DATTLE FIELD NOTES / 02

Costliest U.S. Wildfires

A 30-year review through 2026



Los Angeles fires, January 10, 2025. Natural-color Terra/MODIS imagery. NASA Earth Observatory / Wanmei Liang; NASA EOSDIS LANCE and GIBS/Worldview.

12 high-cost episodes. Historical imagery, affected places, damage assessments and the evidence behind the numbers.

Regional and seasonal totals are clearly separated from individual-fire details.

ECONOMIC LOSS IN INFLATION-ADJUSTED 2026 U.S. DOLLARS

Prepared November 9, 2026 | A collection by Dattle

A fire is not a fire season.

SELECTION AND TIME

The 12 highest-cost wildfire episodes in the retrieved disaster series within November 9, 1996-November 9, 2026. The series was complete through September 2026; this is not a complete account of 2026. It is a ranking of the source's wildfire episodes, not a ranking of individual named fires.

COMPARABLE COSTS

Costs are from Climate Central's Billion-Dollar Weather and Climate Disasters series, continuing NOAA's historical record. Estimates are CPI-adjusted to 2026 USD and rounded to $0.1 billion. These are not insured-loss totals, compensation awards, suppression budgets or estimates normalized for development and population.

THE UNIT MATTERS

Several entries combine a whole regional season. The large dollar figure belongs to that episode. A named fire's acreage, damaged structures and pictured area are local details; they must not be read as a breakdown of the entire episode's economic loss.

DATES AND REVISIONS

Cost-dataset dates can differ from ignition and containment dates. The 2007 entry lists June-August but its narrative includes autumn losses; this inconsistency is flagged on its case page. Figures may be revised. Casualty totals are omitted to avoid mixing incompatible direct, indirect and revised counts.

IMAGES AND PEOPLE

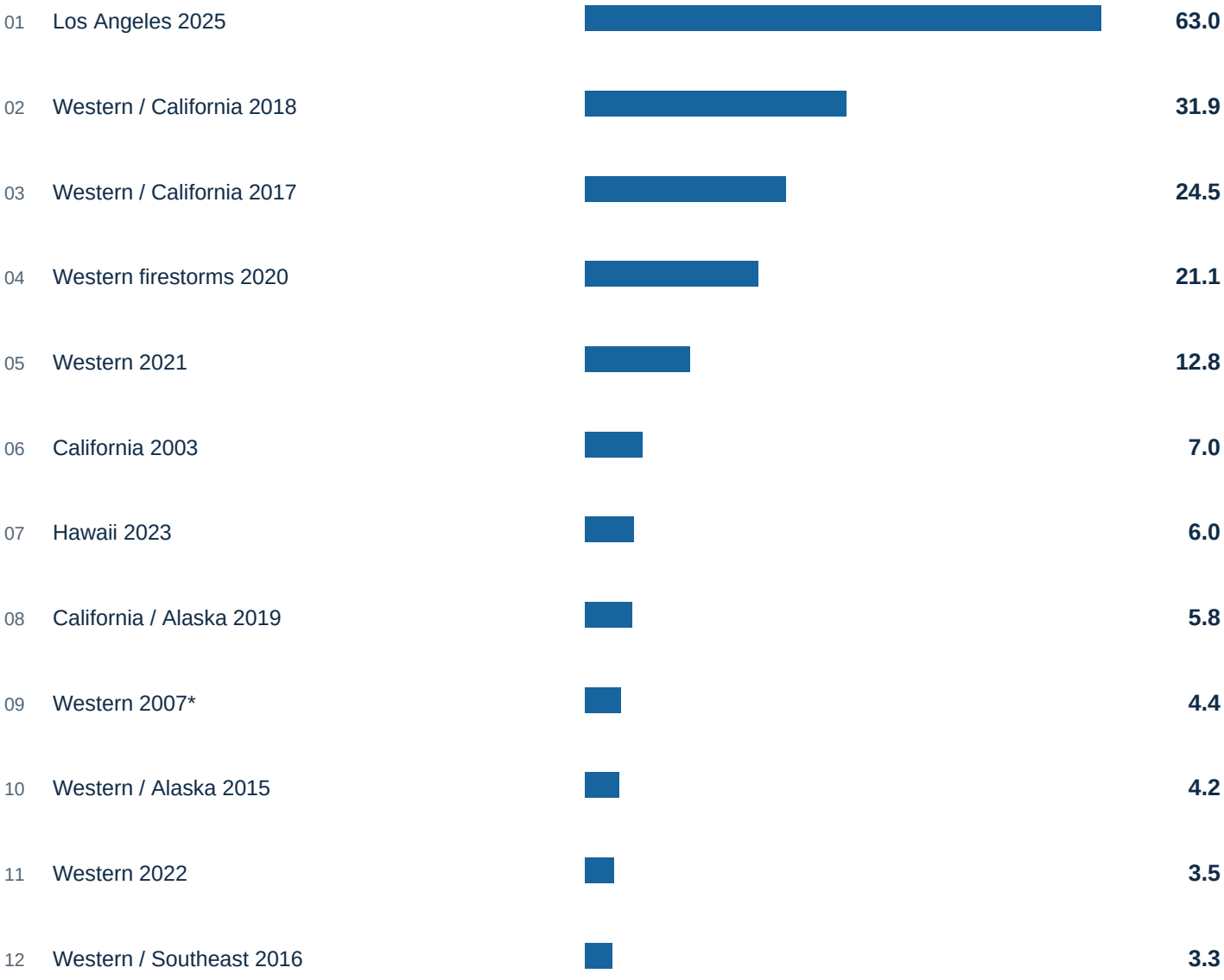
Every image is historical agency imagery or an astronaut photograph, not an AI reconstruction. Captions identify dates and false-color or infrared composites. Documentation credits identify source authors, agencies and responders only where supported; they do not imply endorsement or participation in this collection.

