Ashes of Accountability: Oregon's Wildfire Funds Lost to Inefficiency

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Executive Summary

Oregon's wildfire suppression spending has increased steadily over the past two decades, but the effectiveness of that spending is increasingly in question. This analysis combines data from NIFC and Representative Christine Drazan's office to examine wildfire activity and budget trends since 1999.

Key Findings

- Fire activity has not increased. Fires per year remain relatively flat, and acres burned have returned to the bottom end of the historical range.
- Spending has surged. Despite this drop in fire activity, wildfire budgets have continued to grow.
- Cost per acre burned is now at a record high. Oregon is spending more per acre burned than at any time in recent history, without proportional benefit.
- The rate of increase in cost per acre burned is not sustainable and cannot be justified by outcomes.
- These trends point to inefficient allocation of wildfire funds, not a lack of funding.

Recommendation

Future wildfire policy should prioritize cost-effectiveness and accountability. This includes requiring cost-benefit analysis of budget proposals, reviewing internal allocations, and ensuring that increases in funding are tied to measurable, outcome-based justifications.

Data and Methodology

This analysis uses wildfire incident data primarily from the National Interagency Fire Center (NIFC), with supplemental data from the Monitoring Trends in Burn Severity (MTBS) program to account for 2024, which was not yet available through NIFC. Historical wildfire budget figures were provided by Representative Christine Drazan's office and adjusted to 2025 dollars for consistency.

To align with Oregon's biennial budgeting structure, acres burned were summed over two-year periods. Duplicate fire entries in the NIFC data were removed to correct for overlap and reporting artifacts. A cubic spline smoothing technique was applied to reduce volatility in both the acreage and budget series, allowing the long-term trend—particularly the cost per acre burned—to emerge more clearly.This streamlined, policy-focused approach emphasizes meaningful patterns over short-term noise.

Results

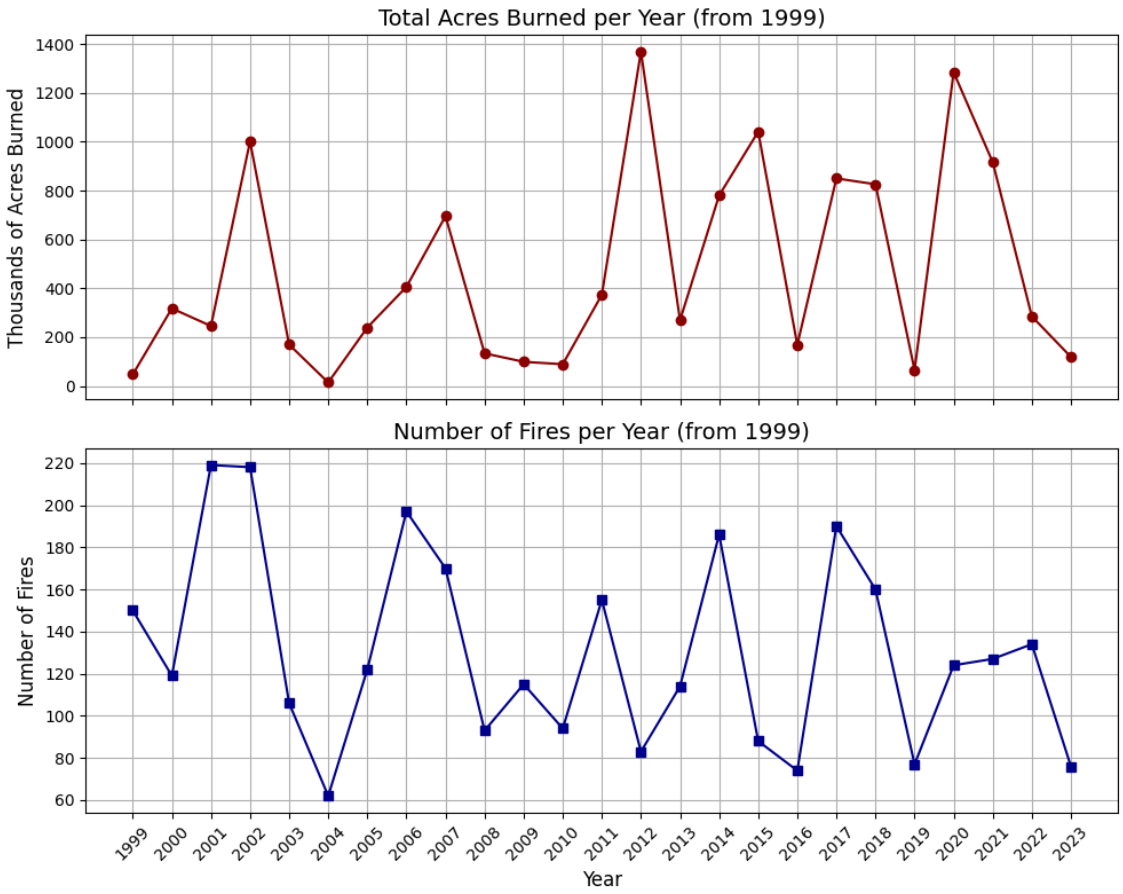
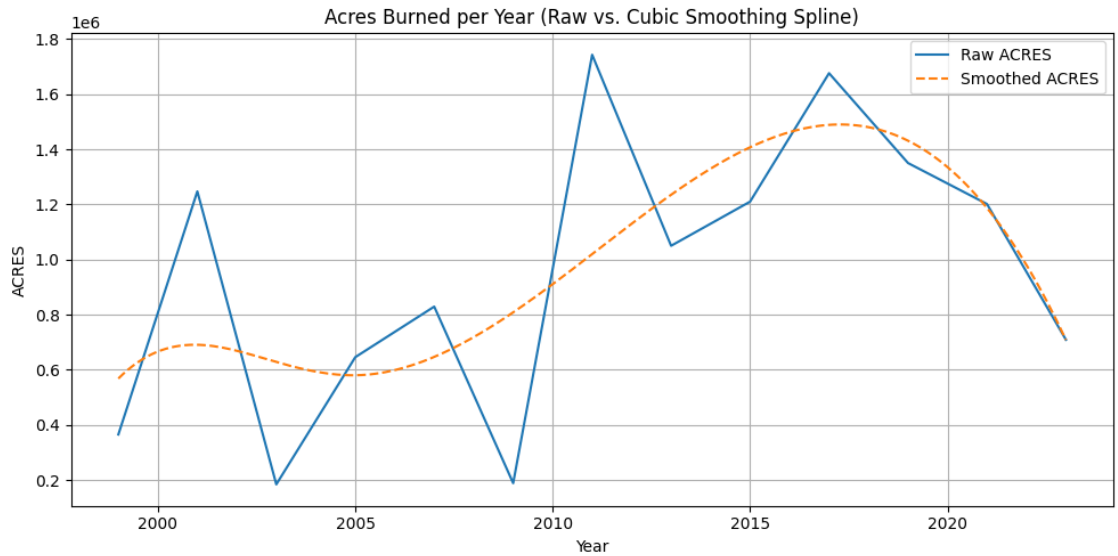


