

California Burning

California not only ranked No. 1 overall among the States That Lost the Most Tree Cover, but it also swept every single metric.

In 2020 alone, the Golden State saw its worst wildfire season ever, destroying some of its oldest green giants: redwoods, sequoias, and Joshua trees. California wildfires ravaged over 4 million acres — an area bigger than Connecticut — accounting for 40% of the total acres burned across the U.S.

California has lost more tree canopy than any other state in every time period we logged, mostly due to wildfires but also to droughts and pests.

The Wild(fire) West

Climbing to the other top spots in our ranking — after California — are Oregon at No. 2 and Colorado at No. 3. These states also regularly experience, and are among the most vulnerable to, wildfires, which is why this problem bears mentioning a second time.

Of the 10.1 million acres destroyed by wildfires in 2020 — nearly half are federally protected forest land — 9.5 million acres were in Western states, including our top three. Each of these states recorded some of the worst wildfires in their history last year.

A striking pattern for these states: With the exception of Colorado's No. 11 position for tree-cover loss in 2020, each claimed the same spot in every category as its overall position.

Bordering on the Coast

Except for Utah, all of the states in our top 20 are along the U.S. coast or the Canadian and Mexican borders. They include, for example, Maine at No. 5, Michigan at No. 10, Arizona at No. 12, and Texas in 16th place.

What explains this peculiar theme? Some of these states are among the most heavily forested in the country, for one. Plus, coastal states are twice as developed as the rest of the U.S., meaning greater harvesting. Clearly, societal growth comes at a tall price.

Great Plains, Great for Trees

The bottom 10 states in our ranking — meaning the states with minimal deforestation over time — are dominated by the Great Plains, claiming half of these spots. They include Oklahoma at No. 43, Montana at No. 46, and South Dakota in last place.

(The other half of the bottom 10 are all over the map, including Hawaii at No. 42, New Mexico at No. 48, and Rhode Island at No. 50.)

Why? The name of this region says it all: The Great Plains landscape is the least forested in the country and mostly flat, covered in prairie and grassland. A semi-arid climate simply prohibits tree growth. In these states, “I got lost in the woods” is never a valid excuse.