



OKLAHOMA

**OKLAHOMA WILDLAND FIRE
WORKING GROUP**

Final Report and Recommendations



Wildfire Mitigation, Response, and Recovery Recommendations

February 24, 2026

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In the aftermath of the devastating firestorm that began on March 14, 2025, claiming four lives and destroying nearly 600 homes across Oklahoma, Governor J. Kevin Stitt announced the formation of a Wildland Fire Response Working Group tasked with developing comprehensive recommendations to enhance the state's wildfire mitigation, suppression, and recovery capabilities.

This report represents months of effort spanning multiple disciplines that operate in the wildland fire enterprise including wildland firefighting agencies, national weather service, state and local emergency management professionals, municipal firefighters, rural/volunteer firefighters, land managers, utility providers, and community stakeholders working together to strengthen Oklahoma's wildland fire readiness. We extend our sincere gratitude to all members of the Working Group who dedicated their time, expertise, and commitment. Their contributions have been invaluable in shaping the recommendations contained in this report.

INTRODUCTION

Oklahoma faces significant and growing wildland fire challenges. Weather variability, changing land use patterns, and increased development in wildland-urban interface areas have elevated risks associated with wildland fire across the state. Recent fire seasons demonstrated both strengths and gaps in Oklahoma's current response capabilities, highlighting the need for strategic improvements in coordination, mitigation, and workforce development.

Under Title 63, Oklahoma Emergency Management has statutory authority for response, recovery, preparedness, and mitigation before, during, and after disasters when local capacity is exceeded. Oklahoma Forestry Services serves as Emergency Support Function 4 (ESF 4 – Firefighting), which provides the framework for state coordination of firefighting resources and functions as the lead agency for wildland fire response coordination. This existing legal framework provides the foundation for enhanced coordination and standardized protocols recommended in this report.

The state of Oklahoma has a limited amount of primary wildland firefighting resources within Oklahoma Forestry Services. When necessary and available, Oklahoma Forestry Services utilizes authority within Title 2 to mobilize out of state partner agencies and federally contracted interagency aircraft as well as the Oklahoma National Guard when approved. Oklahoma Forestry Services maintains 24/7 initial attack resources in all or portions of fifteen (15) eastern Oklahoma counties while also routinely prepositioning resources across the state guided by the state of the fire environment, wildfire activity and/or requests from local firefighting agencies. However, local fire departments, both paid and volunteer, are responsible for wildfire suppression in most of central and western Oklahoma. Following the principle that all disasters are locally executed, state managed, and federally supported, Oklahoma's wildland fire response relies heavily on local capacity with state coordination and support when local capacity is exceeded during extended attack incident or when wildland fire expertise is needed.

The Working Group included representatives from across the state who assessed the state's wildland fire preparedness and response systems. Through subcommittees focused on state/local coordination, mitigation, and first responder capacity, the Working Group identified critical needs and developed actionable recommendations to address them.

WORKING GROUP COMPOSITION AND PROCESS

The Working Group co-chairs intentionally brought together representatives from agencies and organizations with direct involvement in wildland fire management, local government, public safety, emergency response, infrastructure protection, insurance, and community recovery. This diverse membership, including emergency managers, tribal representatives, and academia, ensured recommendations address the unique challenges faced by different regions and communities statewide.

Working Group members participated in multiple working sessions throughout 2025, reviewing data on past fire incidents, assessing current response capabilities, and evaluating successful models from other states. Three specialized subcommittees conducted detailed research in their assigned areas and developed preliminary recommendations that the full Working Group reviewed and approved.

