Government Executive

An effort to make recieving SS benefits more difficult for consituents and Congressional offices that attempt to assist them. One way to "cut" benefits is to make it too frustrating then point to how ineffective government is.

Social Security office that helps members of Congress assist their constituents slashed by up to 94%

By Sean Michael Newhouse

September 9, 2025

A Social Security Administration office tasked with resolving beneficiary issues brought to its attention by federal legislators has shrunk from about 50 employees to as few as three, according to an agency employee.

In addition to constituent casework, employees in SSA's Office of Legislation and Congressional Affairs provide technical assistance to lawmaker offices when developing Social Security legislation and answer questions from Capitol Hill staffers, among other legislative and regulatory responsibilities.

The former OLCA employee, who preferred to be unnamed due to fears of retaliation, said that the office was able to identify systemic problems with agency operations when, for example, officials got a high number of congressional inquiries from a given area.

"Some members of Congress say 'I shouldn't have to be asking SSA. Members of the public should get a direct answer from SSA and not have to ask me to get help from SSA.' And that's absolutely true," the employee said. "When you don't have a congressional affairs staff really plugged into what the Hill is saying, what the Hill is hearing...if you don't have that component in SSA, then I think Congress loses out."

The employee said that in February, at about the same time as the first round of the deferred resignation program, OLCA staffers received messaging that in order to avoid being laid off they should seek reassignments to other parts of the agency. Due to the number of individuals who took DRP or were reassigned, the employee said that remaining roughly 35 OLCA staffers were assured there likely wouldn't be a need for further cuts.

But then higher-ups once again started urging OLCA employees to take a new job at SSA or a voluntary separation incentive. Those reassignments took effect in April, and, according to the employee, OLCA was left with just three staffers, two of whom were brought over from a different office.

"You have the work that was previously done by 50 people [and officials are] expecting to have three people be able to do it," the employee said.

SSA did move a congressional casework team to a different component and remaining OLCA staffers have been instructed to contact other offices to help with their responsibilities, according to the employee. But members of Congress seem to have taken notice of the upheaval.

More than 50 House Democrats in July signed on to letters sent to SSA and IRS that their staffers are receiving "bounce-back emails and no-replies from [agency] legislative liaison offices that were previously responsive to congressional inquiries." A spokesperson for Rep. Gil Cisneros, D-Calif., who spearheaded the letters, said he hasn't yet received a response from the agencies.

The SSA employee said that members of Congress also often go to agency field offices regarding constituent casework, but the union council for SSA field office workers recently argued that workloads at such offices are worsening due to a variety of changes at the agency under Trump.

SSA is in the midst of a reorganization and has brought in several individuals with no government experience to serve in senior leadership roles.

The former OLCA employee is now working in disability adjudication, which handles eligibility determinations for SSA disability benefits. The employee said that they're "overwhelmed" because the reassigned employees were provided with seven weeks of training instead of the usual six months.

"It's a s— sandwich, and we're eating it," they said. "You have all these really inexperienced people who were doing other work effectively now doing disability adjudications."

They did note, however, that reassigned employees were partnered with mentors who have been helpful.

The employee said that some OLCA staffers were asked to return, potentially increasing the number of workers in the office, but the employee does not want to go back out of concern that there's a greater chance of their job being cut there.

"That's not exactly a place a person who's been jerked around for the last six, seven months wants to be," they said.

An SSA spokesperson said in a statement to *Government Executive* that Commissioner Frank Bisignano "has pledged to have the right level of staffing to deliver best-in-class customer service."

"We conduct congressional affairs work across the agency including at field offices working on local constituent services for members of Congress, employees in finance who work closely with our appropriators and our dedicated headquarters legislative affairs staff," the spokesperson said. "We continue to respond to congressional inquiries, provide regular briefings to congressional staff and will adjust our resources as needed to continue to fulfill these responsibilities."

The spokesperson also said that reassigned employees received eight weeks of training and that, paired with the mentorships, "this process ensures they can ask questions, request necessary assistance and possess the required knowledge to be effective in their new roles."

The employee said that the gutting of OLCA has left many staffers feeling like their work wasn't valuable.

"This whole experience has put a lot of us in an existential crisis as to whether or not we mattered at any point. Some of our managers [said] 'Even though you're being told you're not essential, you do matter. You do matter. And just remember, you matter,'" they said. "It was really sad just watching people be like 'Okay, why am I doing this?'"

By Sean Michael Newhouse

September 9, 2025

https://www.govexec.com/workforce/2025/09/social-security-office-helps-members-congress-assist-their-constituents-slashed-94/407997/

Expiring subsidy could leave tens of thousands in Colorado without health insurance, Polis warns congressional delegation

