

## Article

# Remote sensing in rangeland fire ecology: Comparing imagery to measured fire behavior, and burn severity across prescribed burns and wildfires

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**1 Abstract:** Wildland fire scientists have made substantial advances in measuring fire behavior, but properly collecting data is often beyond the capacity of prescribed fire managers and by definition all but impossible for wildfire events. While a method for the immediate assessment of burn severity has been developed around multispectral imagery from space-based Earth observation systems, there has been little comparison of these post-hoc metrics to actual fire behavior. Meanwhile, the application of research results from experimental prescribed burns to rangeland affected by wildfire can be impeded by a lack of understanding of how immediate burn severity differs between wildfires and prescribed burns, especially in rangelands. Overall, much of what is known about wildland fire behavior, severity, and effects comes from forests, whereas rangelands are characterized by having lower fuel loads comprised of fine vegetation that promotes high rates of spread and brief residence time. This paper provides rangeland-specific information on the relationships between direct field-based fire behavior measurements and a space-based index of burn severity (differenced Normalized Burn Ratio, ΔNBR, from Sentinel-2 imagery), and use those data to compare burn severity across 54 prescribed burns in North Dakota, USA, and 29 nearby wildfires in the US Northern Great Plains. In prescribed burns, remotely-sensed burn severity increased with rate of spread and flame temperature 15 cm above the ground, but had no statistically-significant relationship with soil surface temperature. In the semi-arid western zone of the Northern Great Plains, wildfires and prescribed burns had similar, low-moderate severity; wildfires in the eastern zone tended to be moderately-high severity and thus greater than the low severity of the experimental prescribed burns. By describing meaningful gradients in surface fire behavior in rangelands with ΔNBR, even those without the capacity to measure fire behavior in the field can monitor prescribed fire effectiveness and incorporate burn severity in adaptive management plans. Understanding the relationship between burn severity across wildfires and prescribed burns is a critical step in applying knowledge gained from research on prescribed fires to areas impacted by wildfire. Resistance to prescribed burning might be overcome by increasing livestock managers' experience with post-fire forage resources through grazing areas burned in unintentional wildfires, but current practice and policy dissuades or outright prevents ranchers from doing so. Future research ought to connect burn severity with ecosystem recovery metrics to ensure post-fire grazing does not impair rangeland sustainability.

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## 32 1. Introduction

33 Given the ubiquity of fire around the Earth and throughout its history, it is of little wonder that fire has had a primary role in human understandings of nature, shaping both the content and methods of natural philosophy and scientific investigations. From

37 the four natural elements of Empedocles and Aristotle to Faraday's *The Chemical*  
38 *History of a Candle*, the demystification of fire is emblematic of how Western civilization  
39 advanced from mythological to empirical ways of knowing [1]. However, despite the  
40 efforts of reductionism, the scientific method, and controlled experimentation, a complete  
41 understanding of *wildland fire*—combustion in its natural habitat, openly burning through  
42 vegetation—has remained elusive. While the essential contributions of each component  
43 in the fire triangle—heat, oxygen, and fuel—are broadly understood and can be tightly  
44 controlled in closed industrial environments, the degree of nuance in their dynamics in  
45 nature led Sullivan [2, p. 133] to describe wildland fires as “a complex combination  
46 of highly chaotic chemical reactions and physical processes that continually and freely  
47 propagate through spatially-variable biomass fuels across variable terrain influenced by  
48 spatially and temporally varying atmospheric conditions.”

49 Wildland fire scientists use the term *fire behavior* to describe energy release by the  
50 combustion of vegetation in terms of how fast fire moves, how much heat is released, and  
51 how long burning lasts [3,4]. Some of these are immediately observable—one can measure  
52 rate of spread simply by timing the passage of a flame front between points of a known  
53 distance apart; the length of a flame is related to energy release [5]. But each of these  
54 metrics require direct observation of the flame front, which is often precluded by smoke,  
55 lack of access, or the general danger to personnel posed by fire moving freely about. And  
56 while post-burn observations such as scorch height on trees can be used to infer intensity  
57 after the fact [5], such methods have limited value in the rangeland ecosystems that cover  
58 approximately 54% of the Earth's terrestrial surface and are characterized by having few  
59 if any trees [6].

### 60 1.1. Direct measurements of fire behavior

61 Several methods directly measure fire behavior beyond human line of sight. As a  
62 prominent property of fire is heat, wildland fire scientists have long tried to measure fire  
63 behavior as temperature. For at least 75 years, measuring temperature in wildland fires  
64 has predominantly relied upon *thermocouples*—pairs of two wires, composed of different  
65 metals, each of which transmit slightly different electric signals when their shared junction  
66 is heated; at the other end of the cable, differences in electrical properties across the two  
67 wires can be detected and converted to temperature [7–11].

68 Despite their ubiquity in wildland fire research, thermocouple systems have substantial  
69 limitations. Firstly, the physical limitations: *e.g.*, response lags as the thermocouple  
70 material itself gains and loses heat from the material with which it is in contact, and  
71 underestimations due to the fact the junction is losing heat to the ambient environment as  
72 well as absorbing it [12,13]. These errors are greatest when the temperature discrepancy  
73 between the junction and the media is greatest [14], which is exactly when flame fronts  
74 arrive at the sensor. Finally, the junction retains heat even after the flame front passes and  
75 continues to register elevated temperatures; this post-frontal period is often erroneously  
76 interpreted as “residual heating” even when the media the junction is in contact with  
77 has returned to ambient temperature [9].

78 Secondly, even accurately measured temperature is a poor metric of fire behavior.  
79 Sensor placement has an outsized impact on temperature readings: the temperature of  
80 a single flame varies with distance from its base, and the vertical distribution of fuel  
81 can effect differences in the heating profile as great as whether temperatures increase or  
82 decrease with height away from the ground. Furthermore, recent work has called into  
83 question the decades-old concept that organisms have specific temperature mortality  
84 thresholds [16,17]; better is to quantify the total exposure of tissue to heat energy over  
85 time [18–20]. Thus, Alexander [21, p. 350] concluded, “Measuring temperature merely  
86 introduces a cumbersome, secondary step in the study of fire effects when direct linkage  
87 to one or more fire-behavior characteristics would be more profitable,” and Bova &  
88 Dickinson [22] urge fire ecologists to move “beyond fire temperatures.”