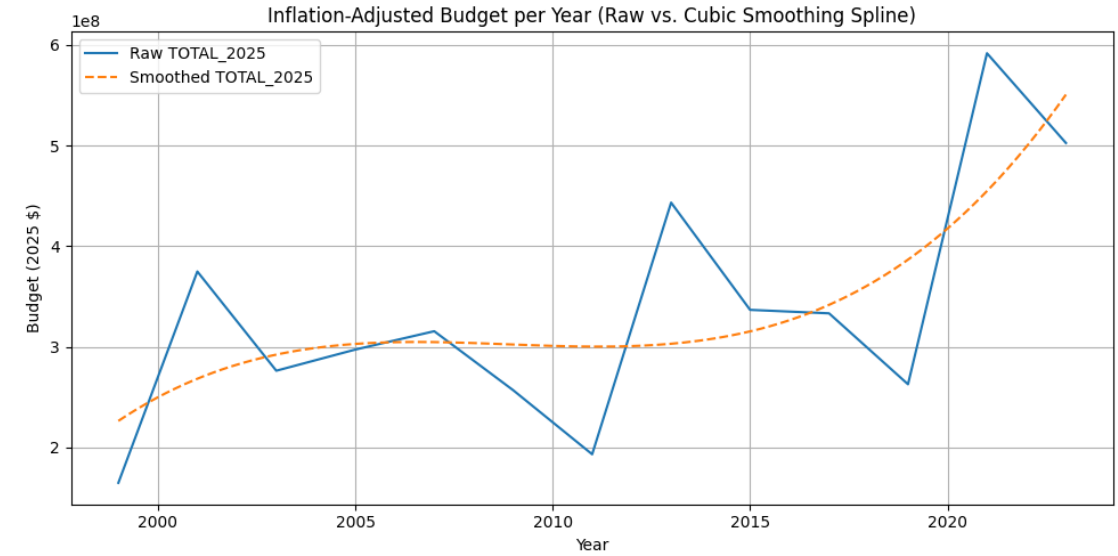
Figure 1: Annual Wildfire Frequency and Acres Burned in Oregon (1999–2023)

The first chart displays the annual number of wildfires and total acres burned in Oregon from 1999 to 2023. The data show that wildfire activity is relatively flat over the long run, with no clear upward trend. While there appears to be an increase in fire frequency beginning around 2012, this is better understood as a clustering of peak years rather than a fundamental shift in baseline activity.