By Caitlyn Kim · Sep. 9, 2025, 8:00 pm

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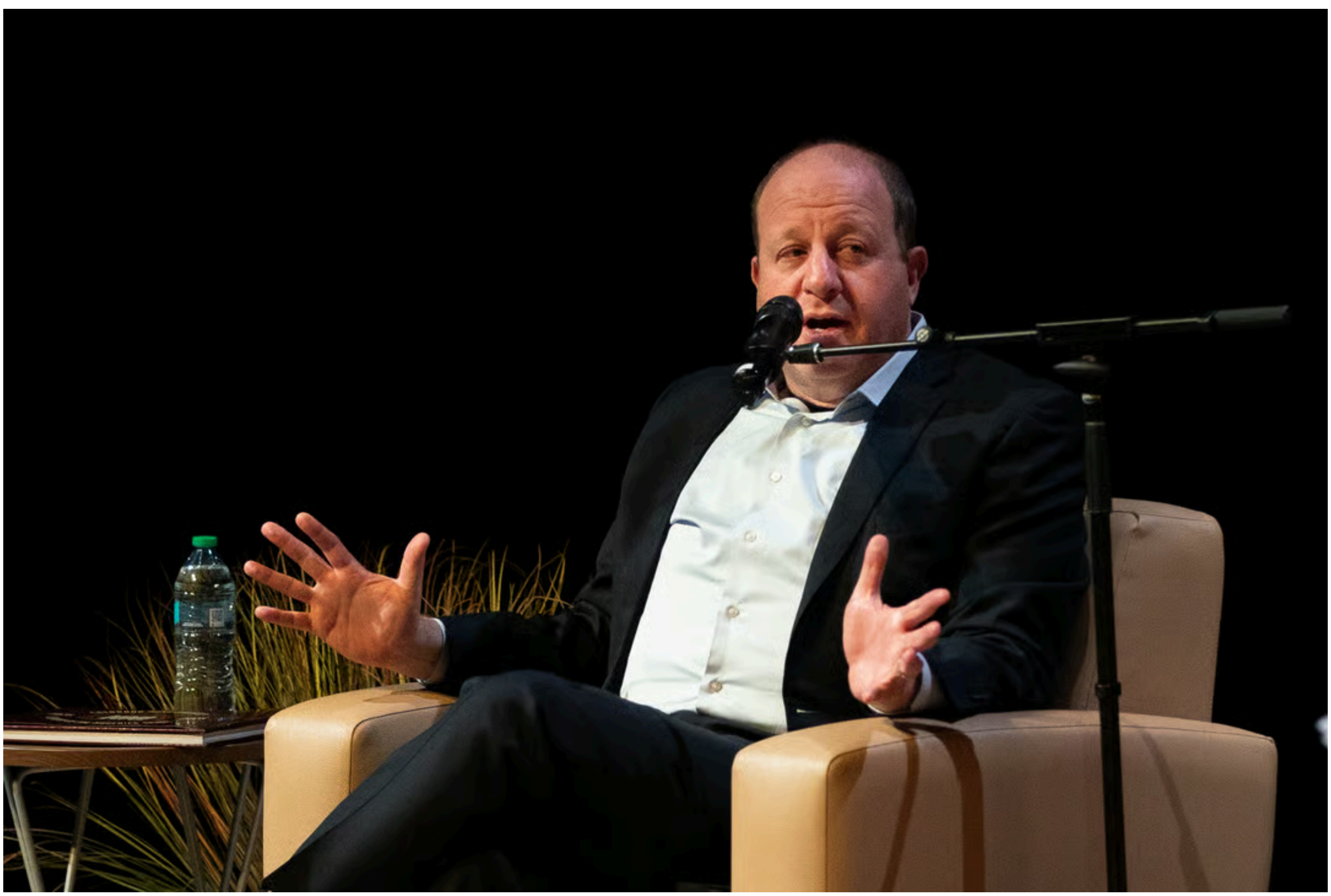

Gov. Jared Polis speaks with Colorado Matters host Ryan Warner Tuesday evening, Sept. 9, 2025, at Colorado Mesa University's Asteria Theatre.

Coloradans who buy health insurance on the state's marketplace are in for a rude awakening.

Costs are projected to skyrocket this fall during the open period, in large part due to the expiration of an enhanced tax credit at the end of the year.

"Only Congress can stop these massive premium increases and the resulting loss of coverage for hundreds of thousands of hard-working Coloradans and their families," Gov. Jared Polis wrote to the entire Colorado Congressional delegation Tuesday, urging the federal lawmakers to pass an enhanced extension of the pandemic-era tax credit by the end of September.

"As shown by recent insurance premium filings for 2026, the tax credit's expiration will force hundreds of thousands of Colorado families, small business owners, and rural Coloradans to pay higher premiums, reduce access to health care, and increase uncompensated care costs for Colorado hospitals and providers," Polis and Lt. Gov Dianne Primavera wrote.

Just over 280,000 Coloradans get their insurance on the marketplace, and constituents in all congressional districts **will feel the pinch**, with some more than others.

For example, in the 1st Congressional District, represented by Democrat Diana DeGette, premiums for people currently eligible for the credit will rise between 161 and 179 percent, per Polis' letter.

with the loss of the enhanced tax credit, plus the increase in premiums insurance companies announced they were seeking this summer.

Some of the biggest increases will be felt in rural Colorado. In the 4th Congressional District, represented by Republican Lauren Boebert, premiums for people using the credit could rise by 131 percent to over 300 percent, with the number of uninsured increasing by nearly 40 percent.

In the 3rd Congressional District, represented by Republican Jeff Hurd, the increase could be as much as 334 percent. With many likely unable to afford those rates, the number of uninsured in the district is expected to increase up to 38 percent.

During **a live event in Grand Junction** Tuesday evening, the governor told Colorado Matters Senior Host Ryan Warner that the stakes for renewing the credit are high.

"They need to get that done or else, especially in Western Colorado, it's going to be devastating for so many families," said Polis.

DC taking heed

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the Biden Administration **increased and expanded tax credits** for people who buy their insurance on the individual marketplace. The policy made people at higher income levels eligible for the tax credit and increased how much the government contributes to cover the cost of plans. Passed first through the American Rescue Plan in 2021, Democrats voted to extend the credits in the 2022 Inflation Reduction Act.

But with the credit set to expire at the end of the year, pressure is growing in the U.S. Capitol to get a temporary or long-term fix.

A bipartisan group of swing-seat lawmakers have introduced a bill, the Bipartisan Premium Tax Credit Extension Act, that would extend the enhanced credit by one year.

“If we want to make sure that this system is sustainable and that people can afford health insurance, we need to extend these tax credits to give us an opportunity to make

