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### Title

The Impact of California Wildfires on Homeowners Insurance Availability and Affordability

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## **The Impact of California Wildfires on Homeowners Insurance Availability and Affordability**

For many Californians, surviving a wildfire is only the beginning: the real struggle starts when rebuilding collides with an insurance market in withdrawal. California's intensifying wildfire seasons have reshaped not only the state's physical landscape but also its economic and policy systems (California Office of Environmental Health Hazard Assessment). In recent years, homeowners have faced growing challenges in securing and affording insurance coverage. What began as isolated market cancellations following catastrophic fire incidents has evolved into a sustained insurance crisis threatening both property ownership and long term stability (Sumagaysay). Although prior research has identified an insurance crisis, little work has focused on how or if this crisis differs across high and low risk counties in California. This study aims to address that gap by examining: *how have rising wildfire risks shaped disparities in access to affordable homeowner's insurance across California?* Specifically, asking: *How have worsening wildfire conditions from 2017 to 2023 influenced disparities in homeowners insurance availability and affordability between high risk counties and lower risk counties?* To answer this question, this paper compares county level data on wildfire activity and homeowner insurance trends, focusing on 5 high risk counties and 5 low risk counties.

### **Context and Significance**

Over the past decade, California's wildfires have intensified in frequency, size, and destructive power. In 2020 alone, the state experienced its largest wildfire season on record, with nearly 10,000 fires burning over 4.2 million acres: an area larger than the entire state of Connecticut (California Office of Environmental Health Hazard Assessment). The consequences of this trend became especially clear in 2017. Making headlines not only across California but

also throughout the nation, the 2017 fires revealed just how vulnerable communities had become to climate driven disasters. What had once been viewed as a seasonal, mostly rural hazard suddenly turned into a headline dominating crisis that marked the beginning of a new era of unprecedented destruction (California Department of Insurance). Not only did these events overwhelm firefighting resources and displace communities, they also reshaped the state's insurance market. Because of the scale and visibility of these fires, 2017 is widely regarded as the year California entered an era of catastrophic "mega-fires," which forced policymakers, insurers, and residents to rethink how wildfire risk should be managed (California Office of Environmental Health Hazard Assessment).

These events collectively showed that California's insurance framework, designed for occasional disasters, was ill equipped to handle persistent extreme fire conditions driven by climate change, drought, and expanding urban development. As these disasters unfolded, it became clear that homeowners insurance markets were entering a state of instability. Major private insurers, facing escalating losses from growing numbers of claims, began restricting new policies or withdrawing entirely (Governor of California). This trend left thousands of homeowners vulnerable to the destructive nature of the fires, as many found themselves uninsured. This issue holds substantial significance for California public policy, as urgent reforms needed to stabilize the insurance market have left policymakers grappling with how to protect homeowners (Governor of California).

In response, California increasingly relied on the Fair Access to Insurance Requirements (FAIR) Plan, a state program created in 1968 to provide basic fire coverage for homeowners and property owners who could not obtain insurance through private markets (California FAIR Plan Association). It functions as an "insurer of last resort". However, over time, the FAIR Plan has

expanded, first in 2024 with AB 1844, which raised coverage limits and introduced wildfire mitigation discounts, and again in 2025 with SB 525, which extended FAIR Plan protection to manufactured homes (Sierra). These measures reflect ongoing efforts to address gaps in wildfire insurance and to safeguard homeowners amid the growing frequency and severity of fire disasters.

## **Literature Review**

Existing research overwhelmingly shows that as wildfire risk intensifies, insurers reduce their exposure by raising premiums, limiting coverage, or withdrawing entirely. However, scholarly articles to date have not sufficiently examined whether these market adjustments have disproportionately affected high risk counties compared to lower risk ones, particularly in the period following the historic wildfire seasons beginning in 2017.

A growing body of empirical work shows that wildfire intensification has destabilized California's insurance market. Liao et al. (2022) provide the most comprehensive quantitative evidence to date, analyzing California zip code level data between 2002 and 2019 and finding that insurers initiated policy nonrenewals more than doubled statewide after 2015, with the greatest concentrations in high wildfire risk areas. Although average premiums appeared stable statewide, affordability deteriorated sharply for households in high risk regions, many of whom were forced onto the state's FAIR Plan, which offers a much narrower coverage at a higher cost (Liao et al.). This study, one of very few, demonstrates clearly geographic disparities in insurance outcomes. However, its temporal range ends just before the most extreme wildfire seasons on record. This research aims to build directly on Liao et. al's finding by extending the timeframe through 2023 and shifting the unit of analysis from individual ZIP codes to a county level comparison.

