

THE *Current*

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Thousands of America's historic landmarks face significant wildfire risk

When the Palisades Fire tore through Los Angeles in January 2025, it didn't only destroy homes. It took the Will Rogers Ranch House — a beloved California landmark — with it. Six months later, the Dragon Bravo wildfire burned through Grand Canyon National Park and destroyed the Grand Canyon Lodge, originally built in 1927. Whether either landmark will ever be meaningfully restored remains uncertain.

A new study published in [Nature Scientific Reports](#) suggests these losses are not anomalies, they are an early warning.

Researchers at UC Santa Barbara's National Center for Ecological Analysis and Synthesis (NCEAS) have completed the first national-scale assessment of wildfire risk to American cultural heritage. Of the 100,117 sites listed on the National Register of Historic Places, more than half face measurable wildfire exposure. For 3,446 places, that risk is severe.

“These places anchor community identity, collective memory and national heritage,” said corresponding author Caitlin Fong, a researcher at NCEAS. “Unlike homes, they cannot simply be rebuilt — and in many cases, once lost, they are gone forever.”

The study cross-referenced every mappable National Register of Historic Places sites in the U.S. with high-resolution wildfire burn probability models, categorizing risk by

place type, geographic location and cultural significance. [Explore the map to see how your favorite place scores.](#)

Key findings include:

- Risk is most concentrated in the western United States, with additional hotspots emerging in Oklahoma, Arkansas and along the southeastern coast.
- Buildings and historic districts — which account for 90% of all listed resources — likely face particularly acute risk, because their cultural value is inseparable from their physical form. Destroy the structure, and the heritage is gone with it.
- Nationally significant sites face disproportionately high wildfire exposure relative to state and locally significant ones, meaning America's most important historic places are among its most vulnerable.
- In California, New Mexico, Colorado and Oklahoma, the concentration of at-risk sites is especially acute.
- Climate change is expected to expand wildfire hazard zones, putting sites in previously lower-risk regions increasingly in the crosshairs.

The Will Rogers Ranch House and Grand Canyon Lodge offer a sobering glimpse of what's at stake. Rebuilding portions of the Will Rogers site is projected to cost \$5.1 million, with key historic elements that were evacuated now guiding reconstruction efforts. The future of the Grand Canyon Lodge, which had already been rebuilt once after a 1932 fire, remains undecided.

The study finds that cultural heritage is largely absent from dedicated wildfire planning frameworks in most states. California, through CAL FIRE's Cultural Resources Management Program, is among the few exceptions. Elsewhere, historic sites must compete for attention within broader all-hazards planning processes not specifically designed with heritage protection in mind.

The researchers argue that the stakes extend beyond the physical loss of individual structures. Wildfire risk assessments have long focused on homes, infrastructure and ecosystems — but the cultural and psychological dimensions of what communities lose when historic places burn have rarely entered that conversation.

“The connection people have to places, their sense of place, is a profound and deeply underappreciated dimension of what communities stand to lose from wildfire,” said co-author [Benjamin Halpern](#), professor at UCSB’s Bren School of Environmental Science and executive director of NCEAS. “Our study identifies where these losses are most likely to happen.”

The researchers outline several mitigation strategies compatible with historic preservation standards, including vegetation management, structural hardening with fire-resistant materials and concealed fire suppression systems that protect structures without compromising their historic character.

Critically, the study’s open-source dataset gives federal, state and local agencies a consistent, nationally comparable foundation for prioritizing which sites to protect first, before the next fire makes the decision for them.

“By identifying where and what is most at risk, this study provides a foundation for proactive planning to safeguard the places that anchor community identity and national heritage before they are permanently lost,” said lead author Mona Farnisa.

The research was funded by the Gordon and Betty Moore Foundation. Data and methodology are publicly available.

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