

Other nations are facing severe firefighting shortages heading into peak season. India is reportedly facing a firefighting deficit of around 1.5 million firefighters compared with global standards, according to [reporting from the Indian Express](#).

Japan, which saw its [largest wildfire in over 30 years](#) in February, is also facing a significant shortage of volunteer firefighters. The nation's numbers have fallen from nearly 2 million in 1956 to 746,681 in 2024, a 60% reduction, according to the [Japan news site Nippon](#).



Crews fighting Ofunato wildfire. Credit: FDMA

## LA Fires – a personal perspective



Guest Writer May 7, 2025 California, Opinion, United States, Wildfire 1 Comment



By Kelly Martin

This is not a reflection about who or what to blame. But blame was the tagline I was watching on TV within the first 24 hours of the Palisades and Eaton fires that wiped out swathes of communities in southern California. This is my account of what I saw and my contemplation about what comes next.

I needed to see this urban conflagration for myself. The fires were so outside my 40 years of wildland fire experience there was no rational part of my brain to reconcile what I was witnessing.

[This article first appeared in [\*Wildfire Magazine – Special Edition: LA Fires.\*](#)]

I went to bed Jan. 7 and woke up the next day to a request from California to neighboring states for help. The call for fire engines went out far and wide as an Emergency Management Assistance Compact (EMAC) request – a national disaster-relief compact that allows states to share resources during emergencies or disasters. Could it be possible that our little White Bird Fire Department (population 100) could be part of this effort? I was repeating over and over, we have to go, we have to go, we have to go. The morning of Jan. 9, I found myself loading my summertime fire gear in the dead of a snowy winter in Idaho and heading south for our two day trip to Los Angeles.

After I retired in 2019 from a 35-year career working for the US Forest Service and National Park Service I found myself volunteering for many opportunities to give back to my community and the larger wildland fire community nationally and internationally. These opportunities allow me to see things differently. I'm no longer a fire chief or a member of an incident management team; I'm no longer a supervisor. In LA, I was happy to be serving as a firefighter, as I had done in 1984 when I was humble, curious and excited for the journey ahead. We left the frigid winter of central Idaho and after two days of traveling, slowly emerged into the envelope of the warm ocean breeze along the Pacific Coast Highway. I see now why so many people are attracted to the ocean and the temperate climate. Many millions of people choose to live in LA, even with the deadly Santa Ana winds always lurking in the background. No amount of human intervention will tame the Santa Anas.

This LA assignment brought my career full circle. I remember the epiphany I had at the Grand Canyon when I was flown by helicopter to the North Rim for a wildfire response. Sleeping in the rocks, dead tired after a seven-day wilderness fire experience, I knew at that moment every day from then on would be dedicated to working as a wildland firefighter. My younger self could never have imagined my older self - responding on an engine to a wildfire in LA, suppressing flare ups behind multi-million-dollar homes, helping people recover something – anything – that was recognizable of their past lives. The extreme contrast of my first fires in the wilderness of Grand Canyon National Park and the urban conflagration of LA could not be greater. I continue to remind myself that I had, and am still having, an amazing career serving the American public, and I'm extremely proud to have been part of a national response.

During the long trip from deep-winter Idaho to summer-like conditions in Malibu, I spent a lot of time being mindful about what I was getting into: tens of thousands of homes gone, lives lost, and billions of dollars of loss that surely would take years of recovery. Our travel route took us through the heart of LA in our oversized engine in gripping traffic. As we were given the wave to pass through the roadblock on the Pacific Coast Highway, it was as if everything became quiet and the anxiety of driving in heavy traffic was gone. It was game time. There was no one on this popular highway, just our five engines in perfect spacing. Our taskforce rumbled toward the first visual of the devastation. When people tell you the scene was unlike anything anyone has ever experienced, it's true. My first impression was how could so many buildings for miles along the Pacific Coast Highway be gone, nothing but rubble – ash, concrete and metal – large, commercial buildings just gone. How do so many buildings built literally on the ocean coast go up in flames? Truly unbelievable.

Our fire engine was assigned a very specific area to suppress hotspots and open flames. We got to know our area quite well and got to know where small spot fires could threaten containment. The physical geography of this area was my first revelation about what we were witnessing. The area was densely populated. Homes lined both sides of steep canyons; some homes were built further up the slope with incredible views of the ocean. I soon discovered why these neighborhoods were very desirable places to live.



*Idaho Taskforce #4 patrolling the burned area near homes for hotspots and taking suppression action to ensure no reignition. Photo by Kelly Martin*

I spent the better part of my fire career working and living in Yosemite National Park and on incident management teams, but Los Angeles County and the City of Los Angeles were new ground for me. I felt like everything was novel again. Our first assignment was along the eastern boundary of the Palisades fire. Our mission was to keep the fire from jumping the canyon and igniting highly volatile vegetation that could reignite the eastern spread and threaten more homes and lives. I felt grateful the most severe Santa Ana winds had passed, but we all felt the heavy weight of protecting multi-million-dollar homes from any further damage.