USING THE REVIEW

Each case links to its cost source, incident context and original image page. This is a historical reference, not an active-fire map or evacuation guide. The selected photographs show only part of each episode. Records were checked on November 9, 2026.

The cost of a wildfire episode

Billions of 2026 USD. These source-defined episodes differ in geography and duration; several combine many fires.



* 2007: source date-window inconsistency. See case 09. Bar lengths compare the reported estimates; they do not imply comparable fire perimeters or population exposure.

Source: Climate Central, U.S. Billion-Dollar Weather and Climate Disasters, retrieved November 9, 2026. Click here to inspect the cost series.

Los Angeles fires (2025)

$63.0 billion

Episode estimate, 2026 USD

Cost-dataset window: Jan 7, 2025 - Jan 28, 2025

Los Angeles County, California; Pacific Palisades, Malibu, Altadena and Pasadena.



Natural-color Terra/MODIS view, January 10, 2025. Smoke from the Palisades and Eaton fires streams toward the Pacific.

Image: NASA Earth Observatory / Wanmei Liang; MODIS data from NASA EOSDIS LANCE and GIBS/Worldview

DAMAGE ASSESSMENT

The $63.0 billion estimate covers the Los Angeles wildfire episode. Los Angeles County's anniversary assessment lists 6,837 structures destroyed in the Palisades Fire and 9,414 in the Eaton Fire; damaged structures are counted separately.

EVENT CONTEXT

Both major fires began January 7. The county reports 23,448 acres for Palisades and 14,021 for Eaton, with containment January 31. Those incident dates extend beyond the cost dataset's January 28 endpoint. Wind-driven fire reached densely developed communities.

DOCUMENTATION

Los Angeles County compiled the anniversary damage figures. NASA image processing: Wanmei Liang; reporting: Lindsey Doermann. These are credited documentation roles, not endorsements.

Cost series > Incident / context > Image source >

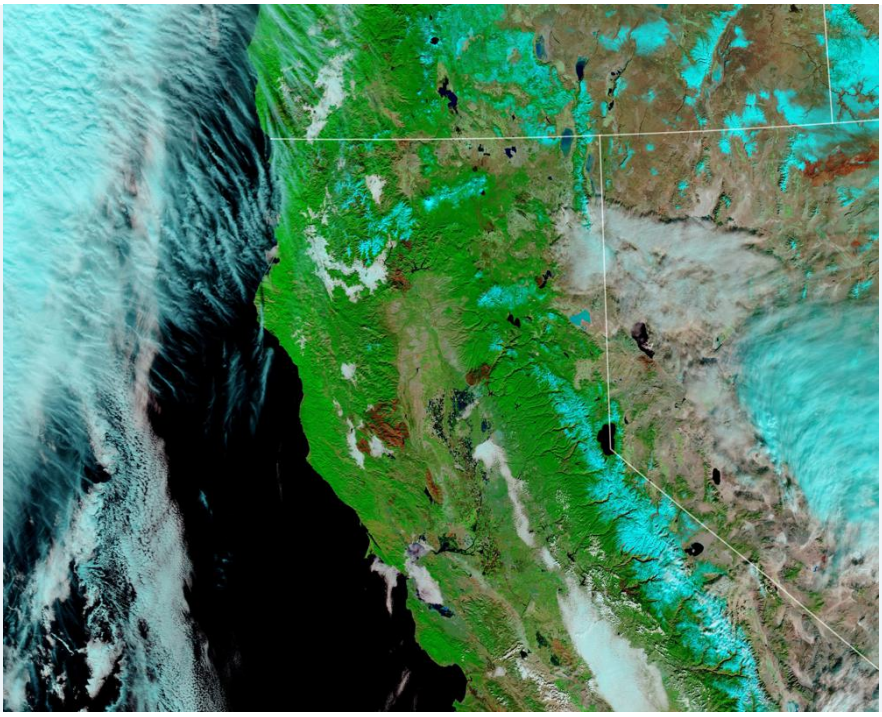
Western fires / California firestorm (2018)

$31.9 billion

Episode estimate, 2026 USD

Cost-dataset window: Jun 1, 2018 - Dec 31, 2018

Western U.S.; emphasis on Paradise, Concow and Magalia in Butte County, California.



