UCLA Luskin Center for Innovation

UCLA Latino Policy & Politics Institute

Do Urban Water Supply Systems Put Out Wildfires?

SUMMARY OF FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

UNDERSTANDING WILDFIRES AND URBAN WATER SYSTEMS

1. **What are wildfires, and how are they different from urban fires?**

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

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

   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.

3. **Who is involved in helping put out wildfires in my area?**

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

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN WATER SUPPLY AND FIREFIGHTING

4. **Are urban water systems designed to fight wildfires?**

   No, they are not — they must provide a water supply that meets fire flow requirements. While some provide additional capacity, there is no requirement to do so.

5. **Where do firefighters get water during a wildfire in an urban area?**

   Firefighters get water primarily from nearby urban water systems (usually via hydrants). They may supplement from other sources, but they very rarely have a separate supply network to draw from.

6. **How important is water supply in fighting active wildfires?**

   Water is one component of a larger firefighting toolbox, and while it is important, firefighting depends heavily on fire departments' capacity to fight fire.

7. **Could we ever store enough water to stop urban wildfires completely?**

   No — no urban water system could provide enough water to stop the largest and most extreme of wildfires (like the January 2025 LA fires). Stopping fires of this magnitude requires thinking beyond water.

8. **Was water being withheld during LA's wildfires?**

   No — urban water systems consistently do everything in their power to support wildfire fighting efforts, going beyond their mandates and capacity.

ALL ABOUT FIRE HYDRANTS

9. **How do fire hydrants work?**

   Fire hydrants allow firefighters to draw water from the water system's underground infrastructure; they do not have their own water supply.

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FEBRUARY 2025

10. **Why do we have fire hydrants?**

    Fire hydrants provide much more water per second than any other part of the urban water system, allowing a fire to be put out more quickly.

11. **Are fire hydrants available everywhere? Can my neighborhood get more fire hydrants to be better prepared?**

    Fire hydrants are typically only available within the territory of an urban water system. Private hydrants can be installed by permit but must use a private water supply.

12. **Why did some fire hydrants run out of water when we needed them most?**

    When fire hydrants have low water pressure, it is likely because many people are using water at the same time to protect property, damaged pipes are leaking water, and/or electric power service is interrupted.

PROVIDING WATER SUPPLY IN TOUGH TERRAIN

13. **How quickly can we move water to where a wildfire is?**

    When water is above or level with a fire, it can get to the fire quickly. But when water is below a fire, it is slower and more difficult to transport, making faraway water sources irrelevant.

14. **Is it more difficult to fight a wildfire with water in hilly and mountainous terrain?**

    Yes, it is more difficult because water must be pumped uphill — particularly where there is limited or no natural water supply.

IMPROVING WATER SUPPLY SYSTEMS FOR WILDFIRE RESPONSE

15. **What can be done to improve water systems so they help fight wildfires?**

    Better public infrastructure or private investments could help water systems provide adequate fire flow. However, other interventions are needed, as no amount of water can stop large-scale wildfires.

16. **How much should we invest in greater urban water system capacity to fight wildfires?**

    Investing heavily in water systems' ability to help fight fires may not be as cost-effective or impactful as investments in other preparedness measures. Funds need to be balanced strategically among all the tools in the firefighting toolbox.

17. **Who would have to pay for better wildfire protection in my community?**

    Funds for better wildfire protection may not inherently come from those who will benefit from protection. It's necessary to have hard conversations and make tough choices to ensure that the financial burden is distributed equitably.

18. **Could someone hack or sabotage the water system during a wildfire?**

    Urban water systems are not easily sabotaged due to underground infrastructure, components requiring manual operation, and heightened vigilance during fires.

19. **Beyond fighting fires in the moment, how can we help limit urban wildfires for future generations?**

    We can limit future wildfires by preventing further climate change — a major driver of increasingly frequent and intense wildfires.