**Figure 1.** The FeatherFlame is an example of a thermocouple-based system designed to measure two-dimensional rate of spread, shown here deployed before a prescribed fire (left) and after the fire had passed (right). The 1 m equilateral triangle holds three K-type thermocouples 15 cm above the soil surface. Using the timestamps associated with flame temperatures recorded by the Arduino-based datalogger allows calculation of rate of spread through the array. A fourth thermocouple is placed under litter at the soil surface. The cylindrical galvanized cap protects the datalogger from heat, allowing *in situ* fire behavior measurements. The system on the left is shown deployed with optional passive flame height sensors following [15].

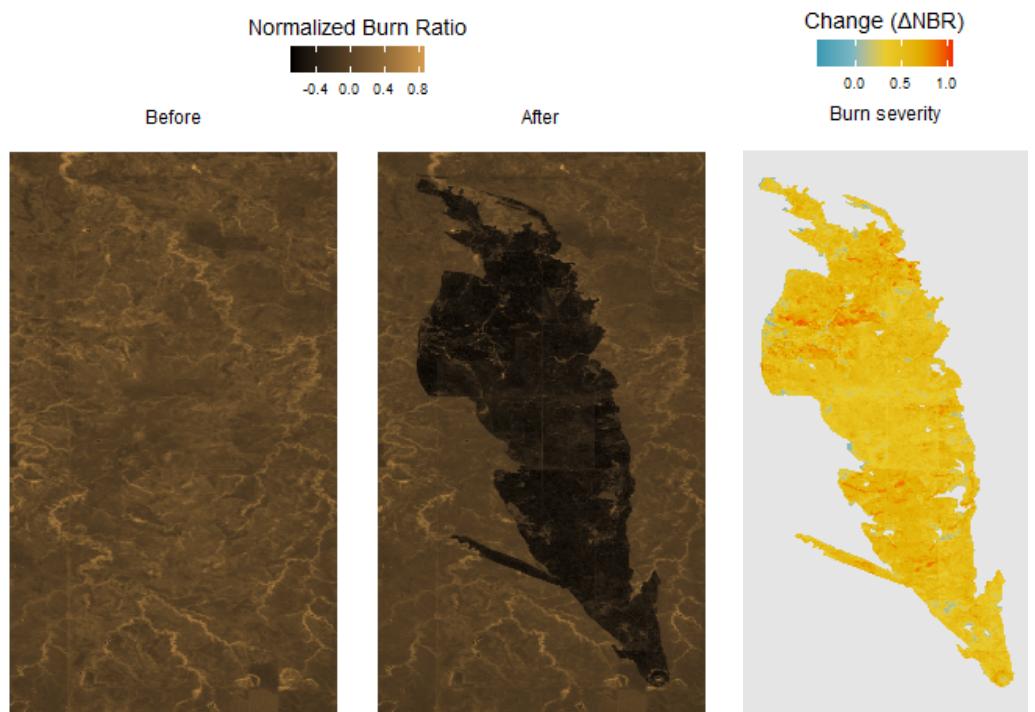
For many wildland fire scientists, rate of spread has become the most reliable metric of fire behavior—conceptually simple; relatively easy to observe, measure, and report; and a step towards calculating intensity, as an input in the Byram equation [23]. Rate of spread isn't perfect—it is affected by each component of the fire triangle but not singularly attributable to any, meaning several combinations of variables in the wildland fire environment can produce the same rate of spread [4]. But rate of spread is a common output in fire behavior prediction models [24,25], particularly of head fires spreading with the wind. While such one-dimensional rate of spread is theoretically relatively easy to measure, especially during prescribed burns—stakes can be pre-positioned and a stopwatch used to time flame front travel between them—in reality, these measurements are challenged first by needing to ensure stakes are positioned perpendicular to the flame front, and second by needing to be within visual contact of the fuelbed ahead of the advancing fire.

Alternatively, measuring fire spread through a two-dimensional array of sensors has two advantages: it can be calculated regardless of the direction of spread, and does not need a human present [4]. Thermocouple dataloggers can be used, but with the twist that the information of most value is the timestamp recorded when the flame front hits each sensor in the array: trigonometry can be applied to these arrival times to calculate the average speed at which the flame front moved through the array [26–30, Fig. 1].

### 1.2. Remote sensing in fire ecology

Beyond field-based measurements, space-based earth observation systems are increasingly being applied in wildland fire science [31]. Fire ecologists have made particular use of the Normalized Burn Ratio (NBR), a multispectral product derived from Near-Infrared and Shortwave Infrared wavelengths, which have specific responses to reflectance changes caused by burning [32]. Changes effected by a specific fire event can be isolated by subtracting, or *differencing*, post-fire NBR values from NBR values of the same point prior to the fire, creating a metric called Differenced Normalized Burn Ratio ( $\Delta$ NBR; Fig. 2).

Fire ecologists use  $\Delta$ NBR to estimate burn severity, defined in the context of interpreting remotely-sensed products as “the degree of environmental change caused



**Figure 2.** An example of a wildland fire from multispectral imagery; see Fig. A1 for true color imagery, including a capture of the fire while it was burning. The longest axis of this fire extended 12 km (7.5 miles). *Left:* The Normalized Burn Ratio for Before and After scenes from a fire in North Dakota, derived from Sentinel-2 Near-Infrared and Shortwave Infrared sensors. *Right:* Burn severity is calculated as the difference between the Before and After NBR (Differenced NBR, or  $\Delta$ NBR), a measure of how much aboveground material the fire removed via combustion.

by fire [32, p. LA-6].” Temporal scale is a very important factor in the definition and interpretation of a  $\Delta$ NBR value. Generally speaking, burn severity assessments can be divided into *extended* and *immediate* [32,33]. The Monitoring Trends in Burn Severity program uses both imagery from immediately after a fire, to assess first-order effects on soil and vegetation consumption, and from the next growing season, to identify overall mortality to tree canopies in forests [34]. The temporal distinction is particularly important in grasslands, where fire might remove all aboveground plant biomass down to mineral soil—by most definitions, high severity in an immediate assessment—but herbaceous plants have typically regrown by the end of the next growing season, which an extended assessment would classify as low severity [35].

