

## Minnesota Wildfire Update – September 28, 2021

### Summary

Because of the exceptionally active 2021 wildfire season, the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (DNR) is providing this interim update regarding state wildfire response activities and costs. This report summarizes state-led<sup>1</sup> wildfire response activities and costs to date for calendar year 2021, and supplements the legislatively required fiscal year 2021 report that is due to the legislature by January 15, 2022. Of particular note:

- Wildfire occurrence this year has greatly exceeded the average for the previous five years. During June, July and August this year, there were 509 wildfires on lands where the state has lead responsibility for wildfire suppression, compared to a five-year average (2016-2020) of 77 state-led wildfire responses for that period. This does not include wildfires on federally managed lands, such as the Greenwood Fire, or on tribal lands.
- The state's costs for wildfire response are also higher. The estimated state costs for emergency wildfire suppression in FY21 are \$30,638,000, compared to a five-year annual average of \$23,658,000 (FY16-20).
- Expenditures in the first half of FY22 are also on track to exceed the five-year average. Expenditures in July and August of this year totaled \$7,779,000. The average expenditures for the first two months of the fiscal year in FY17-21 was \$2,569,000

### Introduction

Minnesota is experiencing an exceptional wildfire season this year, both in terms of duration and intensity. This is largely attributable to drought conditions from the fall of 2020 that have extended to the present. These drought conditions, combined with an extended period of weather that included warmer temperatures, lower relative humidities and high winds, created the circumstances for an extended period of high fire activity.

The costs for state-led emergency wildfire response are borne by the General Fund via both a direct appropriation and an open appropriation.<sup>2</sup> DNR is required by statute to submit a report to the legislature by January 15 of each year identifying all emergency firefighting costs incurred and reimbursements received in the prior fiscal year. DNR is currently compiling the report for Fiscal Year 2021 (FY21).

DNR is providing this interim update to inform the legislature of the elevated wildfire spending in FY21 and the first two months of FY22. This report summarizes state-led wildfire response activities and expenses during this period and provides important context by comparing these figures to five-year averages. Information includes number of wildfire occurrences, acres burned, and expenditures from both the direct and open General Fund appropriations for emergency wildfire response (i.e. pre-suppression and suppression costs).

This update only addresses wildfires for which the State of Minnesota had lead responsibility. The U.S. Forest Service (USFS) and the Bureau of Indian Affairs have also incurred significant costs in calendar year 2021 fighting wildfires in Minnesota for which they have lead responsibility; perhaps most notable is the USFS-led Greenwood Fire near Isabella.

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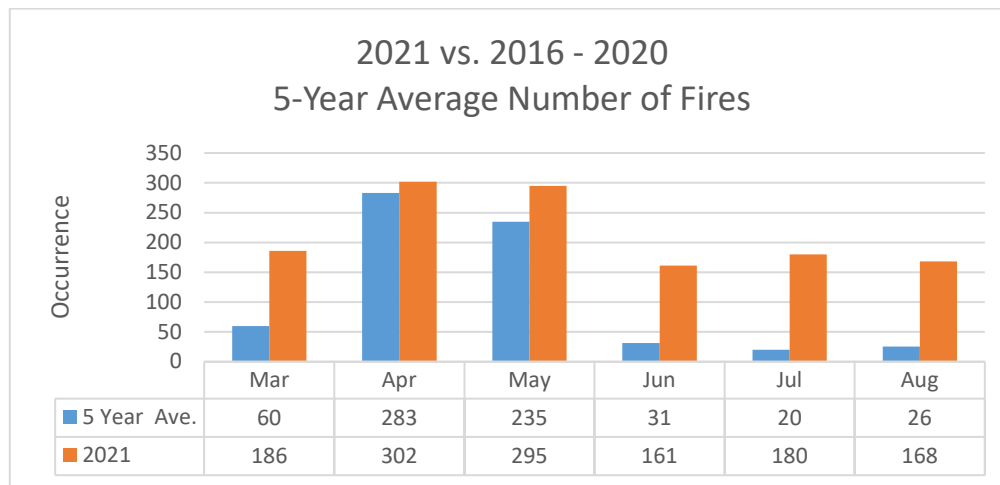
<sup>1</sup> Under Minnesota's interagency wildfire management system, the lead responsibility for wildfire response is determined by the land on which the fire originates, with the DNR generally having lead responsibility for state, county and private lands.