While Liao et al. (2022) document market withdrawal, recent reporting shows that the crisis has worsened substantially in the years they did not study. Kaplan and Philips (2025) report that even before the Palisades Fires in 2025 in Los Angeles, major insurers had already stopped renewing policy across the state, leaving homeowners dependent on public insurance options. Similarly, Sumagaysay (2024) found that despite billions invested in wildfire mutation, insurers remain unwilling to resume writing policies. Together these analyses reveal a crisis, but not its scale or distribution.

The economic rationale behind insurer withdrawal is well established in natural hazards research. Born and Viscusi (2006), analyzing twenty years of catastrophic events, find that after major disasters insurers experience large loss shocks, leading them to raise premiums, restrict coverage, or in some cases exit entire markets. Their theoretical framework explains why insurers respond aggressively to large scale hazards, but their model assumes catastrophes are rare. In contrast, California's wildfire seasons since 2017 have resembled a continuous series of catastrophic events, suggesting the need to revisit their framework under conditions of chronic environmental risk.

The financial scale of recent wildfires provides further explanation for why insurers perceive the market as increasingly untenable. Wang et al. (2021) estimate that the total economic footprint of the 2018 wildfires alone reached \$148.5 billion, including direct property losses, smoke related health costs, and indirect supply chain impacts. When such losses repeat over multiple years, they produce cumulative financial exposure that private insurers may be structurally unable or unwilling to absorb. Wang et al. therefore help clarify why insurance withdrawal is occurring, but they do not assess how the effects of this withdrawal are distributed among different regions or populations.

Taken together, existing research confirms three central facts: (1) wildfire severity is increasing, (2) insurers are withdrawing, and (3) this withdrawal is driven by mounting catastrophic losses. However, three major gaps remain. First, most research ends before the post 2020 wildfire era, which includes the state's worst fires on record. Second, prior studies have not systematically compared higher risk and lower risk counties, although journalistic evidence suggests unequal impacts. Finally, no peer reviewed study has measured the scale of disparities in both affordability and availability of homeowners insurance over time.

### **Theory, Hypotheses, & Causal Mechanism**

I theorize that California's homeowners insurance market operates through repeated cycles of disruption and adjustment triggered by the extreme wildfire events. Major wildfire years, such as 2017, 2018, and 2020, function as market shocks that rapidly increase insurers' financial exposure and force rapid and quick recalculation of future risk. These shocks disrupt the insurance market by prompting insurers to withdraw from high risk counties, restrict coverage, and raise premiums, leading to a rapid increase in nonrenewed policies from private insurers and new policies from the FAIR Plan. Following these shock years, the market may experience short periods of stabilization, but each subsequent wildfire catastrophe restarts the cycle, gradually widening geographic disparities between high risk and low risk communities. Thus, in the years immediately following major wildfire shocks, specifically 2018-2019 after the 2017 fires, and again in 2021 after the 2020 fires, there will be a significant spike in non renewed policies from private insurers and a corresponding increase in new enrollments in the FAIR Plan, while lower risk counties maintain more stable insurance options.

The causal mechanism linking wildfire activity to insurance disparities operates through insurers' financial exposures and their risk calculations. When a major wildfire occurs, they are

faced with sudden surges in claims and large payouts which reduce profit margins and elevate perceived future risks. This heightened exposure widens geographical disparities as high risk counties may experience reduced competitions, higher premiums, and a shrinking private market.

Building upon the theory and prior research on climate related insurance markets, My conceptual hypothesis is: worsening wildfire conditions have intensified disparities in homeowners insurance across California, disproportionately reducing availability and increasing costs in high risk counties compared to lower risk counties.

Therefore, my operational hypothesis is: as wildfire risk scores increase, the affordability and availability of homeowners insurance will decrease, due to insurance companies raising premiums, limiting coverage, and exiting high risk counties in response to greater financial exposure surrounding wildfire related damages and loss claims.