### 1.3. Fire management in the 21<sup>st</sup> century

European colonization altered fire regimes around the world through top-down, command-and-control management that viewed wildland fire as destructive—and ironically, might have exacerbated the issue. As in many European and post-European nations, the United States had tight control over wildland fire by the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century by suppressing unintentional ignitions and excluding intentional ignitions, especially cultural burning [3,36]. But several ecosystems have been diagnosed with fire deficits in which the decades-long elimination of fire has had negative ecological effects and led to a buildup of vegetation biomass that drives high-intensity fires that are often uncharacteristically severe and difficult to control [37,38]. Management interventions often focus on fuel reduction through mechanical thinning or prescribed burning; conducted under less extreme conditions than wildfires typically occur, these “good” fires consume hazardous

fuels without effecting high severity to the rest of the ecosystem, and have shown varying degrees of effectiveness in reducing the severity of subsequent wildfires [39,40].

While the fire deficit affects most ecosystems in the United States, the prevalence of the “good fire/bad fire” duality has its origins in forests, with little critical examination of how or even whether it applies to rangelands. The colonial vanguard described a substantial amount of fire throughout the US Great Plains [41], including the Northern Great Plains, specifically [42,43]. But colonization forced a transition from Indigenous fire use and native ungulates to a commercial ranching industry that relied upon grass being fed to cattle, not destroyed by fires [41]. Although this ethos is present today, especially in North Dakota [44], a growing body of work demonstrates the benefits of prescribed fire for livestock production [45–47]. Even without active prescribed fire programs, a substantial portion of the Northwestern Great Plains already has a high incidence of fire—the ecoregion has one of the highest densities of wildfires in the US [48]. But there is a paucity of information on whether burn severity differs between prescribed burns and wildfires in the Northern Plains.

#### 1.4. Objectives and hypotheses

The intent of this paper is two-fold: to provide rangeland-specific information on the relationships between direct field-based fire behavior measurements and space-based measurements of burn severity, and use those data to compare burn severity across prescribed burns and wildfires. Connecting remotely-sensed data to direct measurements helps calibrate assessments and monitoring programs that are unable to collect field-based fire behavior data but want insight into whether variation in remotely-sensed products has a meaningful relationship with ecological processes on the ground. Understanding how burn severity differs between prescribed burns and wildfires informs the transferability of ecological data on fire effects from burning experiments to broader landscapes affected by wildfire.

The specific hypotheses tested here include:

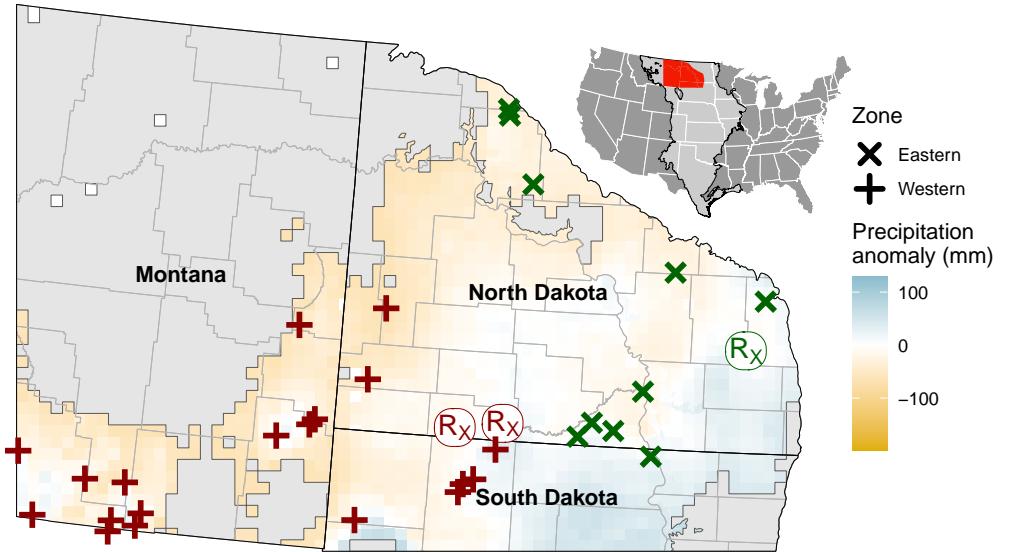
1. A positive linear relationship between field-based fire behavior and space-based burn severity metrics, as higher-intensity fires remove more aboveground plant material and expose more of the mineral surface to satellites.
2. No difference in burn severity among wildfires and prescribed burns, as prescribed burns have been shown to demonstrate a wide range of burn severity that likely overlaps with that of wildfires [e.g., 49].

## 2. Methods

### 2.1. Study area

The primary geographical scope of this study is the Northern Great Plains of the United States, specifically two experimental research locations in south-central and southwestern North Dakota (Fig. 3). The south-central research location, referred to hereafter as the eastern location and in the eastern zone, is the North Dakota State University Central Grasslands Research Extension Center near Streeter, ND, located within the Northwestern Glaciated Plains in a relatively humid, mixed-grass prairie pothole landscape known as the Missouri Coteau.

The southwestern research location, referred to hereafter as the western location and in the western zone, is focused around the North Dakota State University Hettinger Research Extension Center in Hettinger, ND, located within the semi-arid mixed-grass prairie of the Northwestern Great Plains. Research activities at the western location were conducted by North Dakota State University personnel on two blocks of Center-managed rangeland pastures within 5 km of the Center and another privately-owned ranch approximately 20 km to the east of Hettinger.



**Figure 3.** Location of rangeland research areas with experimental prescribed burns ( $R_x$ ) and comparison wildfires ( $\times$ , +) in the Northern Great Plains (green icons indicate eastern zone, brown indicates west). Precipitation anomaly refers to the difference from mean annual precipitation at each of the western and eastern research locations for the study period (2017–2024); grey shaded areas have precipitation anomalies that exceed  $\pm 3$  standard deviations of mean annual precipitation and thus wildfires from these areas were excluded. Eastern and western zones align loosely with EPA Level III ecoregions NW Glaciated Plains and NW Great Plains, respectively (Fig. A2), with the exception of five wildfires near the Missouri River in south-central North Dakota being assigned to the eastern zone, which has substantially fewer wildfires than the western zone for comparison. Inset: Study region within broader US Great Plains and continental US.