False-color Terra/MODIS view, November 25, 2018. Dark burn scars mark several California fires, including Camp; colors are enhanced to distinguish land cover.

Image: NASA Earth Observatory / Lauren Dauphin; MODIS data from NASA EOSDIS/LANCE and GIBS/Worldview

DAMAGE ASSESSMENT

The $31.9 billion estimate is a regional episode total, not the Camp Fire alone. NIST records 153,336 acres burned and more than 19,000 structures destroyed or damaged in the Camp Fire, with extensive loss in Paradise and nearby communities.

EVENT CONTEXT

Camp began November 8 near Pulga. This end-of-season image also identifies scars from the Carr, Mendocino Complex, Woolsey and other fires. A burn-scar map shows spatial extent; it does not measure the value of buildings or the cost of displacement.

DOCUMENTATION

NIST's Camp Fire investigation reconstructs fire spread, notification, evacuation and structure defense. NASA image processing: Lauren Dauphin; reporting: Kasha Patel.

Cost series > Incident / context > Image source >

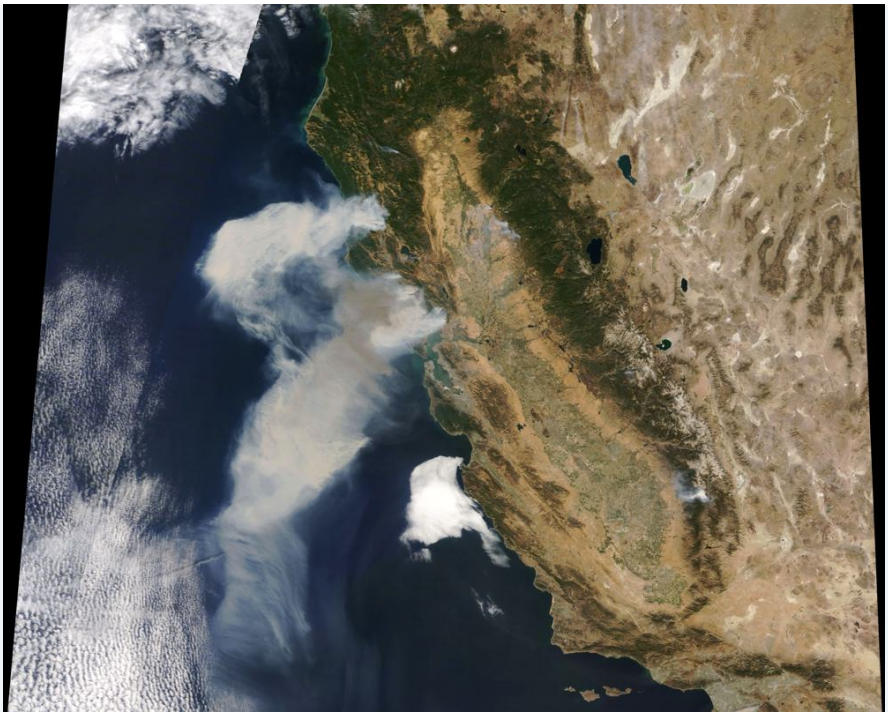
Western fires / California firestorm (2017)

$24.5 billion

Episode estimate, 2026 USD

Cost-dataset window: Jun 1, 2017 - Dec 31, 2017

Western U.S.; North Bay focus in Sonoma and Napa counties, California.



Natural-color Terra/MODIS view, October 9, 2017. Smoke spreads west from the Northern California fires.

Image: NASA Earth Observatory / Joshua Stevens; MODIS data from LANCE/EOSDIS Rapid Response

DAMAGE ASSESSMENT

The $24.5 billion total covers the broader western wildfire episode. The North Bay fires devastated residential areas and disrupted communities across Napa and Sonoma; their damage is only part of this regional loss estimate.

EVENT CONTEXT

The North Bay outbreak intensified overnight October 8-9. The NWS retrospective examines the Tubbs, Nuns, Atlas and Pocket fires and the weather supporting their rapid growth. The image captures smoke early in the outbreak, before final damage was known.

DOCUMENTATION

NWS San Francisco Bay Area produced the North Bay retrospective. NASA imagery: Joshua Stevens; reporting: Mike Carlowicz. The cited sources document conditions and impacts rather than personal fire-chasing accounts.