### **Research Design**

This research employs a combination of large-N quantitative analysis, multiple case comparison, and time-series analysis spanning from 2017 to 2023 across ten urban counties in California.

“Worsening wildfire conditions” serve as the independent variable of the hypothesis, with a temporal scope of 2017-2023. To measure this variable, the study uses the cumulative number of fires per county and the total acres burned each year, standardized by county land area to ensure comparability across counties of different sizes. Observations for each of these two indications total 70, representing annual measurements across ten counties over seven years, for a combined total of 140. Data is collected from the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection.

“The affordability and availability of homeowners insurance” serve as the dependent variable of the hypothesis, with a temporal scope of 2017-2023. The initial analytic approach was to measure insurance affordability directly through average annual premium data across counties. However, because private insurers are not required to publicly release detailed premium information, and the available data are often incomplete, inconsistently reported, or aggregated in ways that limit county level analysis, this strategy was not feasible. As a result, this study operationalizes the dependent variable using two alternative indicators that more reliably reflect shifts in affordability and availability: (1) the number of nonrenewed homeowners insurance policies, which signals withdrawal or tightening by private insurers, and (2) the number of newly issued FAIR Plan policies, which captures the extent to which homeowners are being pushed into the state’s insurer of last resort. Observations for each of these two indications will total 70, representing annual measurements across ten counties over seven years, for a combined total of 140. Data is collected from the California Department of Insurance.

One confounding issue in gathering data is that urban and rural areas may have different types of insurers and market structures due to their geographic and economic characteristics. Rural counties often have fewer insurance providers and lower competition, while urban counties typically have more insurers, higher competition, and stronger regulatory oversight. These differences could influence insurance availability and pricing independently of wildfire risk (Born and Viscusi). Therefore, to reduce this confounding effect, the analysis focuses exclusively on urban counties in California. Another confounding issue involves geographic and climate variation across counties. Factors such as average annual temperature, drought index, and proximity to coastlines or mountain ranges can independently affect wildfire risk, potentially

biasing comparisons across counties. To reduce these confounding effects, the analysis focuses

**Figure 1. County Pairings to Control for Demographic, Geographic, and Climate Characteristics**

| Control Variables |                |               |                                                         |
|-------------------|----------------|---------------|---------------------------------------------------------|
| Pair              | High risk      | Low risk      | Reasoning                                               |
| 1                 | Sonoma         | San Mateo     | Urban, coastal, mid-sized, similar climate              |
| 2                 | Los Angeles    | Alameda       | Urban, diverse, dense development, large metro centers  |
| 3                 | San Diego      | Orange        | Urban, coastal, large population                        |
| 4                 | Riverside      | San Francisco | Urban, economic comparability, large population         |
| 5                 | San Bernardino | Sacramento    | Urban, inland, similar size, comparable growth patterns |

Source: U.S. Census Bureau and the California Department of Forestry & Fire Protection

exclusively on urban California counties with comparable geographic and climate characteristics. Thus, this study focuses on ten urban California counties, which are paired to facilitate structured comparison between areas with similar demographic, economic, and regulatory characteristics but differing levels of wildfire risk.

## Research methods

After assembling the dataset and addressing potential confounding factors through county selection and pairings, the analysis proceeds using a series of quantitative statistical tests designed to evaluate both association and causal relationships between wildfire conditions and insurance outcomes in python.

First, Pearson's  $r$  correlation coefficients are calculated to address the strength and direction of relationships among the study's continuous variables, including annual wildfire frequency, percent acreage burned, nonrenewed policies, and Fair Plan enrollments. This allows for an initial exploration of whether greater wildfire activity corresponded with higher levels of insurance instability.

To determine whether higher risk counties differ meaningfully from lower risk counties, independent samples  $t$ -tests are conducted comparing the mean number of nonrenewed policies and new FAIR Plan enrollments across the two groups. Since the independent variable in this

comparison is binary, this test is the appropriate method for identifying statistically significant differences in outcomes.

Finally, to test the study's central hypothesis, controlling for unobserved characteristics of counties and border annual trends, the analysis employs Ordinary Least Squares regression models with county and year fixed effects. This modeling strategy allows the study to isolate the effects of wildfire risk classifications on insurance availability and affordability while accounting for structural differences.