## 190 2.2. Data sources

191 This study reports on both prescribed burns conducted as part of rangeland ecology  
 192 and management research, and wildfires that spread from unintentional ignitions in the  
 193 region. Data in this study are derived from two sources: fire behavior data collected *in*  
 194 *agris*—from field-based sensors recording temperature as prescribed fires occurred—and  
 195 remotely-sensed products from space-based Earth observation satellites. Fire behavior  
 196 data collected *in agris* consist of flame front rate of spread, flame temperature, and  
 197 soil surface temperature. Remotely-sensed data consist of immediate burn severity  
 198 (differenced Normalized Burn Ratio, or  $\Delta$ NBR). Each of these data types and products  
 199 are described below, and script for their processing and analysis in the R statistical  
 200 environment [50] is freely available from Ag Data Commons [51].

### 201 2.2.1. Location of fire incidents

202 **Prescribed burns.**—54 individual experimental burn units were treated with  
 203 prescribed broadcast burning between 2017 and 2020 by North Dakota State University  
 204 personnel associated with the Hettinger (22) and Central Grasslands (32) Research  
 205 Extension Centers. Burns were conducted as investigations into rangeland ecosystem  
 206 responses to prescribed burning; results of this research and more extensive descriptions  
 207 of experimental design have been published for both Central Grasslands [45,52,53] and  
 208 Hettinger [54,55] Research Extension Centers. All burns at Central Grasslands and 15 at

Hettinger were part of patch-burn grazing research in which 64 ha pastures were divided into four, 16 ha patches, one of which was burned annually. Burns at Central Grasslands were conducted in the spring (April–May) and in the fall (October) at Hettinger using adaptive ignition strategies to maximize burned area within each unit, including ring, strip, and spiral ignitions. Seven additional fall burns at Hettinger were conducted on private ranch, with areas ranging from 5–12 ha [56].

**Wildfires.**—To compare burn severity effected by experimental prescribed burns to that produced by wildfires, a set of comparison wildfires were identified from the National Interagency Fire Center (NIFC) Interagency Fire Perimeter History—All Years geospatial database [57]. Incidents in the database within the study region were filtered to wildfires of at least 10 ha that occurred between 2017–2024. As North Dakota had the fewest wildfire incidents in the region (Table A1), and very few occurred near the Research Extension Centers (Fig. A2), two additional steps were taken to provide sufficient sample size by extending beyond North Dakota while maximizing biophysical comparability with the prescribed burn locations:

Firstly, because wildfires spread across crop fields and pastures as well as through rangeland, the area within each wildfire perimeter identified as rangeland in the United States Forest Service (USFS) Extent of Coterminal US Rangelands raster layer [58] was summed, and incidents <20% rangeland were excluded.

Secondly, because the study area spans a wide precipitation gradient (Fig. A2) that effects substantial differences in fuel load and plant community composition, comparison wildfires were limited to those within 3 standard deviations of mean annual precipitation at the Research Extension Center in each zone (Fig. 3). Mean and standard deviation in annual precipitation for the period 2017–2024 were calculated from daily weather data collected by the respective North Dakota Agricultural Weather Network stations at each Center [59,60]. Precipitation anomalies across the study region were determined by creating a 10 × 10 km resolution grid and retrieving the mean annual precipitation, 2017–2024, for each cell centroid from the TerraClimate dataset [61], accessed with the *climateR* package [62] for R. Centroids from wildfire perimeters were spatially joined with the nearest precipitation anomaly value in the grid, and incidents where the mean annual precipitation differed by more than 3 standard deviations from that of the Research Extension Center in that zone were excluded. Ten incidents were included as comparison wildfires in the eastern zone, and 19 in the western zone.

Both prescribed burn and wildfire features were overlaid as polygons onto true color land surface imagery from the United States Geological Survey's National Map [63] to identify and exclude non-vegetated areas, such as ponds, areas of bare soil, and especially for wildfire perimeters, elements of the built environment such as farmsteads and petroleum well pads. As the NIFC perimeters often reflect general outlines of suppression efforts rather than boundaries of actual wildfire burned area, all perimeters were inspected visually over true color post-fire imagery and vertices edited for spatial accuracy.

### 2.2.2. Fire behavior data

Field measurements of fire behavior were collected from 26 of the prescribed burns described above [30,56]. Briefly, fire behavior data were collected with K-type thermocouples (Omega Engineering, Inc., Norwalk, Connecticut, USA) attached to electronic data loggers using two different systems:

Firstly, most prescribed burns (23) were sampled with the FeatherFlame system [29], which consists of three thermocouples arranged in a 1m equilateral triangle 15 cm above the soil surface, and one thermocouple placed at the soil surface, all read by a single Arduino-based microcontroller writing temperature data at 1.5 Hz to a removable data storage card. When arranged as such, the FeatherFlame system provides information on rate of spread, flame temperature at 15 cm, and soil surface temperature [56]. Nine FeatherFlame units were deployed in each of these 23 burns.

262 Secondly, fire behavior at three prescribed burns was measured with single-channel  
263 HOBO® U12 thermocouple dataloggers (Onset Computer Corporation, Bourne, Mass-  
264 chusetts, USA) logging at 1.0 Hz. At three sub-sample points within each burn, two  
265 loggers were deployed, one with a thermocouple placed at the soil surface and another at  
266 15 cm above the soil surface. Rate of spread information was not available from these  
267 three instances of data from single-channel loggers.

#### 268 2.2.3. Remotely-sensed data

269 Burn severity—a measure of how much aboveground material was removed by  
270 wildland fire combustion—was calculated as the difference in Normalized Burn Ratio  
271 ( $\Delta\text{NBR}$ ) from Normalized Burn Ratio (NBR) values in two images, the most-recent  
272 cloud-free image taken just before the burn, and the first cloud-free image taken just after  
273 the burn [e.g., 64]. The NBR index is derived from the Near-Infrared and Shortwave  
274 Infrared bands [32], and the subtraction of the NBR value in the post-burn image from  
275 the pre-burn NBR value at the same pixel provide  $\Delta\text{NBR}$ .

276 NBR data were retrieved from the European Space Agency (ESA) Sentinel-2 mission's  
277 L2A collection, which provides multispectral imagery at 10 m  $\times$  10 m resolution from  
278 2017 to present. All data were downloaded as geo-referenced raster files using the freely-  
279 available ESA Copernicus Brower, cropped to the bounding box of each visually-verified  
280 perimeter, generated with a custom EvalScript [49], following visual inspection of each  
281 area of interest in true color images to ensure quality, cloud-free imagery.