PARTICIPATING ORGANIZATIONS

Oklahoma Department of Emergency Management	Oklahoma Forestry Services	Oklahoma Department of Environmental Quality
Oklahoma Insurance Department	Oklahoma Corporation Commission	Oklahoma City Fire Department
Oklahoma Office of Faith-Based Initiatives	Oklahoma State University	OG&E
Oklahoma Association of Electric Cooperatives	Oklahoma Emergency Management Association	Association of County Commissioners of Oklahoma
National Weather Service	Oklahoma Municipal League	Oklahoma Farm Bureau
Osage Nation Wildland Fire Response	Tulsa Firefighters Association	Local Fire Chiefs
Local Wildland Task Force Members	Local Emergency Managers	

PRIORITY FOCUS AREAS

After initial assessment sessions, the Working Group identified three areas requiring immediate attention and long-term strategic planning. Specialized subcommittees formed around each priority area to conduct detailed research, examine best practices from other states, and develop specific recommendations.

STATE AND LOCAL COORDINATION

Improving coordination between state agencies and local jurisdictions remains essential for effective wildland fire response. Oklahoma's current system involves multiple agencies with different authorities, protocols, and resources. Standardizing approaches while respecting local autonomy requires careful planning and clear communication channels.

MITIGATION

Reducing wildland fire risk through proactive mitigation provides the most cost-effective approach to protecting communities and natural resources. Oklahoma has significant opportunities to expand mitigation efforts through prescribed fire, fuel reduction projects, and strategic infrastructure protection.

FIRST RESPONDER RECRUITMENT, RETENTION AND TRAINING

Volunteer firefighters provide the first line of defense against wildland fires in most Oklahoma communities. State support of recruitment, providing comprehensive training, and offering incentives for retention will determine the long-term sustainability of Oklahoma's fire response system.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations represent the Working Group's strategy for improving Oklahoma's wildland fire preparedness and response capabilities. The Working Group prioritized recommendations that build on existing strengths, use partnerships, and provide better fire management results.

Implementation Note: *Cities, towns, and counties play a central role in wildfire response and recovery across Oklahoma. As these recommendations move forward, the state should consider dedicated funding to help offset new costs for local governments. With federal support increasingly uncertain, avoiding unfunded mandates on local jurisdictions will be important to successful implementation.*

STATE AND LOCAL COORDINATION

Effective wildland fire response requires coordination between state agencies, local jurisdictions, tribal nations, and federal partners. The following recommendations create processes for improved coordination, standardized protocols, and better information sharing while maintaining the flexibility local jurisdictions need to address unique community circumstances.

RECOMMENDATION 1

FORMALIZE STATEWIDE FIRE RESPONSE PLAN

Oklahoma's current wildland fire response system operates through multiple agencies with overlapping but distinct authorities and responsibilities. Designating a single state agency as the lead coordinating authority will enable development of standardized protocols that improve response effectiveness statewide. The Working Group recommends that Oklahoma develop a Wildland Fire Response Plan by following Montana's best practice model. As the lead Emergency Support Function 4 (ESF 4 – Firefighting), which provides the framework for state coordination, Oklahoma Forestry Service should lead this planning effort. The plan will be a hazard specific annex to the State Emergency Operations Plan.

RECOMMENDATION 2

MODERNIZE COUNTY BURN BAN LANGUAGE

Current statute limits county burn ban authority to periods of extreme drought designation, creating a dangerous gap when fire conditions reach critical levels before drought conditions meet statutory thresholds. Weather patterns, fuel moisture levels, wind conditions, and relative humidity often create high fire danger that does not correspond with drought severity measures. Revising the statute to incorporate fire danger indices alongside drought designations will give counties the flexibility to protect communities during all high-risk periods while maintaining existing exemptions for agricultural burning and prescribed fire operations.

RECOMMENDATION 3

FULLY IMPLEMENT PREDICTIVE SERVICES TECHNOLOGY

Advanced fire detection and prediction technologies provide critical early warning capabilities that enable rapid response before small fires escalate into major incidents. Oklahoma has access to multiple emerging technologies including satellite-based hot spot detection, weather-based fire environment monitoring, and predictive modeling systems. Making the most of these technologies requires adequate staffing, reliable funding, expanded infrastructure, and integration with dispatch systems. Early detection reduces suppression costs, protects lives and property, and minimizes environmental damage through faster containment.