## Results

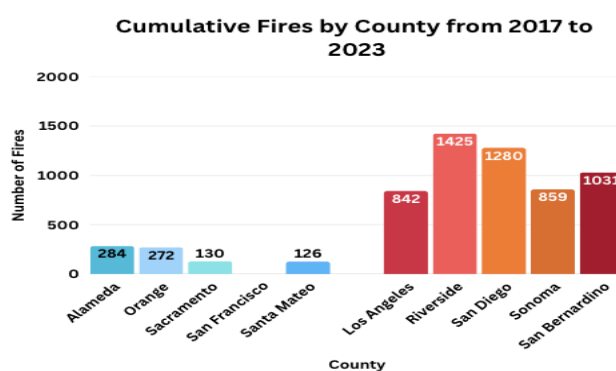


Figure 1. Cumulative Wildfires by County, 2017–2023  
Source: Department of Forestry & Fire Protection

Figure 1 provides essential context for understanding the relationships uncovered in the statistical analysis. The figure shows that cumulative wildfires activity from 2017 to 2023 was heavily concentrated in high risk counties. This uneven distribution of wildfire exposure aligns with the correlation results, which revealed moderate positive associations between wildfire frequency and both nonrenewed policies ( $r = .34$ ) and FAIR Plan enrollments ( $r = 0.31$ ). Counties facing more frequent wildfires also faced greater instability. The strongest relationship emerged between nonrenewed policies and FAIR Plan enrollments ( $r = 0.81$ ), indicating that private insurer withdrawals are closely linked to increased reliance on the state's insurance. In contrast, percent acreage burned showed no meaningful correlation with insurance outcomes, suggesting

that insurers responded more to structural, long-term wildfire conditions than to annual fluctuations in burned land.

Figure 2a visualizes yearly cumulative Fair Plan enrollment policies for high and low risk counties revealing a widening divergence over time. High risk counties consistently reported substantially higher numbers of new Fair Plan policies, beginning around 180 to 190 in 2017-2018, and rising sharply to more than 430 by 2023 (scaled by  $10^3$ ). Growth accelerated especially after 2019, coinciding with back to back extreme wildfire seasons and a noticeable tightening of the private insurance market. Low risk counties, in comparison, showed only minor increases, rising from near zero in 2017 to roughly 50 by 2023 (scaled by  $10^3$ ). These contrasting trajectories demonstrate that dependence on the FAIR Plan is overwhelmingly concentrated in high wildfire risk counties, reinforcing the finding that homeowners in these regions face greater barriers in obtaining private insurance coverage.

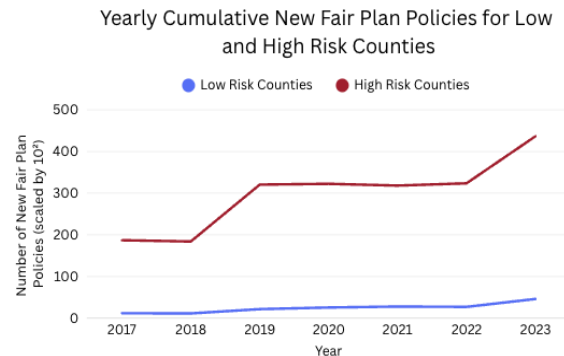


Figure 3a: Yearly Cumulative New FAIR Plan Policies (2017-2023)  
Source: California Department of Insurance

Figure 2b presents yearly cumulative nonrenewed policies and similarly shows substantial differences across country risk classifications. High risk counties ranged from approximately 33 to 47 nonrenewed policies annually, peaking around 2021 before declining slightly in later years (scaled by  $10^4$ ). Low risk counties remained more stable, fluctuating moderately between 14 and 18 nonrenewed (scaled by  $10^4$ ). The consistent and sizable gap

