

Cleanup from NorCal fires estimated at \$243 mil.

By Juliet Williams, AP

Cleaning up from two destructive Northern California wildfires this fall will cost at least \$243 million, far exceeding the cost for other recent blazes, state officials estimated Friday as they transferred more money from the state's rainy day fund to help pay for it.

"The devastation caused by these fires is extraordinary," Department of Finance Director Michael Cohen said in a letter Friday to lawmakers. "Debris removal must continue expeditiously to enable community rebuilding and economic recovery."

The letter was to notify the state Legislature that the administration is shifting another \$83 million from the state's rainy day fund to help pay for the cleanup and that officials anticipate another \$105 million will be needed in January.

The fire sites in Calaveras, Lake and Butte counties were declared a federal disaster, so state officials expect a large portion of the cleanup costs could be reimbursed by the federal government.

Finance officials estimated in November that cleanup costs would top \$100 million.

But Cohen said in the letter that the cleanup is unprecedented in its magnitude and complexity. For example, the state's share of costs for cleanup from a wildfire in the city of Weed in 2014 was \$7.4 million, and cleanup from the 2007 Angora Fire at Lake Tahoe cost the state \$7.3 million.

Cohen cited three factors for higher than expected costs from this fall's fires: more debris than officials anticipated, lot sizes that are larger than expected, and increasing requests from landowners to help with cleanup.

Officials with the California Department of Insurance do not yet have an overall estimate of damages from the two fires.