282 For the subset of prescribed burns with fire behavior measurements, the coordinates  
283 recorded when each datalogger was deployed were used to extract remotely-sensed  
284 data from the pre-burn and post-burn multispectral Sentinel-2 rasters using the *terra*  
285 package for R [65], to allow spatially-explicit tests of the relationship between *in agri*  
286 measurements and remotely-sensed data at the finest scale available. For the broader  
287 comparison of prescribed burns and wildfires, each perimeter was reduced with an internal  
288 20 m buffer (at least two raster cells in Sentinel-2 imagery) to minimize edge effects,  
289 and  $\pm 100$  gridded sample points were distributed within each perimeter. For wildfires,  
290 sampled pixels were limited to those identified as rangeland in the USFS product [58].  
291 Remotely-sensed data were again extracted from the locally-downloaded multispectral  
292 rasters using *terra*.

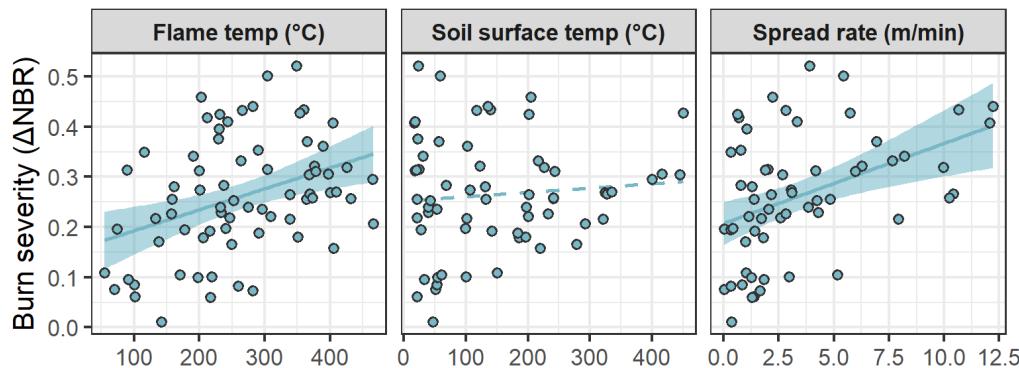
#### 293 2.3. Statistical analysis

294 Linear regression models were used to compare remotely-sensed burn severity against  
295 *in agri* fire behavior data from prescribed burns, and to compare burn severity across  
296 prescribed burns and wildfires. In models comparing the 26 prescribed burns only, plot-  
297 level data from each experimental location were combined and fit with location and burn  
298 event as a nested random effect in linear mixed-effect models using the *lmer* function in  
299 the *lme4* package for R [66]. Statistical significance was determined with a  $\chi^2$  test of  
300 deviance against null, intercept-only models.

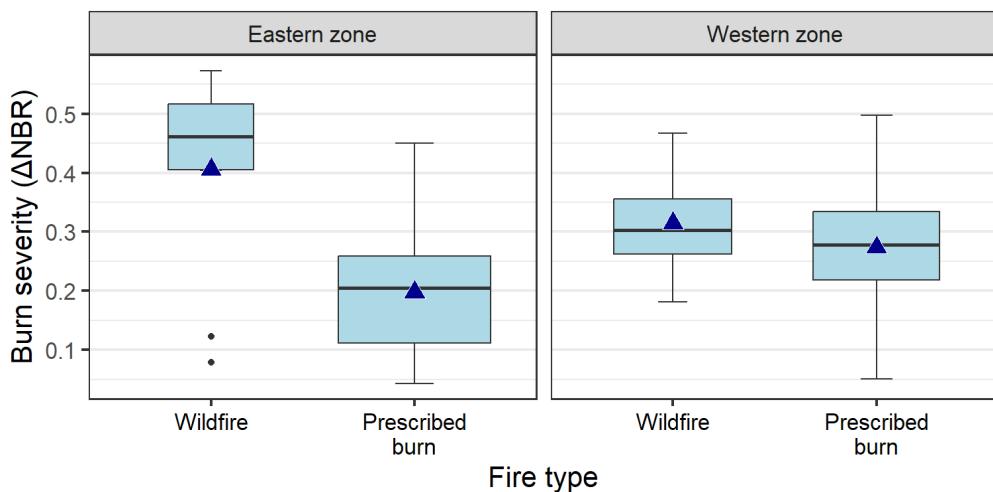
301 Models comparing burn severity across the 54 prescribed burns and 29 wildfires  
302 were fit with ordinary least squares regression using the *lm* function. These data were  
303 summarized as mean values for each unique fire event to eliminate pseudoreplication.  
304 Visual evidence suggested a likely statistical interaction between fire type and the two  
305 zones of the study area, which was confirmed by a significant interaction term in a global  
306 model fitting burn severity against fire type  $\times$  zone. Post-hoc comparisons of prescribed  
307 fires and wildfires within each zone were conducted with the *emmeans* package [67] by  
308 applying the *joint\_tests* function to the full model to produce an ANOVA table of test  
309 statistics for each zone.

### 310 3. Results

311 Remotely-sensed burn severity—as measured by differenced Normalized Burn Ratio  
312 ( $\Delta\text{NBR}$ )—increased with two directly-measured fire behavior responses (Fig. 4)—flame



**Figure 4.** Burn severity—as measured by differenced Normalized Burn Ratio ( $\Delta\text{NBR}$ )—plotted against three fire behavior metrics measured during 26 prescribed burns in south-central and southwestern North Dakota. Solid trendlines with 95% confidence intervals denote statistically-significant linear relationships in linear mixed-effect regression models.



**Figure 5.** Burn severity—as measured by differenced Normalized Burn Ratio ( $\Delta\text{NBR}$ )—across 29 wildfires and 54 prescribed burns in the two zones of the study region (see map, Fig. 3). Triangles represent group means. Width of boxes scale with group sample size.

temperature ( $\beta = -6.5\text{e-}4 \pm 1.1\text{e-}4$ ,  $\chi^2 = 28.2$ ,  $P < 0.001$ ) and rate of spread ( $\beta = 5.8\text{e-}3 \pm 2.7\text{e-}3$ ,  $\chi^2 = 4.3$ ,  $P = 0.04$ )—but burn severity had no statistically-significant relationship with soil surface temperature ( $\chi^2 = 2.0$ ,  $P > 0.05$ ).