RECOMMENDATION 4

ASSESS STATEWIDE WILDFIRE RESPONSE FOOTPRINT

Oklahoma Forestry Services currently maintains wildland fire response capacity primarily in eastern regions. However, changing weather patterns and expanding wildland-urban interface development across the state suggest the need for broader geographic coverage. A comprehensive cost-benefit analysis will determine whether expanded state response capacity provides sufficient value through reduced losses and faster containment to justify the investment in equipment, personnel, and facilities required for statewide coverage.

MITIGATION

Proactive mitigation reduces wildland fire risk more cost-effectively than suppression and recovery efforts. According to the National Institute of Building Sciences, federal hazard mitigation grants save \$6 for every \$1 invested.¹ Oklahoma has opportunities to expand mitigation activities through prescribed fire, strategic fuel reduction, infrastructure protection, and homeowner education. The following recommendations maximize federal funding opportunities while strengthening state mitigation programs.

***Note:** Many recommendations of the Working Group focused on the use of Federal hazard mitigation assistance programs Oklahoma may no longer receive in the future.*

RECOMMENDATION 5

DEVELOP STATE LONG TERM RECOVERY PLAN

Effective disaster recovery begins long before an incident occurs. All-hazards pre-event recovery planning brings together state agencies, local governments, tribal nations, non-profit organizations, faith-based groups, and private sector partners to create recovery plans, identify resources, and clarify roles before disasters occur. The spring 2025 wildfires demonstrated the importance of this coordination when federal support was delayed and state and local partners had to rapidly mobilize alternative resources.

Oklahoma Emergency Management serves as the lead coordinating agency for pre-event recovery planning. The Governor's Office of Faith and Community Based Initiatives already plays an important role in disaster recovery by coordinating volunteer and charitable organizations, but must be more central in state recovery planning and operations. Formalizing this role in the State Emergency Operations Plan will clarify roles and improve coordination before disasters occur.

Additionally, Oklahoma should formalize the wildfire resource center model successfully deployed in Mannford and Guthrie last spring, establishing protocols for rapid activation of local recovery support centers when federal assistance is delayed or unavailable. Continued partnerships with private sector organizations such as Airbnb, which provided housing support to wildfire survivors, and GoFundMe, which helped verify legitimate fundraising campaigns for donors, should be documented in pre-event agreements to enable faster activation during future events.

RECOMMENDATION 6

MAXIMIZE FEDERAL GRANT UTILIZATION

Federal mitigation grant programs have historically provided funding for wildfire risk reduction projects, but many eligible Oklahoma communities do not access these resources due to limited awareness, lack of technical expertise, or concerns about administrative requirements. However, the future of federal mitigation grants is uncertain. Oklahoma did not receive mitigation funding after the 2025 wildfires, which makes state-level solutions more important. Local communities should be encouraged and trained on wildfire mitigation before events occur so they can integrate mitigation measures into the recovery process after disasters occur. Providing comprehensive grant assistance and technical support removes barriers that prevent smaller or under-resourced communities from accessing available funding when it does become available.

RECOMMENDATION 7

EXPAND COUNTY WILDFIRE PROTECTION PLANS

Community Wildfire Protection Plans provide essential foundations for wildfire risk reduction by identifying high-risk areas, prioritizing mitigation projects, and supporting coordination between landowners, fire departments, and land management agencies. Federal grant programs often require current CWPPs as eligibility criteria, making these plans gatekeepers for accessing mitigation funding. Many Oklahoma counties lack current CWPPs or have outdated plans that do not reflect changing development patterns and land use. Expanding CWPP coverage across the state will enable more communities to access federal funding while providing local leaders with actionable plans for reducing wildfire risk.