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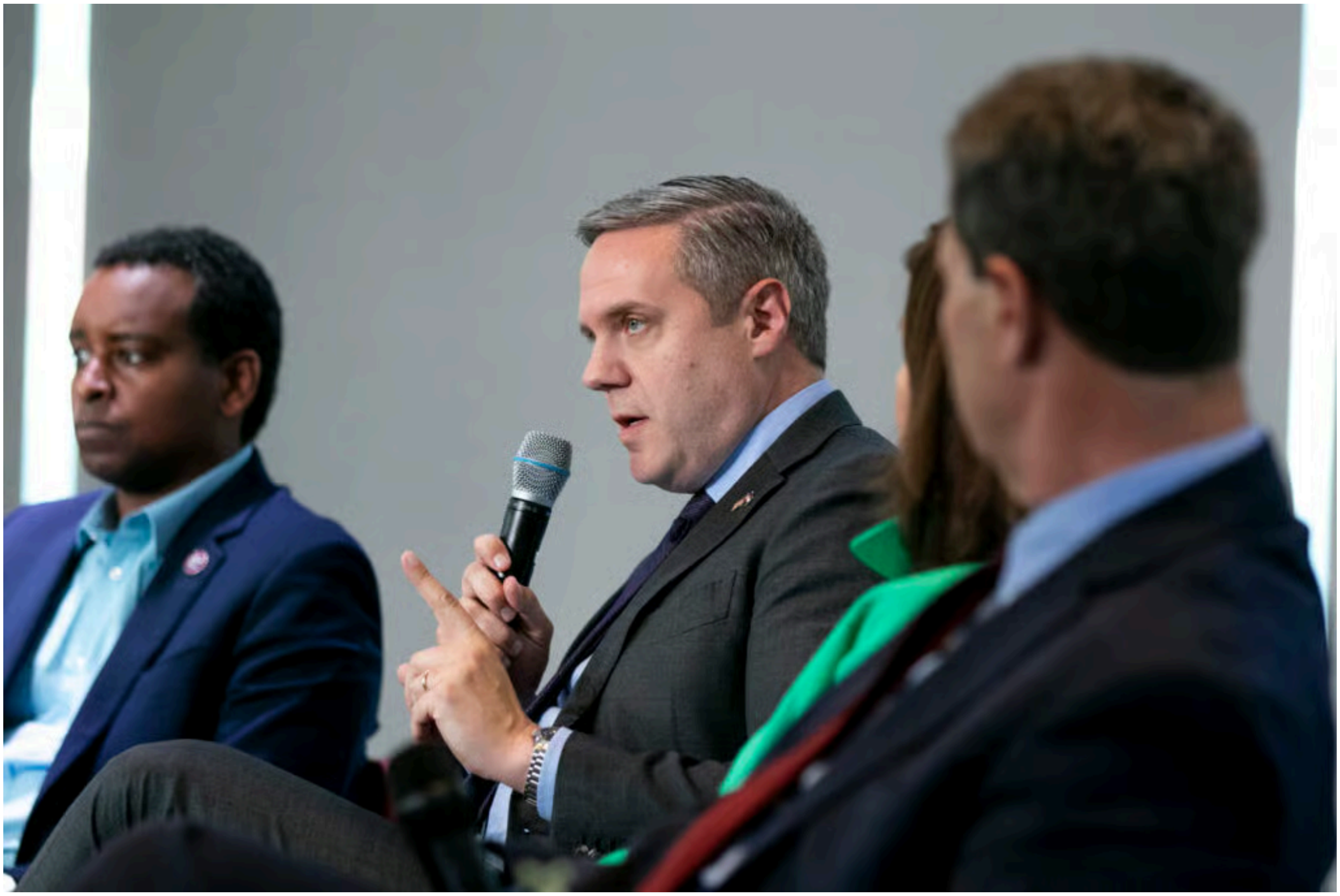
Hurd, who is the only Colorado cosponsor on the bill.



Kevin J. Beaty/Denverite

U.S. Rep. Jeff Hurd speaks during the Colorado Chamber's 2025 Biennial Congressional Luncheon at the Denver Art Museum. Aug. 12, 2025.

He said the one-year fix will give lawmakers time to find a more permanent approach. And they would be under mid-term election year pressure to do that, too, in order to prevent a spike in premiums right before facing their voters.

“If we don't address this issue going forward, it's going to be catastrophic,” Hurd said. “I'm not a big fan of federal subsidies either, but we need time to prevent people from losing their healthcare coverage and then we need to work together to reduce those healthcare costs that are driving these premium increases.”

It’s a message different parts of the Republican conference are telling their leadership.

occurring about whether to include an extension as part of an upcoming government funding package. But he added, “There’s a lot of opposition to it as well.”

An example of that is Boebert, who responded on social media, “Absolutely agree!” to a post on X from Texas Rep. Chip Roy saying the House GOP should not extend the enhanced credit.

Two key Republicans also **told Bloomberg** they questioned the need to extend the benefits.

CPR News reached out to the offices of Colorado’s two other Republican members, Reps. Jeff Crank and Gabe Evans, to get their position on extending the credits. Neither responded.

Constituents who purchase insurance on the marketplace in Crank’s district, the 5th District, will face a 159 percent premium increase, while those in Evans’ 8th District will see an increase of between 176-195 percent.

All of Colorado’s Democrats support an extension.

“The Democrats would extend the tax credits in a heartbeat,” said Rep. Diana DeGette, who’s the ranking member of the Health subcommittee in Energy and Commerce.

But a one-year extension, she said, just kicks the can down the road and tees up another crisis next year. “As somebody who's worked on healthcare policy for many, many years now, I think we need to work in a bipartisan way to reduce the cost of healthcare in this country. But it's not going to happen by next year.”

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Kevin J. Beaty/Denverite

U.S. Rep. Diana DeGette speaks during the Colorado Chamber's 2025 Biennial Congressional Luncheon at the Denver Art Museum. Aug. 12, 2025.

DeGette said over the August recess, she heard from a lot of people afraid they'll lose their health insurance at the end of the year.

"I don't think the Republicans should see this as a political issue. They should see it as the health of their constituents. They should sit down and really work with us on a full solution."

The tax credits are set to expire at a time when other changes to the health care landscape also threaten people's access to coverage.

The health research nonprofit KFF predicts that policies included in Republicans' One Big Beautiful Bill will lead to approximately **150,000 Coloradans becoming uninsured**. The **Center for American Progress found** that the OBBB, combined with the enhanced almost 192,000.

Sen. John Thune, Republican Majority Leader, also seems open to extending the credit, albeit in a modified form, such as returning to the pre-COVID tax credit rate.

"I think all the enhancements in both the Democrat reconciliation bills dramatically increase the size of the population, dramatically increase the cost," Thune told reporters. "Like I said before, I think the Democrats have a responsibility to come forward with a solution."

But with their party out of power, Democrats dispute the idea that a fix rests solely with them. Republicans control both chambers and set the policy agenda in Congress.

"Democrats are ready to work with anyone to restore health care for the millions of Americans who are about to get smacked in the face," said Sen. Brian Schatz of Hawaii. "But that starts with a meeting... and Leader Thune and Speaker Johnson haven't even asked Chuck Schumer and Hakeem Jeffries to sit down and discuss this."

For Hurd, it doesn't matter if it's the one-year extension or something else; he wants to get to a solution before time runs out.

"However we solve it, I'm going to be happy. I just want results," he said. "Let's just solve the problem."

CPR News Ryan Warner contributed reporting.