In the comparison of burn severity ( $\Delta\text{NBR}$ ) across prescribed burns and wildfires in the two zones of the study region (Fig. 5), there was a statistically-significant interaction between fire type and zone ( $F_{1,79} = 10$ ,  $P < 0.01$ ). In post-hoc pairwise contrasts, burn severity did not differ between prescribed burns and wildfires in the semi-arid western zone ( $F_{1,79} = 1.5$ ,  $P > 0.05$ ), but burn severity was statistically-significantly greater in wildfires than prescribed burns in the relatively higher-rainfall eastern zone ( $F_{1,79} = 28$ ,  $P < 0.001$ ).

#### 4. Discussion

Using the US Northern Great Plains as a case study, this paper makes two primary comparisons that can support wildland fire scientists and managers in rangeland ecosystems worldwide. Firstly, three field-based fire behavior measurements (rate of spread, flame temperature, and soil surface temperature) from prescribed burns are compared to remotely-sensed burn severity (differenced Normalized Burn Ratio,  $\Delta\text{NBR}$ ), and secondly, burn severity is compared between prescribed burns and wildfires. These comparisons

330 provide partial support for each of two stated hypotheses: there is a positive linear  
331 relationship between remotely-sensed burn severity and measured flame temperature and  
332 rate of spread (but not soil surface temperature), and prescribed burn severity is not  
333 different from that effected by wildfires in the semi-arid western zone of the region (but  
334 wildfire severity is greater in the eastern zone).

335 These results increase the range of options that provide insight into the variability  
336 of fire behavior and immediate fire effects in rangelands, facilitating better application of  
337 research from prescribed burns to areas affected by wildfire. Below are some considerations  
338 for both conventionally-collected and remotely-sensed data, and knowledge gaps that  
339 will require additional research to enhance the utility of these resources in wildland fire  
340 science and management applications.

#### 341 4.1. *Remote sensing as complement, or even surrogate, to field-based measurements*

342 Most apparently, managers unable to deploy fire behavior sensors during prescribed  
343 burns appear to be able to use freely-available remotely-sensed data on burn severity  
344 to describe meaningful gradients in fire behavior, and even those able to deploy sensors  
345 can use remotely-sensed data to describe fire behavior at spatial scales beyond sample  
346 points. As such, remotely-sensed burn severity can enhance *wildland fire science literacy*,  
347 the ability of scientists and managers to express and understand characteristics of the  
348 fire environment that give context for fire effects [68,69]. More specifically, rangeland  
349 fire ecologists can include summaries of burn severity alongside, or in lieu of, actual  
350 fire behavior measurements in their reports to help contextualize fire effects within a  
351 dose-response framework instead of a simple burned/unburned dichotomy [70].

352 Although using time-temperature data from thermocouple dataloggers to calculate  
353 two-dimensional rate of spread is considered a more robust measure of wildland fire  
354 behavior than flame temperature alone, rate of spread is still an imperfect metric. On  
355 one hand, rate of spread is a description of the wildland fire system, and does quantify  
356 specific physical processes within the fire environment [4]. Thus, some fire scientists  
357 measure responses such as total energy flux using radiometers to detect infrared radiation  
358 [71–73], but such systems can be logistically challenging and expensive [74].

359 On the other hand, rate of spread is the initial output from several standard  
360 mathematical fire behavior prediction models [75,76], and is thus a useful connection  
361 between predicting and evaluating fire behavior. Rate of spread is also an input for  
362 equations that calculate fire intensity, the value of which “lies not so much in the exact  
363 description of energy, but rather in the provision of numerical data for comparing fires  
364 [21, p. 354]”. Knowing that burn severity scales with rate of spread adds a monitoring  
365 option for managers to use fire behavior prediction models as part of planning burns that  
366 meet specific objectives—and deciding under what conditions to conduct those burns  
367 effectively and safely.

368 A particular concern with space-based multispectral products is a potentially coarser  
369 resolution than many processes within the fire environment and plant community play  
370 out. The inherent heterogeneity of wildland fuelbeds introduces variability in fire behavior  
371 that is critical to the survival of many species in fire-dependent ecosystems, such as how  
372 gaps between the vegetation that serves as wildland fuels reduce microsite fire intensity  
373 and thus severity to propagules [77,78]. Analyses of post-fire patch dynamics suggest  
374 grain sizes—the finest scale of spatial independence—ranging from 0.5–10 m [79–83]. But  
375 Sentinel-2 products are comprised of an average value for each 10 × 10 m pixel, and in  
376 the case of indices including NBR, one of the bands used in the calculations is collected  
377 at 20 × 20 m resolution. Thus, the pixel-scale averages in remotely-sensed severity data  
378 might obscure finer-scale instances of high severity that are ecologically meaningful to  
379 the individual organisms that comprise the broader-scale community. Research from  
380 forests suggest this might be more of a concern for prescribed fires: Extreme fire  
381 weather conditions, more typical of wildfires, can override stand-level heterogeneity to  
382 effect more uniform severity [84,85]. In either case, remotely-sensed severity metrics

383 should be compared to ecosystem-specific research on direct and indirect fire effects at  
384 the scale of relevant biological processes to determine how well severity indices correlate  
385 with rangeland fire effects, in addition to fire behavior.

386 These data corroborate other evidence that the biotic and abiotic factors that  
387 typically have linear relationships with surface fire behavior metrics (*e.g.*, rate of spread,  
388 flame properties) appear to have little correlation with soil heating. A subset of the  
389 prescribed burns included here were subject to a previous analysis of how fuel and fire  
390 weather conditions affected measured fire behavior, which reported that rate of spread  
391 increased with wind speed and flame temperature increased with fuel load and declined  
392 with fuel moisture; however, no fuel or weather factor had a statistically-significant effect  
393 on soil surface temperature [30]. Likewise, this study showed no linear relationship  
394 between burn severity and soil surface temperature (Fig. 4). Similar patterns—or rather,  
395 lack thereof—between variables that drive rate of spread not correlating with soil surface  
396 temperature have been reported elsewhere [80].

