



Legislative Post Audit Performance Audit Report Highlights

Kansas Wildfire Management: Evaluating the Adequacy of Kansas' Wildfire Suppression System

June 2018 • R-18-007

QUESTION 1: Is Kansas' Wildfire Suppression System Adequately Designed and Resourced to Effectively Suppress Wildfires?

Background Information

Kansas wildfires have become more frequent and severe in recent years. A recent study found both the number and sizes of Kansas wildfires have increased significantly between 1985 and 2014.

The two largest wildfires in the last 50 years occurred in 2016 and 2017 and caused significant damage to several Kansas counties.

The Anderson Creek fire burned 313,000 acres in Barber and Comanche counties in March 2016. County officials estimated the fire caused at least \$30 million in total damage.

The Starbuck fire burned 509,000 acres in Meade, Clark, and Comanche counties in March 2017. State and county officials estimated the fire caused at least \$50 million in total damage.

Local fire districts, which consist largely of volunteer firefighters, are generally the first to respond to wildfire reports.

- We compared Kansas' wildfire suppression system to national best practices and systems in four Great Plains states: North Dakota, Oklahoma, South Dakota, and Texas. (p. 7).
- Kansas' wildfire suppression structure generally aligned with best practices except that it relies on three entities instead of one (p. 8).
 - *Kansas and our sampled states each have a response plan that outlines emergency procedures and designates a lead wildfire suppression agency.*
 - *Kansas and three of our sampled states also prioritize local control of wildfire suppression operations.*
 - *Unlike the other states we reviewed, Kansas distributes its wildfire suppression duties and resources across three agencies instead of one. The Fire Marshal serves as Kansas' lead agency, and the Forest Service and Kansas Division of Emergency Management each have a supporting role.*
- Kansas' wildfire suppression system has fewer state resources overall than other Great Plains states (p. 11).
 - *Like our sampled states, Kansas owns firefighting resources to use during a wildfire, but these resources belong to the Kansas Forest Service, which is not the lead agency and cannot afford to deploy them.*
 - *Further, Kansas devotes few state resources to wildfire response.*
 - *Although it is the lead agency for Kansas' wildfire suppression system, the Fire Marshal has no wildfire suppression resources.*
 - *The Forest Service has wildfire suppression resources, but limited state funding prevents it from effectively deploying these resources in Kansas.*
 - *As a result, Kansas often requires state agencies and local jurisdictions involved in wildfire suppression efforts to cover their own costs.*
 - *Kansas state agencies and local jurisdictions must rely on FEMA grants to reimburse their suppression costs, but these funds are not always available.*
- Kansas' lack of resources limits the availability of wildfire suppression training (p. 16).
 - *Although it is the lead agency, the Fire Marshal does not have the expertise necessary to provide wildfire-specific training.*
 - *Forest Service staff have wildfire expertise but do not have the resources to provide adequate wildfire suppression training opportunities.*
 - *State and local officials reported Kansas firefighters do not receive adequate wildfire-specific training.*

- Kansas' lack of resources limits its ability to mitigate wildfire damage (p. 17).
- *State and local officials told us Kansas often conducts insufficient wildfire mitigation or cannot reposition resources because of insufficient funding.*
- State and local officials reported education and coordination problems among entities involved in wildfire suppression (p. 19).
- *State and local officials reported ineffective working relationships among the state and local entities involved in wildfire response.*
- *Those officials also reported that local jurisdictions do not always know when to call for state assistance, what resources are available through the state, or how the state wildfire suppression system is supposed to work.*
- The state agencies involved in Kansas' wildfire suppression system do not maintain complete wildfire management data as required by law (p. 21).
- *Local fire districts are not required to submit relevant data, making the systems maintained by the Fire Marshal and the Kansas Division of Emergency Management incomplete.*
- *Therefore, Kansas lacks data important for effective wildfire management.*
- Finally, it is important to note some large wildfires are unavoidable even if Kansas improves its wildfire suppression system (p. 22).

SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

We recommended the Legislature consider amending state law to designate a single state entity to lead the state's wildfire suppression system and provide sufficient resources and funding to that entity. Alternatively, we recommended the Legislature consider requiring the three state entities currently involved to provide suggestions on how the existing system might be improved by January 2019 (p. 25). We also recommended the Kansas Legislature consider amending statute to strengthen the data reporting requirements for local fire districts (p. 26).

AGENCY RESPONSES

The Kansas Forest Service generally concurred with the report's findings, conclusions, and recommendations (p. 27). The Adjutant General's Department and Office of the State Fire Marshal disagreed with and provided additional information and context for some of the report's findings. We carefully reviewed the information provided by these agencies and made some minor wording changes. However, we did not make substantial changes to our findings conclusions and recommendations.

HOW DO I REQUEST AN AUDIT?

By law, individual legislators, legislative committees, or the Governor may request an audit, but any audit work conducted by the division must be directed by the Legislative Post Audit Committee. Any legislator who would like to request an audit should contact the division directly at (785) 296-3792.

The Kansas Division of Emergency Management (KDEM) determines whether the state needs to respond and activates the Kansas Response Plan accordingly. KDEM also operates the state emergency operations center.

The Office of the State Fire Marshal coordinates firefighting resources and helps staff the state emergency operations center during wildfires. It also coordinates the delivery of firefighting resources and communicates with federal officials as necessary.

The Kansas Forest Service owns a limited amount of firefighting equipment and provides certified wildfire management staff to support both the state emergency operations center and local officials. Only the Forest Service can order firefighting resources from either the U.S. Forest Service or other states through the Great Plains Interstate Fire Compact.

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