The WHITE HOUSE

PRESIDENTIAL ACTIONS

IMPROVING OVERSIGHT OF FEDERAL GRANTMAKING

Executive Orders

August 7, 2025

By the authority vested in me as President by the Constitution and the laws of the United States of America, and to improve the process of Federal grantmaking while ending offensive waste of tax dollars, it is hereby ordered:

Section 1. Purpose. Every tax dollar the Government spends should improve American lives or advance American interests. This often does not happen. Federal grants have funded drag shows in Ecuador, trained doctoral candidates in critical race theory, and developed transgender-sexual-education programs. In 2024, one study claimed that more than one-quarter of new National Science Foundation (NSF) grants went to diversity, equity, and inclusion and other far-left initiatives. These NSF grants included those to educators that promoted Marxism, class warfare propaganda, and other anti-American ideologies in the classroom, masked as rigorous and thoughtful investigation. The harm imposed by problematic Federal grants does not stop at propagating absurd ideologies. An unsafe lab in Wuhan, China — likely the source of the COVID-19 pandemic — engaged in gain-of-function research funded by the National Institutes of Health. The NSF gave millions to develop AI-powered social media censorship tools — a direct assault on free speech. Taxpayer-funded grants have also gone to non-governmental organizations that provided free services to illegal immigrants, worsening the border crisis and compromising our safety, and to organizations that actively worked against American interests abroad.

Even for projects receiving Federal funds that serve an ostensibly beneficial purpose, the Government has paid insufficient attention to their efficacy. For example, a significant proportion of the results of federally funded scientific research projects cannot be reproduced by external researchers. Even at Harvard and Stanford, once considered among America's most prestigious universities, senior researchers have resigned following accusations of data falsification. A substantial portion of many Federal grants for university-led research goes not to scientific project applicants or groundbreaking research, but to university facilities and administrative costs.

The grant review process itself also undermines the interests of American taxpayers. Writing effective grant applications is notoriously complex, and grant applicants that can afford legal and technical experts are more likely to receive funds — which can then further support these non-mission functions. In addition, there is insufficient interagency coordination and review by relevant subject matter experts to reduce duplication. As a result, the best proposals do not always receive funding, and there is too much unfocused research of marginal social utility.

In short, there is a strong need to strengthen oversight and coordination of, and to streamline, agency grantmaking to address these problems, prevent them from recurring, and ensure greater accountability for use of public funds more broadly. The Government holds tax revenue in trust for the American people, and agencies should treat it accordingly.

Sec. 2. Definitions. For purposes of this order:

(a) The term "agency" has the meaning given to it in section 551 of title 5, United States Code, except that such term includes only agencies that have the statutory authority to award, offer, or manage Federal grants and does not include the Executive Office of the President or any components thereof.

(b) The term "agency head" means the highest-ranking official or officials of an agency, such as the Secretary, Administrator, Chairman, Director, Commissioners, or Board of Directors, unless otherwise specified in this order.

(c) The term "Director" means the Director of the Office of Management and Budget (OMB).

(d) The term "discretionary award" or "discretionary grant" means a grant that is a "discretionary award" as that term is defined in 2 CFR 200.1. It does not include programs where legislation establishes an entitlement to the funds on the part of the

recipient, such as block grants; those awarded based on a statutory formula; or disaster recovery grants.
(e) The term "funding opportunity announcement" means a "notice of funding opportunity" as defined in 2 CFR 200.1, as it pertains to a discretionary award.
(f) The term "grant" means any "grant agreement or grant" as defined in 2 CFR 200.1, "cooperative agreement" as defined in 2 CFR 200.1, or similar award of financial assistance, including foreign assistance awards.
(g) The term "regulation" means an agency statement of general or particular applicability and future effect designed to implement, interpret, or prescribe law or policy or describing the procedure or practice requirements of an agency, including, without limitation, regulations, interpretative rules, and statements of policy.
(h) The term "senior appointee" means an individual appointed by the President, a non-career member of the Senior Executive Service, or an employee encumbering a Senior Level, Scientific and Professional, or Grade 15 position in Schedule C of the excepted service.
Sec. 3. Strengthening Accountability for Agency Grantmaking. (a) Each agency head shall promptly designate a senior appointee who shall be responsible for creating a process to review new funding opportunity announcements and to review discretionary grants to ensure that they are consistent with agency priorities and the national interest. For the avoidance of doubt, this process shall not guarantee any particular level of review or consideration to funding applicants except as consistent with applicable law. As consistent with applicable law, this review process shall incorporate, at a minimum:
(i) review and approval of agency funding opportunity announcements by one or more senior appointees or their designees;
(ii) continuation of existing coordination with OMB;
(iii) to the extent appropriate to the subject matter of the announcements, review by designated subject-matter experts as identified by the agency head or the agency head's designee;
(iv) review of funding opportunity announcements and related forms to ensure that they include only such requirements as are necessary for an adequate evaluation of the application and are written in plain language with a goal of minimizing the need for legal or technical expertise in drafting an application;
(v) interagency coordination to determine whether the subject matter of a particular funding opportunity announcement has already been addressed by another agency

announcement and, if so, whether one of the announcements should be modified or withdrawn to promote consistency and eliminate redundancy;

(vi) for scientific research discretionary grants, review by at least one subject matter expert in the field of the application, who may be a member of the grant review panel, the program officer, or an outside expert; and

(vii) pre-issuance review of discretionary awards to ensure that the awards are consistent with applicable law, agency priorities, and the national interest, which shall involve in-person or virtual discussion of applications by grant review panels or program offices with a senior appointee or that appointee's designee.

(b) Agency heads shall designate one or more senior appointees to review discretionary awards on an annual basis for consistency with agency priorities and substantial progress. Such review shall include an accountability mechanism for officials responsible for selection and granting of the awards.

(c) Until such time as the process specified in subsection (a) of this section is in place, agencies shall not issue any new funding opportunity announcements without prior approval from the senior appointee designated under subsection (a) of this section, except as required by law.

Sec. 4. Considerations for Discretionary Awards. (a) Senior appointees and their designees shall not ministerially ratify or routinely defer to the recommendations of others in reviewing funding opportunity announcements or discretionary awards, but shall instead use their independent judgment.