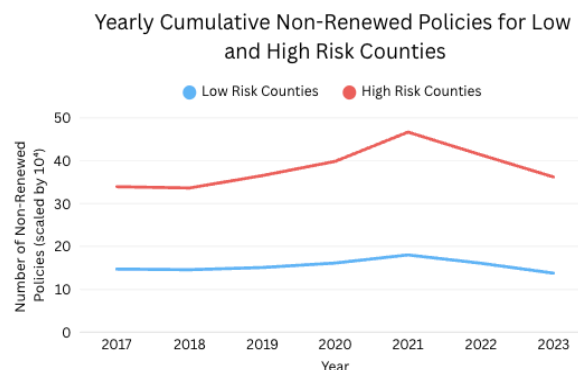


Figure 3b: Yearly Cumulative Non-renewed Policies (2017-2023)  
Source: California Department of Insurance

between the two groups indicated that insure withdrawal was a persistent structural feature of high risk markets rather than a short lived response to individual wildfire seasons. This pattern aligns with the correlated results where nonrenewed policies and Fair Plan enrollments were strongly linked.

Independent samples t-test confirmed that these differences were statistically significant. High risk counties average 76,494 nonrenewed policies per year, compared to 30,975 in low risk counties, a difference of 45,519 ( $p < .001$ ). Fair Plan enrollments showed similarly pronounced disparities: high risk counties averaged 5,978 new policies annually, while low risk counties averaged only 484, a difference of 5,494 ( $p < .001$ ). These results provide strong evidence that high risk counties experience dramatically greater insurance instability than their low risk counterparts.

| Regression Table<br>Outcome: New FAIR Plan Policies |                       | Regression Table<br>Outcome: Non-renewed Policies |                          |
|-----------------------------------------------------|-----------------------|---------------------------------------------------|--------------------------|
| <b>High-risk county</b>                             | 4,055.31*<br>(469.84) | <b>High-risk county</b>                           | 41,917.97*<br>(3,078.48) |
| <b>Fires per year</b>                               | 5.01<br>(5.02)        | <b>Fires per year</b>                             | -39.43<br>(26.85)        |
| <b>% of acres burned</b>                            | 0.34<br>(1.57)        | <b>Fires per year</b>                             | 5.32<br>(9.51)           |

Figure 4a: Fixed Effects Regression Predicting New FAIR Plan Policies (2017–2023)  
Source: California Department of Insurance and Department of Forestry & Fire Protection

Figure 4b: Fixed-Effects Regression Predicting Non-renewed Policies  
Source: California Department of Insurance and Department of Forestry & Fire Protection

Regression models with county and year fixed effects further supported these findings. Figure 4a and figure 4b reveal that high risk county classification emerged as the only statistically significant predictor of both outcomes. On average, high risk counties experience +41,917.97 additional nonrenewed policies ( $p < .001$ ) and +4,055.31 additional FAIR Plan policies ( $p < .05$ ) compared to low risk counties, even after controlling for annual fires and percent acres burned. Neither wildfire frequency nor percent acreage fire burned reached

statistical significance in any models, suggesting that insured responded primarily to long term structural risk rather than yearly variation in wildfire activity.

### **Discussion and Research Implications**

The results strongly support the study's hypothesis that worsening wildfire risk has exacerbated disparities in homeowners insurance across California. High risk counties consistently faced higher private insurer withdrawal, greater reliance on the FAIR Plan, and more strained insurance markets. The finding that high risk classifications of counties, rather than annual wildfire activity, predicted insurance outcomes suggests that insurers respond primarily to structural, long term risk conditions rather than short term fire events. This aligns with prior research showing that insurers evaluate risk based on cumulative exposure and market stability rather than single year catastrophic events.

One of the most striking and unexpected findings of this analysis is that neither wildfire frequency nor the percent of acreage burned emerged as statistically significant predictors of insurance outcomes in the regression models. Given the common assumption that insurers adjust their behavior in direct response to wildfire events, it is surprising that annual fire activity did not meaningfully predict nonrenewed policies or FAIR Plan enrollments once county and year fixed effects were included. This suggests that insurers are not reacting to short term spikes in wildfire conditions, but rather deeper, long term structural characteristics that define high risk countries. The fact that "high risk" county remained the only significant predictor, even after controlling for actual wildfire activity, indicates that insurers have internalized the risk profile of certain regions and have adjusted to what their future can hold. This disconnect between actual yearly wildfire damage and insurer behavior underscores a critical policy dilemma: even if the wildfire mitigation efforts successfully reduces fire security in the short term, the insurance market may

not respond unless underlying structural risk classifications change. The lack of significance among the wildfire variable therefore highlights the extent to which insurance instability in California has shifted from being event driven to being embedded in long term geographic and environmental risk assessments.

