

Wildfire risk reduction projects are distributed inequitably

Forest managers are more likely to implement projects near communities with wealthier, white, more educated residents.

Based on **Sarah E. Anderson, Andrew J. Plantinga, and Matthew Wibbenmeyer. 2022. "Inequality in Agency Responsiveness: Evidence from Salient Wildfire Events." *Journal of Politics*.**

The Policy Problem

Wildfires have sharply increased in the western United States over the past several decades, due to a combination of climate change effects and high fuel loads. To reduce wildfire risk, federal government agencies carry out fuel reduction projects that remove hazardous dead or live vegetation. After experiencing a nearby wildfire, communities place more importance on wildfire risk. As a result, community members may mobilize and put public pressure on agencies to act. However, because the ability to mobilize varies across demographics such as income, race, and education, agency responsiveness to this pressure may perpetuate inequity.

Key findings and proposed solutions

- Communities with wealthier, white, non-Hispanic, and more educated residents are better able to mobilize for additional resources provided by government agencies.
- Nearby wildfires increase fuel treatment rates in communities with a relatively high percentage of high-income, well-educated, and white residents.

- Agencies should work on outreach to marginalized communities who might not have the resources to organize to demand resources.
- Agencies should be wary of programs like matching funds that might inadvertently prioritize non-wealthy communities.

What We Found

Agency responsiveness and community income level, racial composition, and education. Characteristics associated with high socioeconomic status significantly increase the probability of fuel projects following recent fires. We found consistent evidence that forest managers are more likely to implement projects near communities with a relatively high percentage of high-income, well-educated, and white residents.

Our findings show that similar events, in this case wildfires, can yield very different policy outcomes for different types of communities. The unequal response by government agencies may be at least partially a function of community mobilization, as prior studies show that communities with more white, non-Hispanic, wealthier, and more educated residents are better able to mobilize.

To address this inequity, agencies should work on outreach to marginalized communities who might not have the resources to organize to demand resources. Further, agencies should be wary of programs like matching funds that might inadvertently prioritize non-wealthy communities.

What We Did

We analyzed the placement of wildfire-reducing fuel projects among US census blocks across the country's Wildland Urban Interface (WUI). We compared the demographic and socioeconomic features of census blocks that had received a fuel management project with those that had not. We also examined the role of recent wildfire experiences in structuring project prioritization.