More recently, both fire frequency and acres burned have declined, with current levels reverting to the low end of the historical range—below the peaks observed in 2002. In short, the chart suggests that Oregon is not experiencing a sustained increase in fire activity, but rather natural variability within a relatively stable range.

Results (continued)





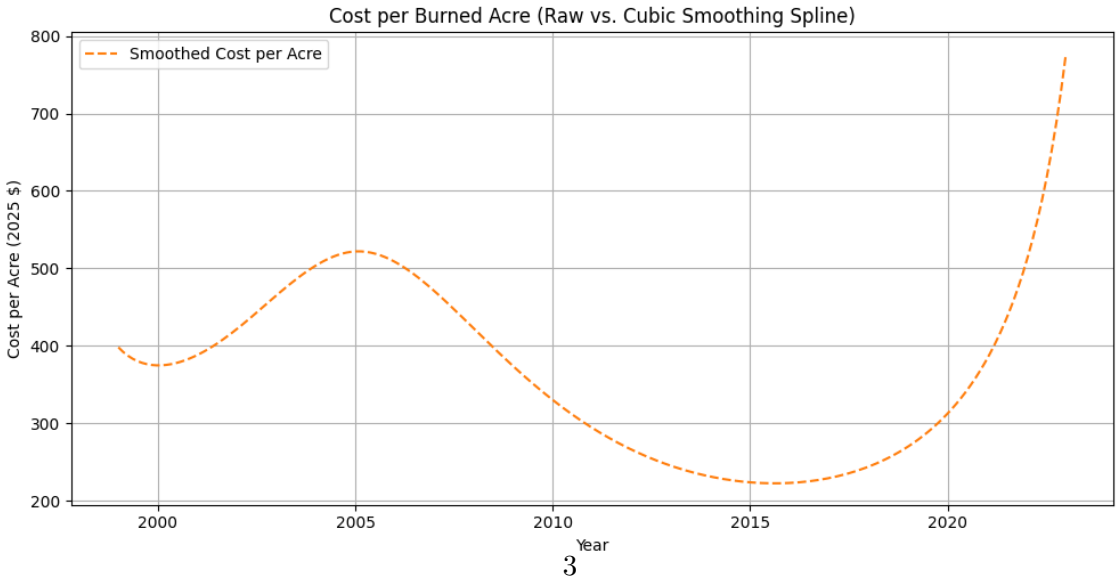


Figure 2: Biennial Budget, Acres Burned, and Cost per Acre Burned (Smoothed)

The chart above presents Oregon's biennial wildfire budget (adjusted to 2025 dollars), total acres burned, and the resulting cost per acre burned. To ensure alignment, acres burned were summed across two-year periods to match the state's budgeting cycle. A cubic spline smoothing technique was applied to each series to reduce volatility and reveal the underlying trend signal.

The data show that total acres burned have returned to a range consistent with levels observed between 2000 and 2010. Despite this stabilization in fire activity, wildfire spending has continued to rise. As a result, the cost per acre burned has increased sharply and now sits at record levels. This rise cannot be explained by worsening fire conditions and instead points toward inefficiencies in how wildfire funds are being allocated.

Policy Implications and Recommendations

The findings suggest that Oregon's wildfire spending is not aligned with actual fire activity. While acres burned have returned to the same general range observed between 2000 and 2010, the state is now spending more per acre burned than ever before. Over the long run, wildfire activity appears largely sideways—there is no sustained upward trend in frequency or severity. This pattern points to growing inefficiency in how funds are allocated, not increasing fire behavior.

To improve accountability and ensure better use of public funds, Oregon should consider the following:

- Oregon is spending more per acre burned than at any point in the past two decades, despite fire activity stabilizing.
- This increase reflects inefficiency in fund allocation, not a surge in fire risk.
- Wildfire budgets should be tied to measurable outcomes, not generalized forecasts or fear-based projections.
- Require cost-benefit analysis for future wildfire spending proposals.
- Review ODF spending line by line to identify areas of waste or misalignment.
- Prioritize budget efficiency over budget expansion in all future legislative discussions.

Sources

- National Interagency Fire Center (NIFC) – Historical wildfire incident data for Oregon (1999–2023).
- Monitoring Trends in Burn Severity (MTBS) – Supplemental fire data for the 2024 fire season.
- Office of Representative Christine Drazan – Historical wildfire budget data for Oregon, adjusted to 2025 dollars.
- U.S. Census Bureau – Oregon base map used for spatial analysis and polygon intersection.