397 The consistent lack of connections between the fire environment, soil heating, and  
398 burn severity suggest that at least for rangeland fuelbeds in which the primary carrier of  
399 fire is fine fuels (graminoids and herbaceous vegetation), a burned/unburned dichotomy  
400 might in fact be sufficient to explain first-order (direct) fire effects to soil. While it is  
401 certainly true that nutrient pools and microbial abundance are directly affected by soil  
402 heating, soil properties in rangelands recover within days or weeks of even relatively  
403 severe fires [56,86]; fungal communities are especially resilient to the low soil heating in  
404 grass-carried fires [87]. The primary driver of belowground tissue damage is duration of  
405 heating; as such, fast-moving fires through grass-dominated fuelbeds effect the lowest  
406 amount of soil heating due to the shorter residence time of fine fuel combustion [88,89].  
407 And because soil is a good insulator, even when soil surface temperatures in a subset of  
408 the prescribed burns here ranged from 200–400°C, temperatures were consistently at or  
409 below 100°C at depths of just 2 cm [56].

410 Thus, even intense fires through grass-dominated fuels might not exceed a threshold  
411 of soil heating to immediately effect anything beyond a general burned vs. unburned  
412 response pattern. However, second-order (indirect) effects to soil microbes might depend  
413 more on surface fire behavior—as modulated by abiotic and biotic conditions, and  
414 correlated with burn severity—because these organisms can be affected by post-fire soil  
415 conditions and plant community dynamics [88].

#### 416 4.2. Transferability of research from prescribed burns to wildfire-affected rangeland

417 Although research on prescribed fire effects on rangeland plant communities has  
418 been conducted in the US Great Plains for over 100 years [90–92], conceptions of wildfires  
419 and knowledge of their effects have largely been derived from forests [93]. Due to the high  
420 potential fuel loading of forests (especially those under decades of fire deficit), there is a  
421 general concern that ‘natural’ and prescribed burns in forests are ecologically different  
422 [94]. But little scientific information substantiates such a difference in rangelands.

423 As most rangeland ecosystems in the US are used for commercial livestock grazing,  
424 there is a general concern among managers throughout the western US about the impacts  
425 of livestock grazing on rangeland assumed to have been negatively affected by a wildfire.  
426 For example, the general guidance for the US Department of Interior Bureau of Land  
427 Management is to have their permittees defer, delay, or avoid altogether livestock grazing  
428 for up to two seasons on a grazing allotment burned by a wildfire [95]. While Kluth  
429 *et al.* [96] attribute the two-year convention to Blaisdell *et al.* [97], it was more explicitly  
430 stated earlier, by Wright *et al.* [98, p. 9]: “Prescribed fire can be a useful tool in many big  
431 sagebrush communities if the fires are carefully planned and livestock do not graze the  
432 burn for two growing seasons.” (Ironically, both sources were cautioning on the return of  
433 livestock to range recently treated with prescribed burns, a practice both *recommended*  
434 *be used* to maintain herbaceous plant cover and reduce woody plants; the prescribed

435 fire predicate has since been detached and the 2-year grazing exclusion adopted into  
436 pyro-skeptical wildfire management.)

437 It remains an open question whether rangeland management recommendations from  
438 the arid Great Basin region apply to semi-arid rangeland in the Northern Great Plains.  
439 Studying wildfire is difficult: by its very nature it occurs unpredictably, precluding the  
440 pre-treatment data collection that constitutes a robust sampling design, as simple burned-  
441 unburned comparisons are limited in their capacity to control for environmental and  
442 temporal variability [99]. What research does exist on post-wildfire vegetation dynamics  
443 in the region suggests the caution over damage to plant communities is unjustified:  
444 productivity in the season after two wildfires in the Northwestern Great Plains was  
445 resilient to both wildfire and grazing [100–102]. Meanwhile, benefits of prescribed fire to  
446 the rangeland ecosystem and livestock grazing recent burns have been widely documented,  
447 especially from the prescribed fire experiments included in this study [45,47,54,56,103].  
448 What remains is an understanding of whether data from experimentally-controlled  
449 prescribed burns are relevant to wildfire incidents.

450 The data presented here suggest that across both wildfires and prescribed burns,  
451 burn severity in the Northern Great Plains is generally low to moderate, especially in the  
452 western zone; wildfires in the more humid eastern zone tend to be moderately high (Fig.  
453 5). Based on the lack of difference in burn severity between wildfires and prescribed burns  
454 in semi-arid rangeland of the Northwestern Great Plains, it is likely that research results  
455 from prescribed burns in the region are applicable to ecologically-similar areas affected by  
456 wildfire. Although less certain, there is possibly a useful degree of transferability between  
457 prescribed burn research and wildfires in the eastern zone as well, because despite the  
458 statistically-significant difference in burn severity, even the incidents with the most severe  
459 burns fall below the 0.66 ΔNBR threshold for high burn severity [32].

460 Consistently low to moderate burn severity aside, a number of biotic and abiotic  
461 differences between most wildfires and prescribed burns ought to be resolved before  
462 the ecological effects of these fires can be considered consistent, as well. Many of these  
463 differences fall under the general umbrella of seasonality, which affects both the conditions  
464 of the fire environment and the biological status of organisms impacted by heating, e.g.  
465 seasonal phenology and dormancy considerations. A common denominator of weather  
466 conditions conducive to burning relate to moisture: dry air from cold fronts, dry surface  
467 conditions from periods with little to no precipitation, and low relative humidity [104].  
468 Additional factors include fuel load and wind speed at the time of an ignition further  
469 modulate energy release [105–108].

470 Prescribed burn operations are typically reserved for seasons more conducive to  
471 manageable fire behavior, while wildfires occur whenever fuels and weather align with  
472 ignitions. In the eastern zone, prescribed burns reported here were conducted entirely  
473 in April and May, whereas the wildfires in the eastern zone included here occurred  
474 fairly consistently between January and August (Table A2). Prescribed burns in the  
475 western zone were restricted to October, whereas all wildfires included here occurred  
476 January–September, and mostly in July and August (Table A2). And then within seasons,  
477 prescribed burns are often only conducted under moderate weather conditions, which  
478 likely accounts for substantially lower burn severity in experimental prescribed fires in  
479 the eastern zone: for instance, prescribed burns at the Central Grasslands Research  
480 Extension Center were only conducted on days with wind speeds below the 42-yr median  
481 [49]. Future research should measure post-fire effects on soils and plants on wildfires,  
482 as well, to determine that seasonal differences do not limit ecosystem recovery beyond  
483 that observed after prescribed burns despite consistent low to moderate severities in  
484 immediate assessments based on remotely-sensed data.

