

Fighting wildfires: Short-term cost cuts mean higher long-term expenses

The cost of fighting wildfires has soared in recent years. Factors include:

- inflation in equipment costs
- rising labor costs
- intensified fire behavior triggered by climate change
- development in forested areas

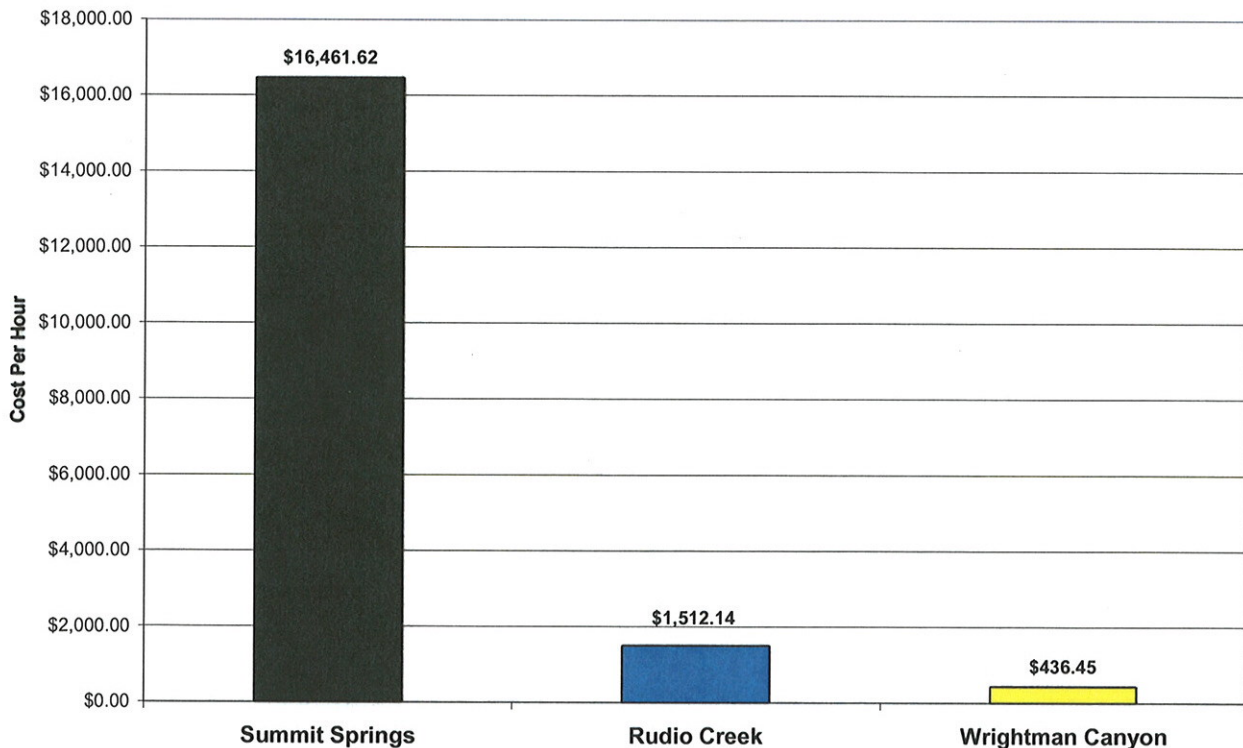
The Oregon Department of Forestry (ODF) has long adhered to a policy of aggressive firefighting as the most effective and cost-efficient way to protect the forest resource.

Hitting fires fast and hard while they are relatively small is not cheap. It requires a substantial force of fire crews, fire engines and aircraft to stop upwards of 94 percent of the hundreds of wildfires each summer at 10 acres or smaller.

But the alternative is far more expensive. A single wildfire that escapes control and grows into a major incident can cost millions to extinguish - \$16,000 *per hour* or more depending on the circumstances – while causing extensive damage, smoke emissions, and public disruptions such as evacuations or road closures. If the existing firefighting force is curtailed to save money up front, the inevitable result will be much higher costs down the line.

This chart compares the total hourly costs of fighting a large wildfire, the 2008 Summit Springs Complex, with two smaller fires that year, Rudio Creek and Wrightman Canyon.

ODF Fire Costs Per Hour



Rudio Creek and Wrightman Canyon were stopped quickly during the initial-attack phase – thus the relatively low costs per hour. Summit Springs burned for nearly two weeks and consumed about 2,000 acres. An ODF incident management team, hundreds of firefighters, and aerial and ground equipment were needed to stop the blaze. **Landowners and the public paid an average of \$16,000 per hour over 12 days to put out the 2,000-acre Summit Springs Complex fires.**

The total suppression cost of \$4.8 million for the Summit Springs Complex breaks out this way:

- Hand crews - \$1.7 million
- Aircraft - \$1 million
- Equipment - \$900,000
- Incident support* - \$850,000
- Direct personnel** - \$300,000

*Includes such items as food, sanitation, campsite rental and Dept. of Corrections camp crews.

**Includes personnel that work directly on the fire line, such as division supervisors and heavy equipment operators. Firefighting hand crews are listed under their own category.

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