To reduce duplication of effort and align mitigation investment strategies, CWPPs should be integrated into the State Hazard Mitigation Plan and local hazard mitigation plans. This alignment ensures wildfire mitigation priorities are captured in broader planning documents and eligible for multiple funding sources. Oklahoma should also consider regional approaches to CWPP development, allowing neighboring counties to collaborate on shared plans that reduce costs, address cross-boundary fire risks, and share technical resources.

RECOMMENDATION 8

SCALE PRESCRIBED FIRE ASSOCIATION NETWORK

Prescribed fire associations operating primarily in western Oklahoma have demonstrated remarkable success in reducing wildfire risk through coordinated burning programs that reduce accumulated fuel loads while supporting ranching operations and ecosystem health. These associations pool equipment, share expertise, and provide mutual assistance that enables private landowners to conduct prescribed burns safely and effectively. Eastern Oklahoma faces increasing wildfire risk due to fire suppression policies that allowed dangerous fuel accumulation in forests and changing land use patterns that created extensive wildland-urban interface areas. Expanding the prescribed fire association model eastward will reduce fuel loads, restore fire-adapted ecosystems, and build community capacity for proactive fire management.

RECOMMENDATION 9

ESTABLISH VOLUNTARY STRATEGIC RIGHT-OF-WAY MITIGATION PARTNERSHIPS

Roads, highways, utility corridors, and other linear infrastructure create thousands of miles of continuous fuel (vegetation along and adjacent to corridors) that can contribute to rapid fire spread across landscapes. Coordinated vegetation management along these corridors (where feasible and appropriate) provides dual benefits by creating strategic fuel breaks that slow fire spread while maintaining infrastructure functionality and public safety.

Multiple agencies and entities manage various right-of-way systems with different priorities, authorities, and maintenance schedules. These agencies should work to coordinate and communicate right-of-way plans, provide situational awareness amongst groups, and target specific mitigation measures to known areas of fire risk. To ensure any right-of-way mitigation follows the standards and requirements of each agency and entity while also working to reduce the spread of fire, work done shall be risk-based, prioritized, and coordinated for maximum efficacy.

Formalizing partnerships and coordinating vegetation management activities through voluntary, collaborative cooperation will increase mitigation value and improve coordination, while state and federal partners connect adjacent landowners with available federal cost-share programs for fuel reduction on private property. This recommendation is intended to encourage voluntary coordination and does not create new regulatory requirements or alter existing right-of-way/easement rights or utility vegetation management obligations.

RECOMMENDATION 10

EXPAND FORTIFIED STANDARDS TO INCLUDE WILDFIRE MITIGATION

In 2018, the Oklahoma Legislature passed legislation that required insurance companies to provide discounts to any owner who builds a property to resist high wind, hail, or tornado damage. Oklahoma should work with the Institute for Business and Home Safety (IBHS) to adapt the FORTIFIED Home Wildfire Prepared Standard to Oklahoma's specific wildfire risk conditions. The existing legislation provides a proven framework for incentivizing disaster-resistant construction that can be expanded to address wildfire hazards. The current law already references IBHS FORTIFIED standards for wind and hail, so expanding to include IBHS Wildfire Prepared standards creates consistency in certification processes and leverages an established relationship with IBHS. Property owners who construct or retrofit homes to wildfire-resistant standards will receive insurance premium discounts proportional to their reduced risk. This incentivizes wildfire mitigation, reduces insured losses, and improves community resilience to wildfire hazards across Oklahoma.

FIRST RESPONDER RECRUITMENT, RETENTION AND TRAINING

Volunteer firefighters provide the first line of defense against wildland fires in most Oklahoma communities. Maintaining adequate numbers of trained responders requires coordinated efforts to recruit new volunteers, retain experienced personnel, and provide specialized training in wildland fire operations. The following recommendations address workforce challenges through improved incentives, expanded training, and new partnerships with CareerTech and other state agencies.