#### 485 4.3. Conclusion

486 These data suggest wildland fire professionals can describe meaningful gradients  
487 in surface fire behavior in rangelands within an immediate assessment framework using

488 differenced Normalized Burn Ratio ( $\Delta$ NBR) from remotely-sensed imagery as a metric  
489 of burn severity. Thus, even those without the capacity to measure fire behavior in the  
490 field can monitor prescribed fire effectiveness and incorporate burn severity in adaptive  
491 management plans. Understanding the relationship between burn severity across wildfires  
492 and prescribed burns is a critical step in applying knowledge gained from research on  
493 prescribed fires to areas impacted by wildfire. Resistance to prescribed burning might  
494 be overcome by increasing livestock managers' experience with post-fire forage resources  
495 through grazing areas burned in unintentional wildfires, but current practice and policy  
496 dissuades or outright prevents ranchers from doing so. Despite the known improvements to  
497 forage, it is essential that future research study the association between burn severity with  
498 ecosystem recovery metrics to ensure post-fire grazing does not impair the sustainability  
499 of rangeland ecosystems.

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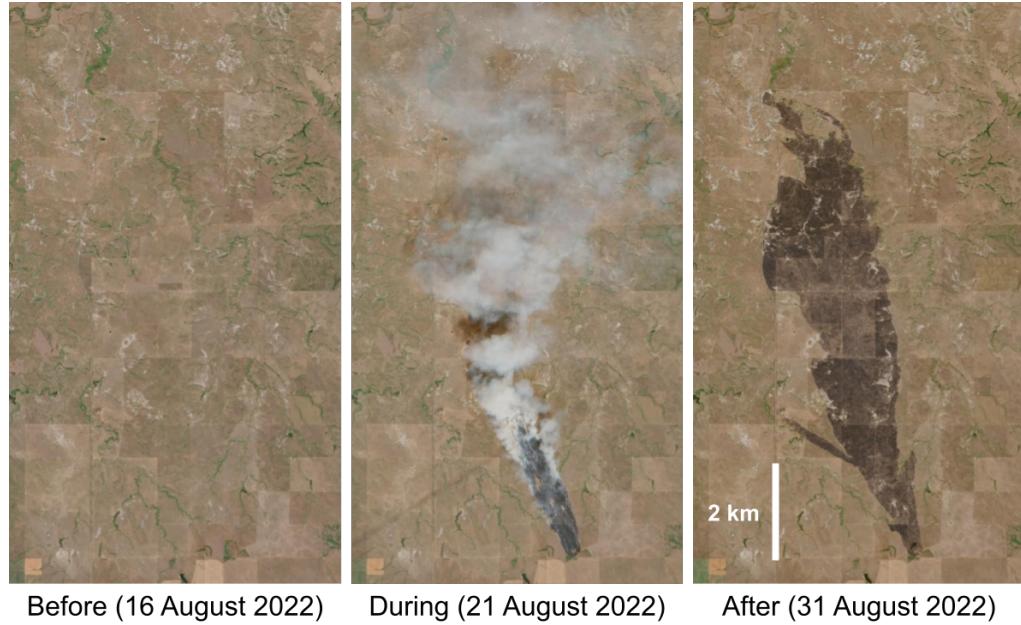
505 **Author Contributions:** DA McGranahan did everything related to this paper.

506 **Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

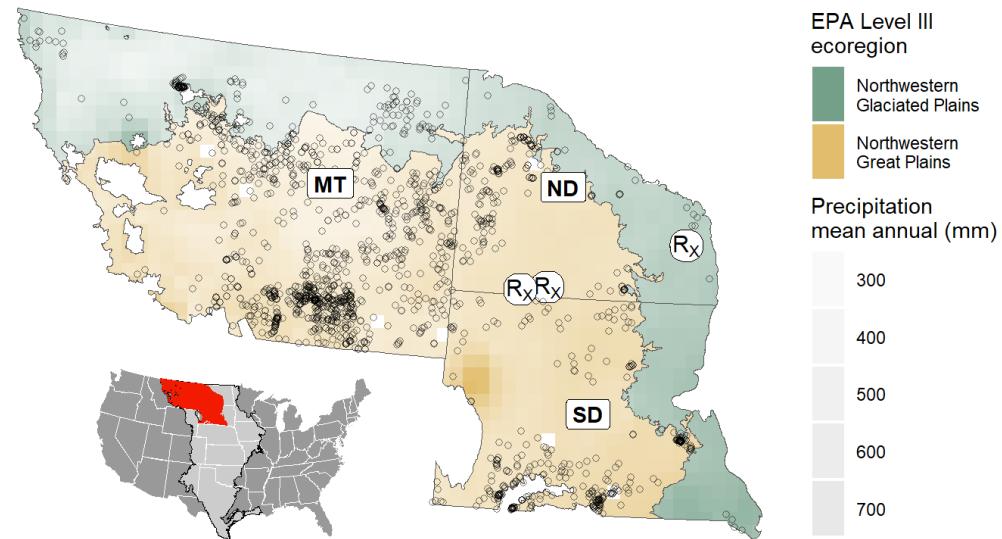
507 **Data Availability Statement:** Data for formal analysis, modified perimeters of included  
508 wildfires, and script are freely available on Ag Data Commons [51].

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510 **Appendix A. Additional information**



**Figure A1.** True-color images of a fire in North Dakota, which a satellite from the Sentinel-2 mission caught shortly after the fire started—a tall smoke plume coming off the wind-driven head fire is clearly visible on August 21, 2022. NBR and  $\Delta$ NBR in Fig. 2.



**Figure A2.** Portions of Montana, North Dakota, and South Dakota encompassed by the primary EPA Level III ecoregions of the Northern Great Plains—Northwestern Glaciated Plains and Northwestern Great Plains—within the broader US Great Plains (inset, red area). Ecoregions shaded by mean total annual precipitation for the complete years in the study period (2017–2024).  $R_x$  badges indicate locations of prescribed burn experiments. Open circles denote centroids of wildfire events in the NIFC Interagency Wildfire Perimeter database, 2017–2023; total counts presented in Table A1.

**Table A1.** Summarized totals of wildfire incidents presented in Fig. A2.

State	NW Glaciated Plains	NW Great Plains	Total
Montana (MT)	153	998	1151
South Dakota (SD)	9	339	348
North Dakota (ND)	21	150	171

**Table A2.** Monthly distribution of the wildfire subset used in this study, by zone, as determined by midpoint of pre- and post-fire image dates.

Zone	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep
East	1	1	1	2	2	0	2	1	0
West	1	0	2	3	0	0	5	6	2

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