(b) In reviewing and approving funding opportunity announcements and discretionary awards, as well as in designing the review process described in section 3(a) of this order, senior appointees and their designees shall, as relevant and to the extent consistent with applicable law, apply the following principles, including in any scoring rubrics used to assess grant proposals:

(i) Discretionary awards must, where applicable, demonstrably advance the President's policy priorities.

(ii) Discretionary awards shall not be used to fund, promote, encourage, subsidize, or facilitate:

(A) racial preferences or other forms of racial discrimination by the grant recipient, including activities where race or intentional proxies for race will be used as a selection criterion for employment or program participation;

(B) denial by the grant recipient of the sex binary in humans or the notion that sex is a chosen or mutable characteristic;
(C) illegal immigration; or
(D) any other initiatives that compromise public safety or promote anti-American values.
(iii) All else being equal, preference for discretionary awards should be given to institutions with lower indirect cost rates.
(iv) Discretionary grants should be given to a broad range of recipients rather than to a select group of repeat players. Research grants should be awarded to a mix of recipients likely to produce immediately demonstrable results and recipients with the potential for potentially longer-term, breakthrough results, in a manner consistent with the funding opportunity announcement.
(v) Applicants should commit to complying with administration policies, procedures, and guidance respecting Gold Standard Science.
(vi) Discretionary awards should include clear benchmarks for measuring success and progress towards relevant goals and, as relevant for awards pertaining to scientific research, a commitment to achieving Gold Standard Science.
(vii) To the extent institutional affiliation is considered in making discretionary awards, agencies should prioritize an institution's commitment to rigorous, reproducible scholarship over its historical reputation or perceived prestige. As to science grants, agencies should prioritize institutions that have demonstrated success in implementing Gold Standard Science.
(c) Nothing in this order shall be construed to discourage or prevent the use of peer review methods to evaluate proposals for discretionary awards or otherwise inform agency decision making, provided that peer review recommendations remain advisory and are not ministerially ratified, routinely deferred to, or otherwise treated as de facto binding by senior appointees or their designees. Further, nothing in this order shall be construed to create any rights to any particular level of review or consideration for any funding applicant except as consistent with applicable law.
Sec. 5. Revisions to the Uniform Guidance. (a) The Director shall revise the Uniform Guidance and other relevant guidance to streamline application requirements and to further clarify and require all discretionary grants to permit termination for convenience, including when the award no longer advances agency priorities or the national interest, but subject to appropriate exceptions, including agreements entered into in furtherance

of international trade agreements or those awarded by the Department of Commerce under title XCIX of the William M. (Mac) Thornberry National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2021 (Public Law 116-283), the CHIPS Act of 2022 (Public Law 117-167), or division F of the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (Public Law 117-58).

(b) The Director shall further revise the Uniform Guidance and other relevant guidance to appropriately limit the use of discretionary grant funds for costs related to facilities and administration.

Sec. 6. Implementation and Termination Clauses. (a) Within 30 days of the date of this order, each agency head shall review the agency's standard grant terms and conditions and submit a report to the Director detailing:

(i) whether the agency's standard terms and conditions for discretionary awards permit termination for convenience and include the termination provisions described in 2 CFR 200.340(a), including the provisions that an award may be terminated by the agency "if an award no longer effectuates the program goals or agency priorities" or, in the case of a partial termination by the recipient, if the agency "determines that the remaining portion of the Federal award will not accomplish the purposes for which the Federal award was made";

(ii) whether the agency's standard terms and conditions for discretionary foreign assistance awards permit termination based on the national interest; and

(iii) the approximate number of active discretionary awards at the agency, as well as the approximate percentage of funding obligated under those awards that contains termination provisions allowing for termination under the circumstances described in subsection (i) of this section.

(b) Each agency head shall, to the maximum extent permitted by law and consistent with relevant Executive Orders or other Presidential directives, take steps to revise the terms and conditions of existing discretionary grants to permit immediate termination for convenience, or clarify that such termination is permitted, including if the award no longer advances agency priorities or the national interest. Each agency head shall ensure that such terms are included in all future discretionary grants and likewise shall take steps to revise all applicable regulations binding on or incorporated in discretionary grant terms and conditions to require such terms. Agency heads shall take action to incorporate these new terms and conditions into all future amendments to grant awards.

(c) To the extent practicable and consistent with applicable law, agency heads shall insert in future discretionary grant agreements terms and conditions that:

(i) prohibit recipients from directly drawing down general grant funds for specific projects without the affirmative authorization of the agency; and

(ii) require grantees to provide written explanations or support, with specificity, for requests for each drawdown.

Sec. 7. General Provisions. (a) Nothing in this order shall be construed to impair or otherwise affect:

(i) the authority granted by law to an executive department or agency, or the head thereof; or

(ii) the functions of the Director of the Office of Management and Budget relating to budgetary, administrative, or legislative proposals.

(b) This order shall be implemented consistent with applicable law and subject to the availability of appropriations.

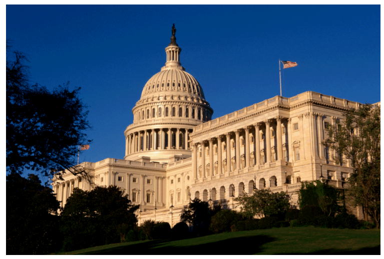
(c) This order is not intended to, and does not, create any right or benefit, substantive or procedural, enforceable at law or in equity by any party against the United States, its departments, agencies, or entities, its officers, employees, or agents, or any other person.

(d) If any provision of this order, or the application of any provision to any person or circumstance, is held to be invalid, the remainder of this order and the application of its provisions to any other persons or circumstances shall not be affected thereby.

(e) The costs for publication of this order shall be borne by the Office of Management and Budget.

DONALD J. TRUMP

THE WHITE HOUSE,
August 7, 2025.



Trump Administration Signs Executive Order Governing Federal Grantmaking

On August 7, 2025, President Trump signed an Executive Order (EO) titled "Improving Oversight of Federal Grantmaking," which directs federal agencies to strengthen oversight over the discretionary grant process to ensure grants advance American interests, reflect presidential priorities, and eliminate funding for activities deemed inconsistent with those values.

Under the order, there are some structural shifts that could impact the grantmaking process, including: an effort to streamline the grant application process; a focus on making awards to a broad range of recipients and discouraging awards to repeat recipients; a move to centralize control under senior political appointees; and an emphasis on the potential for an award to be terminated if it is deemed to no longer be in alignment with "agency priorities or the national interest."