Cost series > Incident / context > Image source >

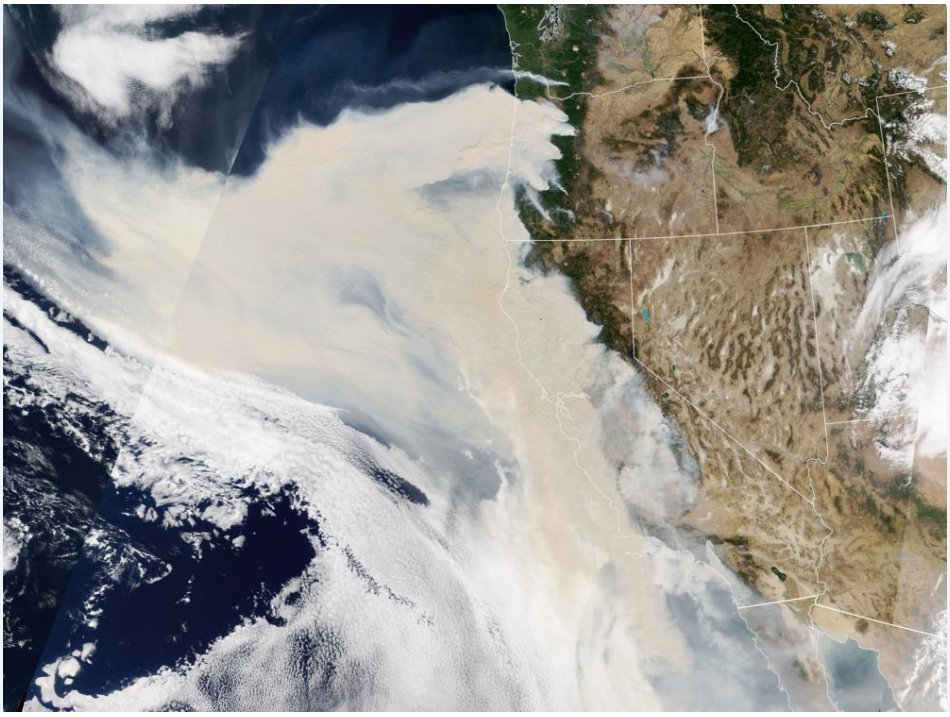
Western firestorms (2020)

$21.1 billion

Episode estimate, 2026 USD

Cost-dataset window: Aug 1, 2020 - Dec 30, 2020

Western U.S.; major firestorms in California, Oregon and Washington.



Natural-color Terra/MODIS view, September 9, 2020. A broad wall of smoke obscures parts of the West Coast and nearby Pacific.

Image: NASA Earth Observatory / Lauren Dauphin; MODIS data from NASA EOSDIS/LANCE and GIBS/Worldview

DAMAGE ASSESSMENT

The $21.1 billion estimate combines a western wildfire episode, including destructive firestorms across multiple states. Community losses and evacuations were accompanied by a much larger smoke footprint; visible smoke extent is not a map of destroyed property.

EVENT CONTEXT

Late-summer fires and strong winds produced simultaneous emergencies along the Pacific Coast. By September 9, dense smoke from California and Oregon extended far offshore. The event illustrates why local damage records and regional air-quality observations should be kept distinct.

DOCUMENTATION

NASA Earth Observatory documented the regional extent using satellite data. Image processing: Lauren Dauphin; reporting: Adam Voiland. The linked retrospective provides context for the wider Pacific Coast episode.

Cost series > **Incident / context >** **Image source >**

Western fires (2021)

$12.8 billion

Episode estimate, 2026 USD

Cost-dataset window: Jun 1, 2021 - Dec 31, 2021

Western U.S.; Dixie Fire focus in northern California, including the Lassen region.



Natural-color Terra/MODIS view, July 29, 2021. Extensive smoke plumes accompany the Dixie Fire in northern California.

Image: NASA Earth Observatory / Lauren Dauphin; MODIS data from NASA EOSDIS LANCE and GIBS/Worldview

DAMAGE ASSESSMENT

The $12.8 billion figure covers the western episode, not just Dixie. The National Park Service reports a final Dixie Fire footprint of 963,309 acres. Community destruction, forest impacts and park damage had very different local consequences within that area.

EVENT CONTEXT

Dixie began July 13 in the Feather River Canyon and was fully contained October 26. The July image is an early snapshot, not its final perimeter. The larger loss episode also spans other western fires and extends through December.

DOCUMENTATION

Lassen Volcanic National Park maintains the Dixie Fire history. NASA image processing: Lauren Dauphin; reporting: Michael Carlowicz. Final acreage comes from NPS, not the early satellite article.

