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A Summer of Wildfires:

From time to time, there have been memorable wildfires in the Western states. As a child, I remember the Yellowstone fires of 1988 that burned 36% of Yellowstone National Park and dominated the news cycle all summer, ceasing only when the fall rains arrived. A few years later, a family trip to visit Yellowstone impressed upon me just how much vegetation was lost as we viewed thousands of blackened snags amid the geysers and buffalo. Aside from the devastation in Yellowstone during that long-ago summer, I can rarely recall wildfires threatening suburban areas or worrying much over wildfire costs. For many years, Utah's fire costs have averaged around \$11 million and weren't a noticeable line item in a several billion-dollar state budget.

Last summer featured several impressive wildfires in Utah including one that threatened the Brian Head Ski Resort and left a burn scar that impacted fish in Panguitch Lake. The 2017 fire costs to the State of Utah alone set a record at \$19 million and required supplemental appropriations by the legislature to cover the expenditures. This doesn't account for local or federal firefighting costs which add millions more to the total costs. Unfortunately, the records set in 2017 haven't lasted long. The 2018 Utah wildfire season has blown past the 2017 totals. To date, we have experienced approximately 1,300 wildfires in Utah and the State-only costs stand at about \$35 million, with two major wildfires continuing to threaten the southern-end of Utah county, the largest of which is still less than 50% contained as we enter fall without rain in the forecast. Sadly, over half of the wildfires are human-caused. This data is offered without entering into a debate about Climate Change and western drought, which might push many lightning-caused fires into the human-caused category. Not to mention how the smoke from the homegrown and regional wildfires has impacted Utah's air quality throughout the summer.

If drought and wildfire are the new-normal for Utah and other Western states, we will need to rethink how to cover the firefighting costs. With a rapidly growing population wanting to live an outdoor lifestyle, more and more people are heading into the backcountry, and as the stats show us, we are mostly to blame for wildfires through a variety of ill-advised behaviors. Local governments in communities that border forests or wilderness, whose budgets are often less elastic, will also have to re-think their budgeting and planning. Interestingly, Utah ended the budget year with a \$27.2 million surplus. Those surplus funds would usually have a variety of groups thinking of new buildings, program expansions, or smaller classrooms. However, with the 2018 fire costs still growing, it is safe to say

those funds might already have been spent. Long-term costs to re-seed or stabilize burned hillsides or rebuild lost structures are not yet known.

While this summer of wildfires, smoky air, and growing fire costs has been depressing, the wildfires have also demonstrated one of the best things about Utah: our sense of community and ability to pull together in a crisis. I remain amazed that after 6,000 Utahns were evacuated during the Bald Mountain and Pole Creek fires, the Red Cross ultimately closed their evacuation shelters because there was no one there. Utahns farther away from the fire opened their homes and absorbed the evacuees rendering all those cots in the shelters unnecessary. This truly inspiring response stands out among so many less cheerful reports about the growing costs of wildfires.

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