What impact does this have on grant contract language?

For future grants and discretionary awards, every new award must be reviewed and approved by a senior appointee or their designee. This includes both the pre-award phase (before a grant is announced) and the post-award phase (review of performance and continued alignment with agency priorities). This has the potential to introduce delays into the grantmaking process.

..."and discretionary awards" encompasses just about everything

Potential Impacts to Grantees

The executive order introduces a number of changes that may directly affect how NADO members engage with federal grant programs. Below is a summary of the most relevant potential impacts:

- **Simplified Applications**: The executive order calls for simplified and more accessible grant applications. This could benefit smaller or newer organizations that may lack the legal or technical infrastructure to navigate traditionally complex federal grant processes.

- **Increased Scrutiny**: Federal agencies are now required to conduct more rigorous reviews of grant applications to ensure alignment with both agency-specific objectives and broader national priorities. This added layer of review could result in delays in funding decisions or increased documentation requirements.

- **Restricted Project Types**: Grants supporting activities that involve racial preferences, gender ideology, assistance to undocumented immigrants, or initiatives perceived as "anti-American" are now deemed ineligible for federal funding. Organizations involved in such programs may need to reassess current or planned initiatives to avoid ineligibility.

Will there be another House Committee on "un American" activities?

- **Termination Risk**: The executive order emphasizes changes to the Uniform Guidance that would require all discretionary grants to be terminated in the event that a funding opportunity "no longer advances agency priorities or the national interest." This may introduce greater funding uncertainty, particularly for multi-year grants or long-term initiatives.

- **Cost Limits**: The order places caps on administrative and facility cost reimbursements, which could disproportionately affect institutions with higher overhead rates, such as research universities and hospitals.

- **Range of Recipients**: Agencies are encouraged to make awards to a broad range of recipients, rather than to a "select group of repeat players." . While this may create access for new and diverse organizations, it could also introduce new competition for experienced applicants who have historically received repeat funding.

- **Scientific Rigor**: There is a renewed emphasis on "Gold Standard Science" and research reproducibility. Institutions with strong records of scientific integrity may benefit, while those with fewer resources or emerging programs may face higher barriers to demonstrating rigor.

- **Compliance Burden**: New requirements for detailed justifications of grant fund drawdowns are expected to increase administrative responsibilities, particularly for finance and compliance teams tasked with managing federal awards.

Looking Ahead

NADO will continue to monitor developments closely—such as agency guidance, legal challenges to the order's provisions, and potential adjustments in implementation that could affect grant eligibility, compliance requirements, and administrative processes.

August 11, 2025

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Ravines in a neighborhood impacted by the 2015 Sleepy Hollow Fire in Wenatchee, Washington. Photo: Wenatchee World, Don Seabrook.

The next generation of wildfire risk models must account for the built environment

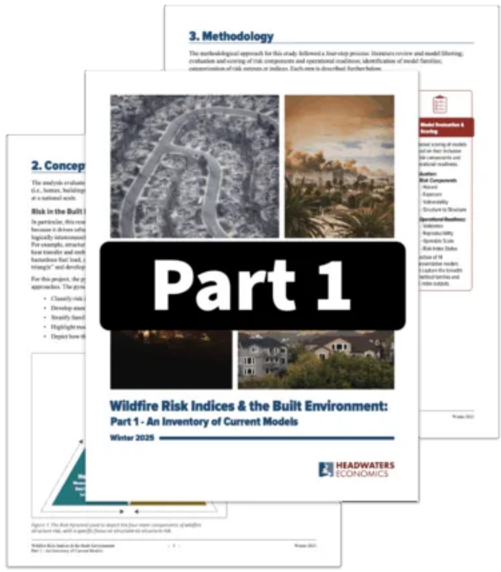
September 3, 2025

Wildfire risk modeling is a vital tool for disaster preparedness and response. For decades, scientists have leveraged federal data to develop sophisticated models that predict how fire spreads through forests and grasslands, helping fire departments, land managers, and policymakers prepare for and manage wildfires.

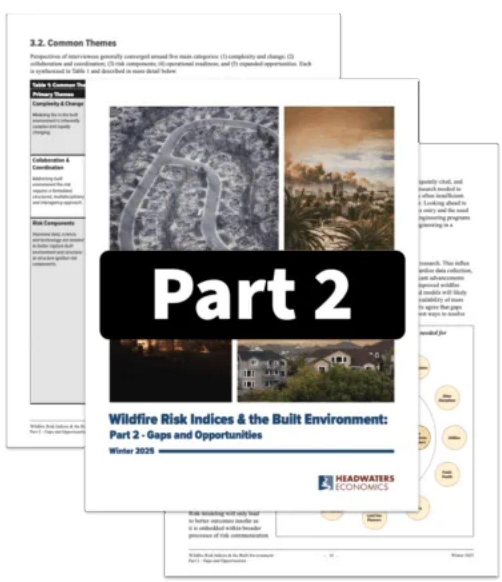
But as wildfire risks have transitioned from the forests and grasslands into communities, so must our models. Recent disasters in Lahaina, Hawaii, and Los Angeles, California, demonstrate how wildfires can spread rapidly through neighborhoods, jumping from home to home in ways that differ from fires in natural vegetation. The intense heat, embers, and debris generated by burning structures, vehicles, and infrastructure are driven by local factors that have not been captured in most wildfire risk models. The complexity of integrating building materials, housing density, fuel continuity between structures, and neighborhood layouts presents a new challenge.

Many wildfire modelers are actively working to incorporate these built-environment factors into next-generation tools. Still, wildfire models primarily reflect fire behavior in natural vegetation and do not yet fully capture how fire spreads and propagates through neighborhoods. This gap limits the ability of communities to make informed decisions about mitigation, building standards, and risk planning.

Headwaters Economics, in partnership with Pyrologix (a Vibrant Planet company) and the U.S. Fire Administration, analyzed the state of wildfire risk modeling to identify opportunities for improvement. The two-part report includes a detailed inventory of existing wildfire risk indices (Part 1) and expert interviews to highlight solutions (Part 2).