Cost series > Incident / context > Image source >

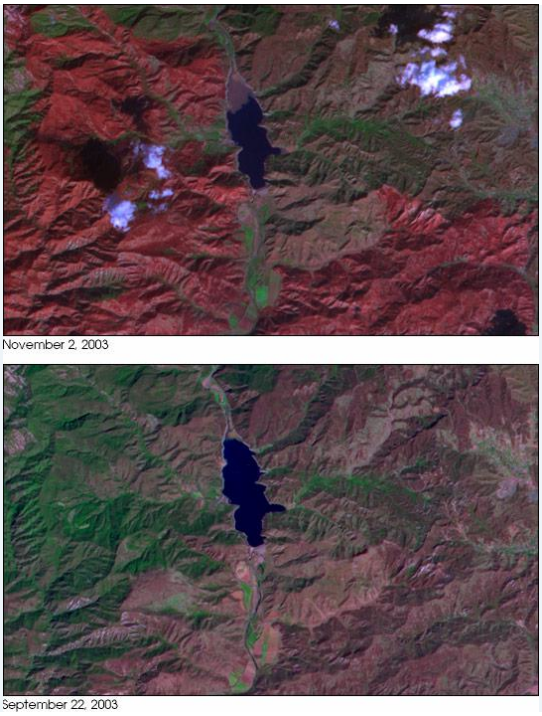
California fires (2003)

$7.0 billion

Episode estimate, 2026 USD

Cost-dataset window: Sep 1, 2003 - Nov 30, 2003

Southern California; San Diego, San Bernardino, Los Angeles and Ventura regions.



False-color Terra/ASTER comparison near Lake Piru: November 2, 2003 above; September 22 below. Deep red identifies burn scars in this infrared composite.

Image: NASA Earth Observatory; data from the U.S./Japan ASTER Science Team

DAMAGE ASSESSMENT

The $7.0 billion estimate covers the California episode. The NWS service assessment describes 14 wind-driven fires in late October and early November, nearly 740,000 acres burned and thousands of homes lost. These figures are from that assessment, not from the pictured burn scar alone.

EVENT CONTEXT

The broader siege included the Cedar, Old, Grand Prix and other fires. The image pair near Lake Piru illustrates how infrared observations separate burned land from healthy vegetation. It represents one area northwest of Los Angeles, not the San Diego Cedar Fire.

DOCUMENTATION

The NWS Southern California wildfire assessment examines the 2003 event. Image: NASA Earth Observatory using U.S./Japan ASTER Science Team data; the source does not name an individual photographer.

Cost series > Incident / context > Image source >

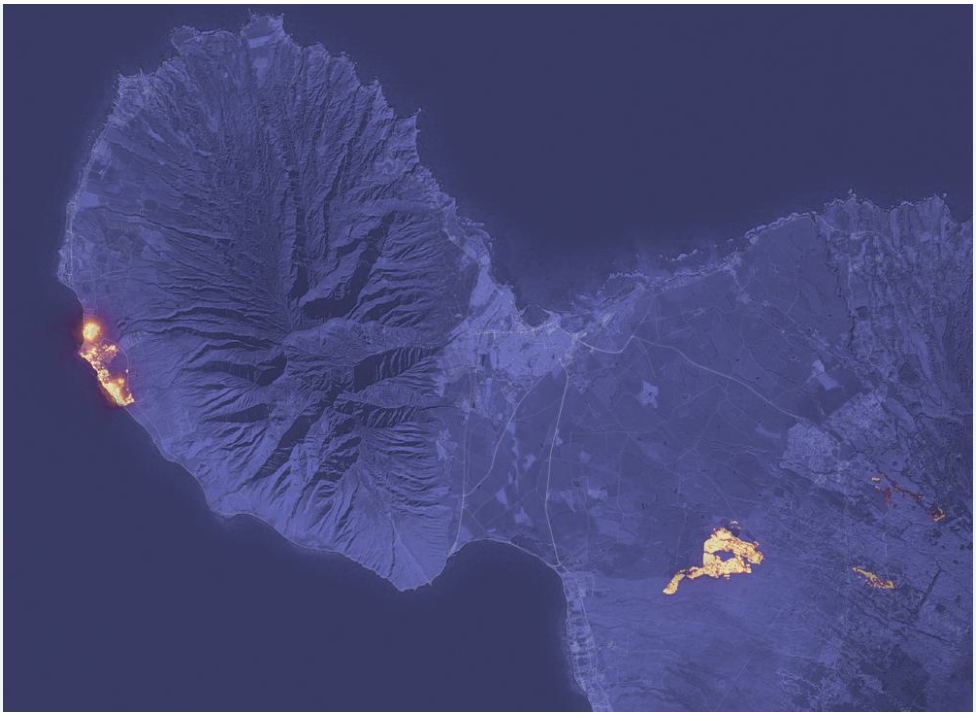
Hawaii firestorm (2023)

$6.0 billion

Episode estimate, 2026 USD

Cost-dataset window: Aug 8, 2023

Hawaii; principal damage in Lahaina, Maui, with additional Maui fire areas.



Landsat 8 shortwave-infrared observations at about 10:25 p.m. on August 8, 2023, overlaid on a daytime basemap. Yellow areas show active fire; this is not a daylight photograph.

Image: NASA Earth Observatory / Lauren Dauphin; Landsat data from the U.S. Geological Survey

DAMAGE ASSESSMENT

The $6.0 billion estimate covers the Hawaii firestorm episode. Lahaina suffered severe loss of homes, businesses and cultural places. Recovery also required debris management and work around the harbor; the economic estimate is not a complete measure of cultural or personal loss.