The next 14 days we covered a lot of ground throughout the Pacific Palisades area and just to the east of the fire's edge to ensure no reignition.

I was struck most by the sheer devastation, block after block of leveled buildings, but occasionally I would see a house still standing and I could not help but study these houses up close. Had firefighters been there? What was the construction of the house? How old was the house? How and why did particular homes survive? The heroic efforts of individual engine companies is likely one of the untold stories that will come out over time. For CAL-FIRE, LA City and LA County and surrounding fire departments that were called into to assist, I can't help but try to put myself on their engines with the firefighters who did their very best – as they had been trained to do – to save life and property, watching home after home, and business after business, fall.

I saw first-hand concrete bank buildings that were but shells. How does a concrete building in the middle of town on flat terrain just disappear? My curiosity began to shift to try to understand the many factors that contributed to this devastation. Weeks later, at home, I was still processing what I saw and the people we met and helped.



*The first glimpse of what was to come; major buildings on both sides of the Pacific Coast Highway were destroyed. Photo by Kelly Martin*

My experiences in LA will forever be part of my fire career: Homes reduced to ashes with Christmas decorations on their hedges and fences; miles and miles of ash, concrete rubble and twisted metal; devastated homes and buildings along the pacific coast washing into the ocean; remaining homes that did not burn that were saved by owners or firefighters and home hardening construction. Amid such destruction and devastation of life and property I looked for color among the chaos. I found small comfort in emerging new flowers, just two weeks after Jan. 7.

LA experienced a great boom after the Second World War. Houses and small lots were the first indication to me that the building boom after 1945 likely did not consider the possibility that whole communities could be destroyed

by fire. Communities continued to expand into the wild, untamed fire territory. Building continued and the population surged from 3.5 million to more than 18 million by the 21st century. Combine the population growth with few if any builders or homeowners who understood home hardening or Firewise™ concepts, and the lack of building codes. Community planning 70 years ago was very different than it is today, and the number of communities still in the path of future wildfires is staggering. Devastating loss of life and property will happen again. Closely packed housing units, vegetation hedges 15 to 20 feet tall between homes, home development in steep canyons, and narrow roads – it's clear how this catastrophic urban conflagration developed.

*Kelly Martin was IAWF President in 2024. Martin retired as chief of fire and aviation, Yosemite National Park, National Park Service, Pacific West Region, in 2019.*

*She began her federal career as a GS-3 with the Apostle Island National Lakeshore in 1984 while attending college and worked her way up through the ranks during her 34-year career. Martin also served on the Presidential Wildland Fire Mitigation and Management Commission. She is the past chair of two National Wildfire Coordinating Group programs: Fire Environment Committee and the National Fire Management Leadership (M-582) course. Martin is a mentor and coach for the national and international Women in Fire Training Exchange (WTREX) program. She now serves as a volunteer firefighter and trainer for White Bird Fire Department in Idaho and started a fire consulting business in 2024.*



Forest-thinning operations involve carefully removing young trees and brush that could easily burn, with a goal of creating conditions less likely to send fire into the crowns of trees.

[AP Photo/Godofredo A. Vásquez](#)

In general, logging that focuses on extracting the highest-value trees leaves thinner trees that are more vulnerable to fires. A study in the Pacific Northwest found that replanting logged land with the same age and size of trees can [lead to more severe fires](#) in the future.

## Research and data are essential

For many people in the western U.S., these risks hit close to home.

I've seen neighborhoods burn and friends and family displaced, and I have

contended with regular air quality warnings and red flag days signaling a high fire risk. I've also seen beloved landscapes, such as those on Cameron Peak, transform when conifers that once made up the forest have not regrown.



Recovery has been slow on Cameron Peak after a severe fire in 2020. This photo was taken in 2024.

Bella Oleksy/University of Colorado

My scientific research group [and collaborations with other scientists](#) have been helping to identify cost-effective solutions. That includes which fuel-treatment methods are most effective, which types of forests and conditions they work best in and how often they are needed. We're also planning research projects to better understand which forests are at

greatest risk of not recovering after fires.

This sort of research is what robust, cost-effective land management is based on.

When careful, evidence-based forest management is replaced with a heavy emphasis on suppressing every fire or clear-cutting forests, I worry that human lives, property and economies, as well as the natural legacy of public lands left to every American, are at risk.

[Laura Dee](#), Associate Professor of Ecology, [University of Colorado Boulder](#)

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## Bambi's Legacy

Guest Writer May 5, 2025 Wildland Firefighter Leave a comment

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BY DYLAN BRUCE

The Bambi Bucket™ is a large, collapsable bucket that attaches to helicopters, allowing them to scoop up gallons of water to drop on fires – it isn't named after Bambi Morey, but she always told younger firefighters in the field that it was.