RECOMMENDATION 11

EXPAND TAX EXEMPTION ELIGIBILITY TO INCLUDE WILDLAND FIRE TRAINING

Oklahoma's current volunteer firefighter tax exemption provides important financial recognition for service but limits eligibility to those with structure fire training. This excludes many rural volunteers whose primary mission involves wildland and grass fire response. Expanding tax exemption eligibility to include wildland fire training acknowledges the critical role these volunteers play in protecting Oklahoma communities and agricultural lands. This change provides parity between structure and wildland firefighters while incentivizing specialized training in wildland fire operations.

RECOMMENDATION 12

DEVELOP HEALTH CARE INCENTIVE PROGRAMS FOR FIRST RESPONDERS

Volunteer firefighters face significant personal costs for serving their communities, including health risks and time away from employment. Some Oklahoma counties have developed innovative incentive programs that reduce volunteer costs while improving recruitment and retention. Roger Mills County provides AirEvac memberships at no charge to first responders, eliminating concerns about emergency medical transport costs. Exploring and scaling successful local incentive models across the state will support volunteer recruitment and retention efforts. This includes evaluating opportunities for health insurance supplements, emergency medical service memberships, and other benefits that reduce the financial burden of volunteer service.

RECOMMENDATION 13

LAUNCH COORDINATED STATEWIDE RECRUITMENT CAMPAIGN

Volunteer fire departments across Oklahoma struggle with declining membership and aging volunteer populations. Individual departments lack resources for professional marketing and recruitment efforts. A coordinated statewide recruitment campaign leveraging professional marketing expertise, social media platforms, and targeted messaging will reach potential volunteers more effectively than fragmented local efforts. The campaign should highlight the critical importance of volunteer firefighters, showcase success stories, and provide clear pathways for interested citizens to connect with local departments. Concurrent recruitment efforts for professional firefighters in urban departments will address workforce needs across the full spectrum of fire services.

RECOMMENDATION 14

EXPAND WILDLAND FIRE TRAINING THROUGH CAREERTECH PARTNERSHIP

Effective wildland fire response requires specialized training beyond traditional structure firefighting. Many volunteer firefighters lack access to comprehensive wildland fire training due to distance, cost, or scheduling conflicts. Oklahoma's CareerTech system provides established infrastructure for delivering technical training across the state. Partnering with CareerTech to develop and deliver wildland fire training programs will increase training accessibility, provide certification pathways, and leverage existing educational resources. This partnership can offer both basic wildland firefighter certification and advanced specialized courses in areas like prescribed fire operations and incident command.

RECOMMENDATION 15

EVALUATE DEPARTMENT OF CORRECTIONS WILDLAND FIRE CREW PROGRAM

Several western states successfully utilize inmate fire crews for wildland fire suppression and mitigation work. These programs provide valuable workforce capacity during fire season while offering inmates job skills, work experience, and reduced sentences. Oklahoma should evaluate the feasibility of developing a Department of Corrections wildland fire crew program modeled on successful programs in other states. This evaluation should address legal requirements, safety considerations, training protocols, supervision needs, and potential benefits for both fire management operations and offender rehabilitation. If feasible, a pilot program could provide additional capacity for prescribed fire operations and fuel reduction projects during non-fire season months.

CONCLUSION

These fifteen recommendations give Oklahoma a path forward for wildland fire preparedness and response. Getting them done will take funding, leadership, and cooperation among state agencies, local governments, tribes, and private partners.

Wildfire risk in Oklahoma isn't going away. Weather patterns are shifting, land use is changing, and more people are living in fire-prone areas. These recommendations aren't the final answer, but they're a solid starting point. Over the next three to five years, Oklahoma can make real improvements in how we prepare for, respond to, and recover from wildfires.

¹ National Institute of Building Sciences, *Natural Hazard Mitigation Saves: 2019 Report*. Available at: nibs.org/projects/natural-hazard-mitigation-saves-2019-report