EVENT CONTEXT

Destructive fires spread on August 8 amid dry conditions and strong winds. The satellite view shows heat signatures near Lahaina and elsewhere on Maui that night. Later incident reviews are more useful for response lessons than early, changing damage counts.

DOCUMENTATION

Maui Department of Fire and Public Safety issued an after-action report, available through the Wildland Fire Lessons Learned Center. NASA imagery: Lauren Dauphin; reporting: Adam Voiland.

Cost series > | Incident / context > | Image source > | Additional report >

California and Alaska fires (2019)

$5.8 billion

Episode estimate, 2026 USD

Cost-dataset window: Jun 1, 2019 - Nov 30, 2019

California and Alaska; image and incident detail focus on Sonoma County, California.



Aqua/MODIS corrected-reflectance bands 7-2-1, November 6, 2019. Red tones highlight the Kincade burn scar; green represents vegetation.

Image: NASA Worldview / Earth Observing System Data and Information System (EOSDIS)

DAMAGE ASSESSMENT

The $5.8 billion cost is for the combined California and Alaska episode. NASA's November 2019 account, citing CAL FIRE's final update, reports 77,758 acres burned and 374 structures destroyed by Kincade. Those Kincade figures do not describe the Alaska fires.

EVENT CONTEXT

Kincade began October 23 near Geyserville. The November 6 satellite view shows its burn scar after containment. This is a useful example of why a collection should record both the economic estimate's geographic scope and the individual incident being illustrated.

DOCUMENTATION

NASA caption author Lynn Jenner reported CAL FIRE's final Kincade update. Image supplied through NASA Worldview/EOSDIS. The image source provides the incident figures and explains the spectral bands.

Cost series > Incident / context > Image source >

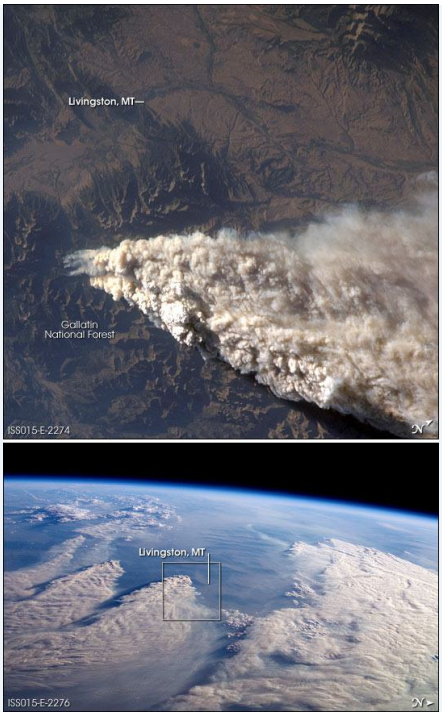
Western fires (2007)

$4.4 billion

Episode estimate, 2026 USD

Cost-dataset window: Jun 1, 2007 - Aug 31, 2007

Western U.S.; illustrated fires in Montana, Idaho and Wyoming.



Two astronaut photographs, August 13, 2007: a closer view of the WH Complex smoke plume above and a wider Northern Rockies view below. Source frames ISS015-E-22274 and -22276.

Image: NASA / ISS Expedition 15 crew; Crew Earth Observations, Johnson Space Center

DAMAGE ASSESSMENT

The source assigns $4.4 billion to a western wildfire episode. Its listed June-August window conflicts with narrative references to autumn Southern California losses. Treat this as a source-level seasonal estimate; it is not a defensible cost for the pictured Montana fire.

EVENT CONTEXT

ISS photographs from August 13 show smoke from multiple Northern Rockies fires, including the WH Complex in Gallatin National Forest. The mismatch in the economic source is retained explicitly rather than silently changing its dates or assigning all costs to one incident.

DOCUMENTATION

The source credits the ISS Expedition 15 crew, Crew Earth Observations and Johnson Space Center's Image Science and Analysis Laboratory. It does not identify the individual astronaut who took each frame.