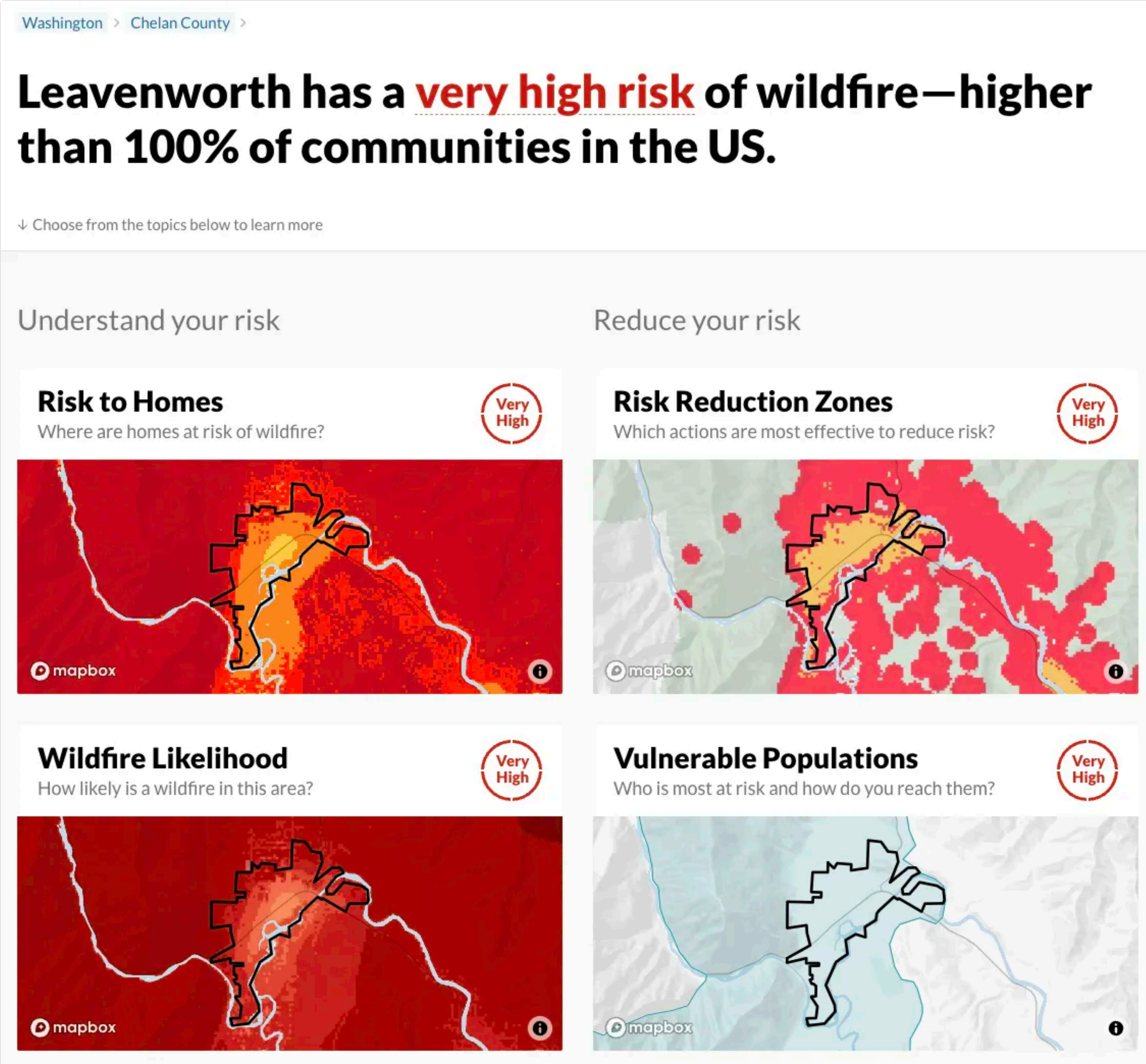
Read part 1



Read part 2

Promising new approaches and opportunities for wildfire risk modeling

Research results show that current models face a tradeoff: some can predict outcomes for broad geographies like states or the whole nation, but lack precision about fire behavior in smaller areas such as neighborhoods, especially when it comes to structure-to-structure spread. Conversely, models that have more local precision are difficult to scale up to larger geographies. Several promising approaches supported by federal agencies—including those led by the USDA Forest Service (Wildfire Risk to Communities) and FEMA's U.S. Fire Administration (the National Risk Index)—are making strides toward balancing the need for scalability and modeling wildfire spread into the built environment. Ongoing improvements can further integrate information about the built environment, validate the models, and make models accessible for decision-makers.



The tools at wildfirerisk.org use the best available data and fire models to show the relative wildfire risk facing every community in the United States.

Despite imperfections and ongoing challenges, current wildfire risk models have [accurately identified]() communities that experienced recent urban wildfire disasters. These models are an essential tool for recognizing the most at-risk communities.

When combined with local knowledge and on-the-ground data, they help target prevention efforts and resource allocation to reduce wildfire impacts effectively.

Interviews with dozens of experts point to several key needs to advance the field of wildfire risk modeling:

1. **Cross-discipline, cross-agency coordination.** A central coordinating body is needed to manage model development, direct funding, and ensure collaboration across all disciplines in wildfire response.
2. **Improved datasets.** Researchers need better data that capture building and parcel-level details, ember propagation and transport, and the impacts of mitigation activities on fire behavior. These data can be developed through tools like remote sensing, home inspections, and crowdsourcing.
3. **Enhanced transparency and validation.** Current models of fire among structures must be refined before they can work in real-world applications. Open comparison and critique among researchers using publicly available information will make these models stronger.
4. **Clarified language and standards**. Models that are useful for one discipline, such as fire suppression, may not be useful for another, such as long-term mitigation planning. Clarity is needed in defining problems, scenarios, and the

needs of various users to ensure models are aligned with real-world applications.

5. **Actionable insights**. Improved models must offer pathways for behavioral change, such as home hardening, creating defensible space, and implementing regulations. Modeling advancements should proceed alongside practical, on-the-ground risk-reduction efforts.

Without these advances, communities will continue to make high-stakes decisions about where to build, how to harden homes, and how to insure property based on incomplete or outdated information.

Open collaboration is key to developing better wildfire tools

Addressing the wildfire crisis will require building better wildfire risk models: Models that incorporate structure-to-structure ignition, are validated against a wider range of scenarios, and use high-quality, accessible data.

