UCLA Luskin Center for Innovation
UCLA Latino Policy & Politics Institute

Do Urban Water Supply Systems Put Out Wildfires?

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

WHY DID WE WRITE THIS GUIDE?

The January 2025 wildfires devastated Los Angeles, claiming lives, homes, jobs, and whole communities. As the fires raged, discussions erupted across social and mainstream media, questioning whether water supply systems could have been more prepared to fight the fires. This FAQ provides clear, accurate answers to the most common questions we heard from the public, media, and policymakers about fire hydrants, firefighting, water infrastructure, and more. Our goal is to offer a better understanding of how water systems work, address common concerns, and provide useful information that can help communities stay informed and prepared, and advocate for change. We seek to answer these questions in ongoing research, as they have not been well studied and explained in clear language. Feel free to contact us with additional questions that we can help answer.

SECTION 1

UNDERSTANDING WILDFIRES AND URBAN WATER SYSTEMS

What are wildfires, and how are they different from urban fires? Q

A

Takeaway: Wildfires are unplanned fires that burn vegetation. They become urban wildfires when they also burn homes and other structures.

Wildfires — unplanned fires that burn vegetation in open lands — are a natural part of many ecosystems. In fact, many types of ecosystems depend on fire to regrow vegetation, protect against disease, reduce competition among plant species, and more. Areas throughout California are naturally fire-prone just as many are in earthquake zones.

Increasingly, wildfires are moving into urbanized areas, as people have increasingly moved into high wildfire-risk areas. Ultimately, many wildfires become **urban wildfires** because homes and other structures themselves turn into fuel for the fire. These are different from typical urban fires that involve just a few buildings or structures and are much easier to put out.

What are urban water systems, and how do I know if I am served by one? Q

A

Takeaway: Urban water systems are agencies responsible for supplying high-quality, affordable water in urban areas. In LA, you can tell if one serves you using this tool.

Urban water systems are agencies that supply water to homes, businesses, schools, and other customers in or near cities, including for everyday firefighting. They do this

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by securing a water source, treating this water, and then distributing this water to users through a complex series of pipes and other plumbing. Their core responsibility is to provide a sufficient supply of high-quality water at an affordable price, meeting essential needs for drinking, cooking, bathing, and more. There are about 200 urban water systems in Los Angeles County alone, and they range in size, shape, and complexity. A system can serve from 25 people in a mobile home park to the 4 million served by the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power.

Urban water systems are owned by different types of organizations — public, private, and mixed — and are only physically connected to each other at one or a handful of points (called **interties**). Not everyone living in an urban area is served by an urban water system. For instance, some residents in Los Angeles are not served by water systems but rather rely on a private well for water. You can tell by typing your address into this mapping tool.

Q Who is involved in helping put out wildfires in my area?

A

Takeaway: Fire departments coordinate firefighting efforts, which can include firefighters from across the state, country, and beyond. Urban water systems' only role is providing water.

Local urban fire agencies, often called fire departments, organize firefighting efforts. Fire departments are usually run by local governments (cities or counties) or quasi-governmental agencies known as "special districts." They employ firefighting personnel, vehicles (both ground and air), and specialized equipment stationed throughout urban areas ready for deployment in the event of an urban fire.

Urban firefighting agencies are not designed to fight wildfires on their own. The role of urban water systems in firefighting is to provide a supply of water to firefighters through their pipes, tanks, hydrants, and other infrastructure. Urban firefighting is designed to fight fires in single or multiple connected dwellings using on-the-ground resources such as fire hydrants and firetrucks. These systems are not designed to fight large-scale wildfires involving entire blocks or neighborhoods. Government agencies such as the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection (CAL FIRE) or the U.S. Forest Service are designed to fight wildfires using both on-the-ground and aerial methods such as dropping water and fire retardant from airplanes. In the event of a severe urban or wildfire, firefighters from neighboring agencies and across the state, country, and even other countries may join the effort.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- U.S. Department of Agriculture: General wildfire information and resources
- Ready.gov: Wildfire preparedness information
- UC Agriculture and Natural Resources: Fire resources and information
- CAL FIRE: Wildfire information/tracking and partnering agencies
- Los Angeles Fire Department: Website
- Los Angeles County Fire Department: Website
- UCLA Luskin Center for Innovation: Los Angeles County Water Systems Governance Map
- UCLA Latino Policy and Politics Institute: Community resources