

Multimillion-dollar fines for starting forest fire

By Wes Siler, Outside

In Oregon, two elderly men are being billed \$37 million for a fire the state says they started with their lawn mowers. In California, a homeowner is being charged \$25 million for a fire authorities claim was sparked by a known electrical problem at his house. Could you be stuck with a similar multimillion-dollar tab for accidentally starting a wildfire?

The answer used to be no. “In the United States, we’ve had a very cavalier attitude toward fires,” says J. Curtis Varone, a former firefighter who now practices law and specializes in fire litigation. “We consider fires to be an accident that’s really nobody’s fault.”

But with wildfires exploding across the American West—the number is up 70 percent in California so far in 2016—local and state governments have decided that typical civil penalties for causing a fire are no longer good enough. The two men in Oregon were fined just \$550 for a fire that ultimately cost the state at least \$37 million to extinguish.

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