statistics.
- ⁷ USDA Forest Service. 2013. **The National Cohesive Wildland Fire Strategy: Northeast Regional Action Plan (Review Draft – January 2013)**, a Phase III report by the Northeast Regional Strategy Committee.
- ⁸ USDA Forest Service. 2014. **The National Cohesive Wildland Fire Management Strategy: The Final Phase in the Development of the National Cohesive Strategy (Phase III National Strategy)**. April. Washington, DC: U.S. Forest Service.

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