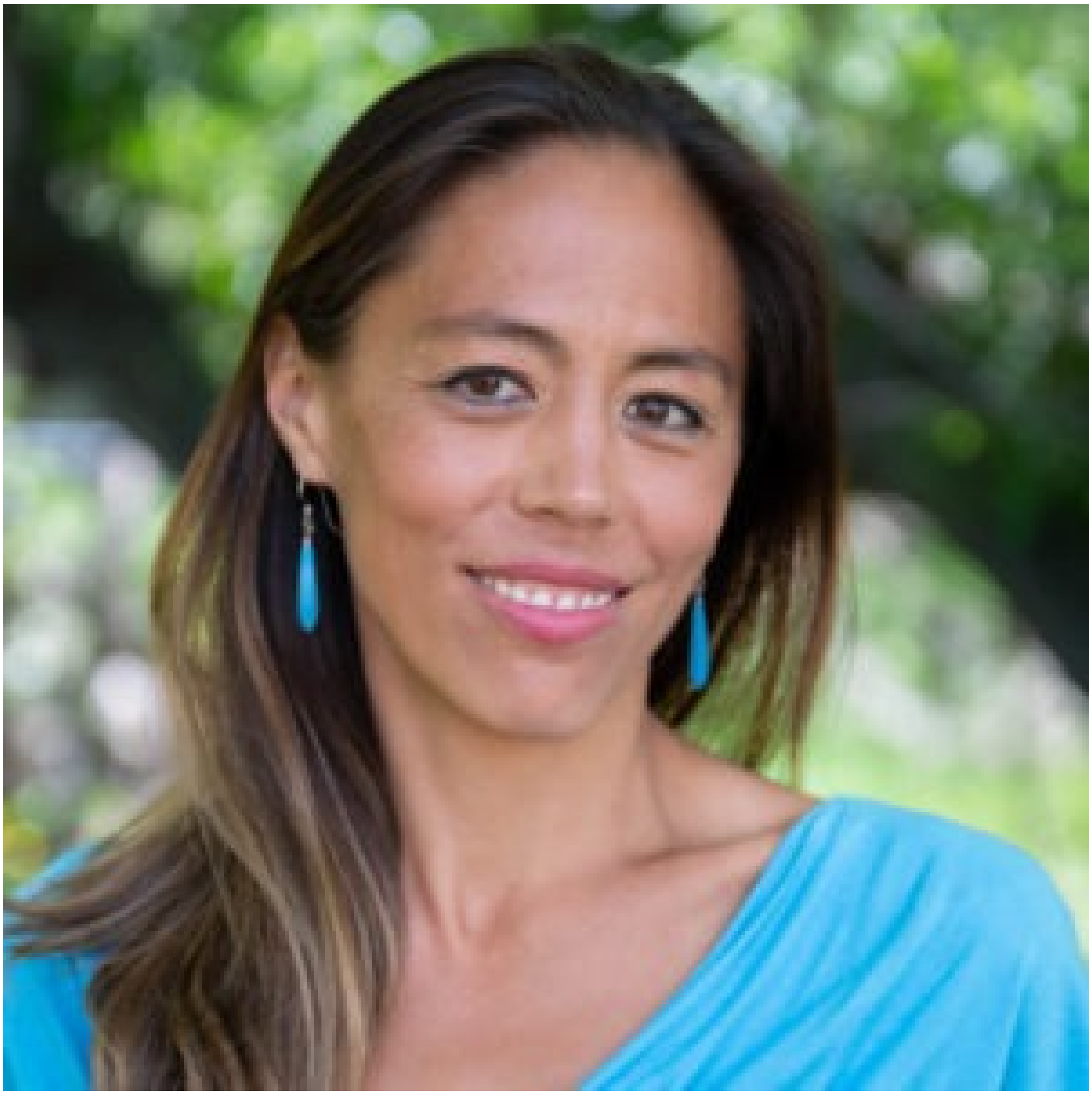
Unfortunately, a large amount of data is not widely accessible. Insurance companies have developed their own proprietary risk models to set rates and address state regulatory issues, but these data will likely be unavailable to researchers, policymakers and the public. This includes state and local governments that need accurate, open risk maps to inform adoption of building codes, create programs to help homeowners retrofit existing structures, and align land use policy with known wildfire hazards.

To develop reliable risk maps that are accessible to a wide range of stakeholders open collaboration will be critical. The comparison and verification of existing models can be improved with publicly available benchmark datasets, including pre-fire building characteristics and post-fire outcomes. This work will require leadership and coordination across agencies, sectors, and disciplines. The federal government has an important role to play in bringing together policymakers, scientists, engineers, community and business leaders to close the gap between what we know about wildfire and how we prepare for it.

With a shared strategy it is possible to unite research efforts and greatly improve our understanding of how fires behave, and ultimately shift from reacting to wildfire disasters toward proactively protecting lives, property, and economic stability.

Acknowledgements

Matthew Thompson, Ph.D., and Bryce Young of Pyrologix, a Vibrant Planet Company, contributed knowledge and expertise to this research. This project was conducted through a partnership with the U.S. Fire Administration.



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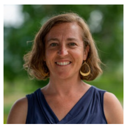

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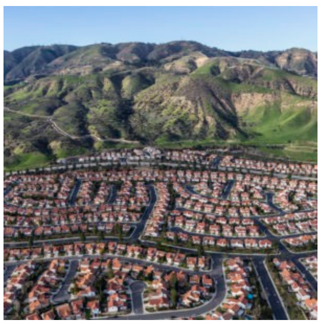

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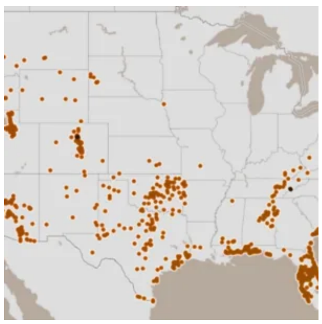

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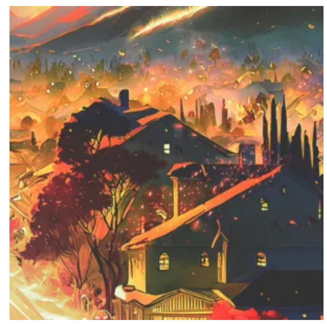

Redefining the urban wildfire problem in the West

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