<sup>2</sup> See Minnesota Laws 2019, Ch. 4, Art. 1, Sect. 3, Subd. 4(a) for the FY20-21 appropriations, and Minnesota Laws 2021, 1<sup>st</sup> Special Session, Ch. 6, Art. 1, Sect. 3, Subd. 4(a) for FY22-23.

## Wildfire Activity on Lands under State Responsibility<sup>3</sup>

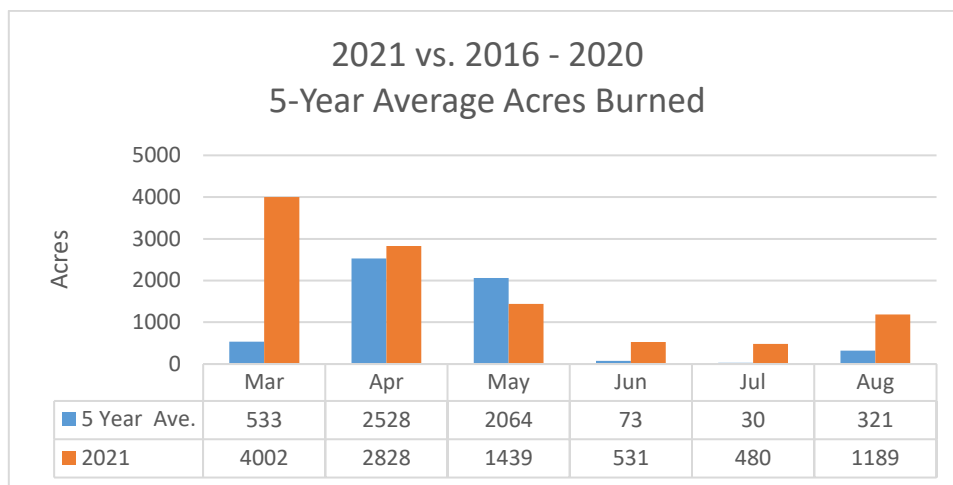
Wildfire occurrence in Minnesota in 2021 greatly exceeded the previous five-year average (Figure 1). There has been an above-average number of fires in all snow-free months thus far this year. An abnormally early snowmelt in March led to a greater than threefold increase in fire occurrences for the month. Usually, late March, April, and May is the primary spring fire season and June, July, and August are typically considered low fire occurrence months. This year, however, there were 509 fires during the June-July-August time period on lands where the state has lead responsibility for wildfire suppression, compared to a five-year average (2016-2020) of 77 state-led wildfire responses for that period.

**Figure 1.** Comparative number of state-led wildfire responses.



With the exception of May, the numbers of acres burned to date in 2021 also exceeded the five-year monthly average (Figure 2). The deviation from the five-year average was particularly high in June, July and August. During these three summer months, 2,200 acres of land burned for which the state had the lead role in wildfire response, compared to the five-year average of 424 acres for state-led responses in this same period.

**Figure 2.** Comparative acres burned.

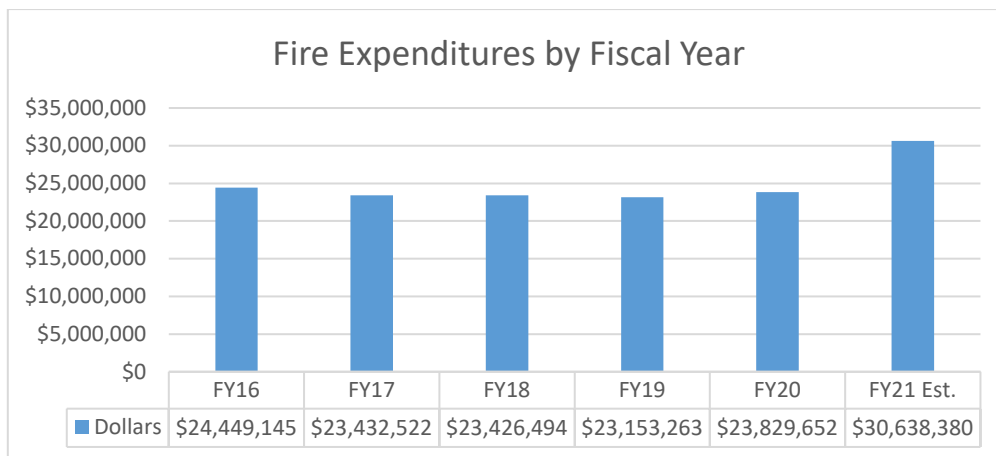


<sup>3</sup> The number and acreage of wildfires summarized in this update include only those fires where the State of Minnesota has the lead responsibility for suppression activities.