Cost series > Incident / context > Image source >

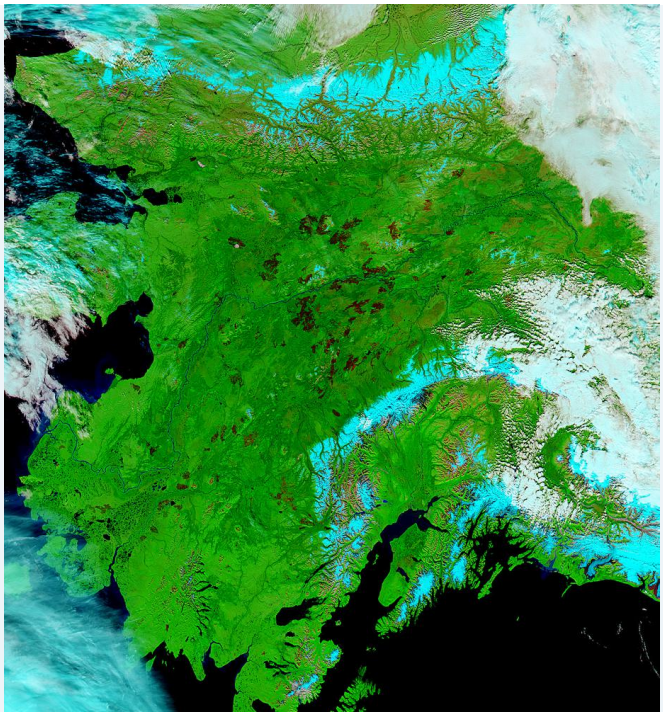
Western and Alaskan fires (2015)

$4.2 billion

Episode estimate, 2026 USD

Cost-dataset window: Jun 1, 2015 - Nov 30, 2015

Western U.S. and Alaska; California Valley/Butte impacts and Alaskan burn scars.



False-color Aqua/MODIS view, September 1, 2015. Brown patches identify Alaskan burn scars; vegetation appears green and clouds use contrasting enhanced colors.

Image: NASA / Jeff Schmaltz, LANCE/EOSDIS Rapid Response

DAMAGE ASSESSMENT

The $4.2 billion estimate covers western and Alaskan fires together. CAL FIRE lists 76,067 acres for the Valley Fire and 70,868 for the Butte Fire. In Alaska, more than five million acres had burned by early September; area and economic loss are different measures.

EVENT CONTEXT

Valley and Butte burned in September, while extensive Alaskan fires developed earlier in the summer. The image shows an Alaskan landscape after much of that season, not the California communities affected by Valley and Butte.

DOCUMENTATION

CAL FIRE maintains incident acreage; California OES published an after-action report. NASA image: Jeff Schmaltz; caption: Adam Voiland. Satellite colors help distinguish burn scars from remaining vegetation.

Cost series > | Incident / context > | Image source > | Additional report >

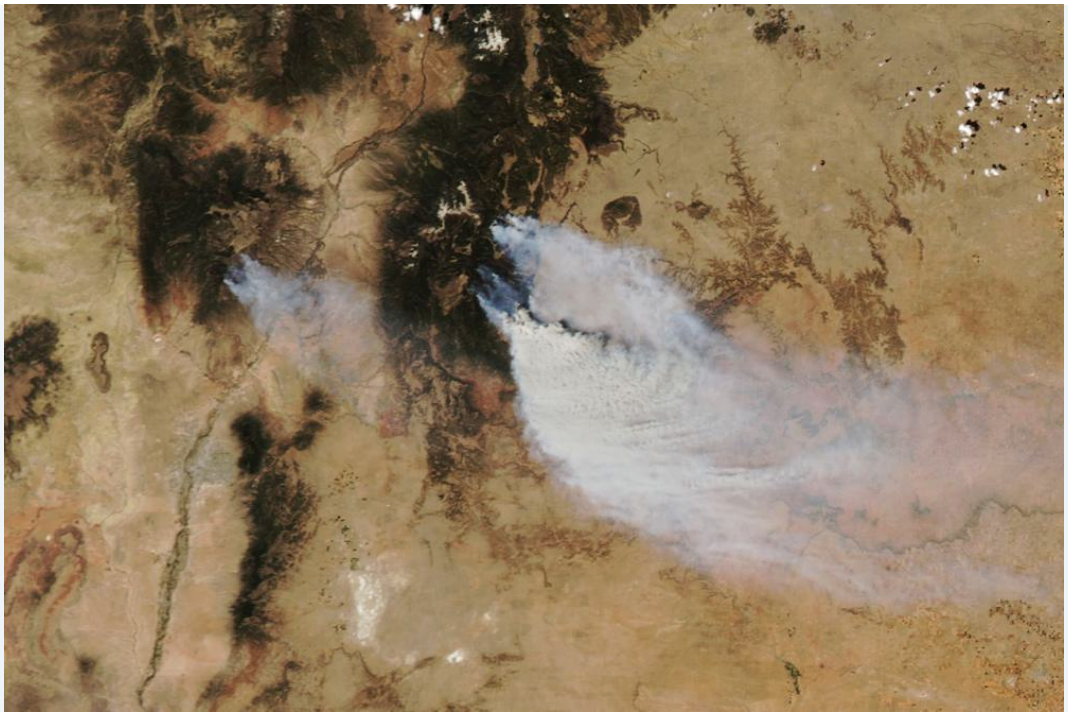
Western fires (2022)

$3.5 billion

Episode estimate, 2026 USD

Cost-dataset window: Apr 1, 2022 - Nov 30, 2022

Western U.S.; Hermits Peak/Calf Canyon focus near Mora, Rociada and Las Vegas, New Mexico.