These findings have important policy implications. First, they highlight the growing dependence on the FAIR Plan in high risk communities, raising concerns about affordability and equity, as FAIR Plan policies offer narrow coverage at a much higher cost. Second, the lack of responsiveness to annual fire conditions suggest that hazard mitigation efforts, even if successful, may not be sufficient enough to bring insurers back into high risk markets without broader regulatory interventions. Third, the widening gap between high and low risk counties indicates increasing geographic inequality in access to insurance, potentially exacerbating housing insecurity and limiting economic recovery after wildfire events.

A key policy implication emerging from these findings is the need for greater transparency in how insurers assess and communicate wildfire risk. The results show that insurers are not simply reacting to yearly fire activity, but to long term structural risk classification that are largely invisible to homeowners. This lack of transparency leaves consumers unable to anticipate nonrenewals, understand rate increase, or take effective mitigation measures. A policy requiring insurance companies to disclose the factors driving their risk assessments, similarly to transparency debates sparked when Zillow removed public access to extreme weather risk data information, would allow homeowners to make more enforceable decisions and reduce the informational asymmetry that currently exist within high risk communities (Milman). By making underwriting criteria, risk scores, and withdrawal patterns publicly available, policymakers could improve market accountability. In a market increasingly

shaped by chronic climate conditions, transparency is an essential step toward restoring fairness and predictability.

### **Research Limitations and Extensions**

Although the study offers strong evidence of structural disparities in insurance outcomes, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, county level data may mask variations within countries, especially in large geographically diverse regions such as Los Angeles and or San Bernardino. Zip code level data would allow for more precise measurement of localized risk and insurer behavior. Second, the study was limited to only public data, thus there was a great unavailability of relational county level premium data, preventing direct measurement of insurance affordability. Instead, the analysis relied on proxy, nonrenewals and FAIR Plan enrollments, which, while meaningful, do not capture changes in premium burdens. Third, the measure of wildfire activity did not include additional relevant risk factors such as vegetation density, wind conditions, or proximity to urban interface zones.

Further research is needed. Given the rapidly rising FAIR Plan enrollment, future studies could explore how long term dependence on the state insurance program affects housing affordability, rebuilding decisions, migration patterns, and related outcomes. Additional work could also examine whether FAIR Plan expansion stabilizes the insurance market or crowds out private insurers. California is not alone in facing these challenges; scholarly research shows that Florida, Louisiana, Texas, and several other states are experiencing similar insurer withdrawals. Comparative analysis could identify structural differences in regulation, reinsurance markets, land use policies, and mitigation incentives that make some states more resilient than others.

### **Conclusion**

California's worsening wildfire conditions have not only transformed the state's physical environment but have also fundamentally reshaped its homeowners insurance market. This study set out to determine whether the impacts of this insurance crisis have been distributed unevenly across the state, and the results provide compelling evidence they have. By comparing ten urban counties between 2017 and 2023, the analysis revealed that high wildfire risk counties face dramatically greater insurance instability than lower risk counties, reflected in significantly higher nonrenewed private policies and substantially greater reliance on the FAIR Plan. These disparities were not only consistent across multiple statistical tests but persisted even after controlling for annual wildfire activities, suggesting that insurers respond more to long term structural risk embedded in geographic classification than to short term fire conditions.

This finding complicates common assumptions about how insurers assess and respond to wildfire hazards. Rather than adjusting behavior in direct response to annual fluctuations in burned acreage or fire frequency, insurers appear to operate from perceived perceptions of risk. The consequences of this dynamic are profound: insurance instability in high risk counties threatens affordability, undermines homeownership security, and deepens geographic inequality, placing already vulnerable communities at even greater financial risk.

While the findings highlight worrying trends, they also underscore the importance of policy innovation. Efforts to increase transparency in insurer risk assessments, strengthen mitigation incentives, and modernize regulatory frameworks will be critical to restoring stability and fairness in California's insurance market. As climate change continues to intensify wildfire conditions, understanding and addressing these structural inequities will become essential not only for insurance policy but for the future resilience of California's community.

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