## Costs of State-led Emergency Wildfire Response

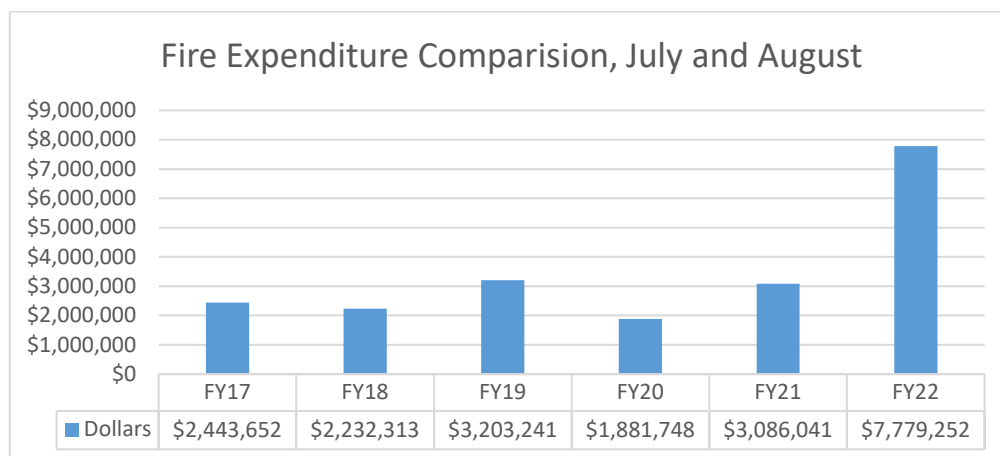
The costs of emergency wildfire response in a given year are directly related to the severity of wildfire risk and the number and size of resulting wildfires for which the state has the lead response role. As illustrated in Figure 3, FY21 saw a marked increase in DNR emergency wildfire expenditures compared to the previous five fiscal years. The five-year (FY16-20) average General Fund expenditures for emergency wildfire response was \$23,658,000.<sup>4</sup> The estimated costs for FY21 are \$30,638,000.<sup>5</sup> This is a 29.5 percent increase over the previous five-year average and reflects the high wildfire activity DNR experienced in the second half of FY21. Notably, this increase in costs is lower in magnitude than the increase in incidents or acreage burned. This is because the portion of the state’s annual costs associated with maintaining basic response capacity is relatively fixed.

**Figure 3.** DNR emergency wildfire response expenditures, FY16-21.



The available cost data from July and August indicate that this season’s high wildfire expenditures are continuing into FY22 (Figure 4). DNR’s emergency wildfire response expenditures in July and August of this year totaled \$7,779,000. This compares to an average expenditure for the first two months of FY17-21 of \$2,569,000.

**Figure 4.** DNR emergency wildfire response expenditures for July and August, FY17-22.



<sup>4</sup> Based on data from each *Annual Report on Emergency Firefighting Expenditures Report to the Legislature* for FY16-20.

<sup>5</sup> Based on actual FY21 expenditures as of September 8, 2021, and estimated remaining reimbursement obligations under interagency cooperative wildfire suppression agreements (anticipated to be less than \$200,000).

This year the wildfire season and associated expenditures are extending well into September. DNR anticipates that expenditures in the first half of FY22 will greatly exceed the five-year annual average for this same period. There is the potential for this higher rate of expenditure to continue into calendar year 2022 if wildfire conditions do not improve in the coming months.

## **Conclusion**

Minnesota has experienced an exceptionally active wildfire season to date in 2021, with elevated activity starting in early spring and continuing through the summer. In order to protect life and property, significantly greater resources have been required for state-led wildfire response this year. This has led to increased DNR expenditures from both the direct and open General Fund appropriations for emergency wildfire response compared to recent years. These expenditures will be apparent in both FY21 and FY22.

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