Natural-color Aqua/MODIS view, May 3, 2022. Smoke from fires in New Mexico is visible during the developing season.

Image: NASA Earth Observatory / Lauren Dauphin; MODIS data from NASA EOSDIS LANCE and GIBS/Worldview

DAMAGE ASSESSMENT

The $3.5 billion estimate covers western fires, not just this New Mexico incident. USDA NRCS reports about 342,000 acres and more than 900 structures burned in Hermits Peak/Calf Canyon. Subsequent monsoon flooding compounded the damage around the burn scar.

EVENT CONTEXT

The May 3 image predates the final fire footprint. Recovery included watershed assessments, seeding and mulching. The cost shown here is the historical disaster-series estimate, not a compensation fund, settlement or projection of every long-term loss.

DOCUMENTATION

NRCS documents recovery work by Kenneth Branch and local district managers Gerald Romero and Wanda Martinez. NASA imagery: Lauren Dauphin; reporting: Sara E. Pratt. These are documented agency and source roles.

Cost series > **Incident / context >** **Image source >**

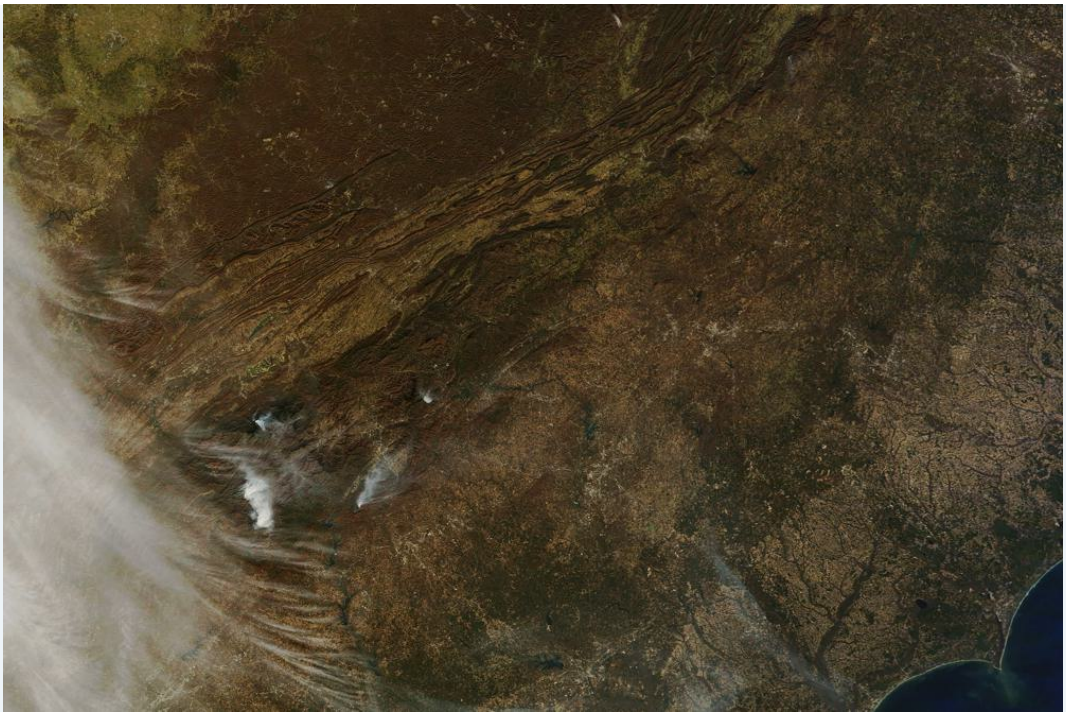
Western / Southeast fires (2016)

$3.3 billion

Episode estimate, 2026 USD

Cost-dataset window: Jun 1, 2016 - Dec 31, 2016

Western and southeastern U.S.; Gatlinburg and Great Smoky Mountains, Tennessee, in focus.



Natural-color Terra/MODIS view, November 27, 2016. Smoke rises from southeastern fires, before the destructive wind-driven spread into Gatlinburg.

Image: NASA Earth Observatory / Joshua Stevens; MODIS data from LANCE/EOSDIS Rapid Response

DAMAGE ASSESSMENT

The $3.3 billion estimate combines western and southeastern fires. NPS reports more than 2,460 structures damaged or destroyed after Chimney Tops 2 spread into Gatlinburg and merged with other fires. That local count is separate from the regional cost total.

EVENT CONTEXT

Drought and strong winds contributed to the destructive southeastern outbreak. The November 27 image shows smoke before the major Gatlinburg damage. Subsequent NPS work used the event to examine evacuation constraints and coordination between neighboring agencies.

DOCUMENTATION

The National Park Service discusses lessons from Chimney Tops 2. NASA image processing: Joshua Stevens; reporting: Adam Voiland. The imagery is a historical observation rather than a current fire-status map.

Cost series > Incident / context > Image source >