

All of Colorado will face high wildfire risk to properties in the next 30 years

Panisara Jaijongkit | October 19, 2022

Colorado has a history of wildfire risk, but that danger will only grow as we head into the future. The Cameron's Peak Fire, the East Troublesome Fire, and the Pine Gulch Fire—[Colorado's three largest fires](#)—all happened in 2020. The Marshall Fire and the NCAR Fire that followed in 2021 and 2022 respectively both happened in proximity to the populated areas of Boulder County. The Marshall Fire in particular was the most destructive, with [1084 homes destroyed](#). Wildfires are creeping closer and closer to populated communities, putting properties at risk.

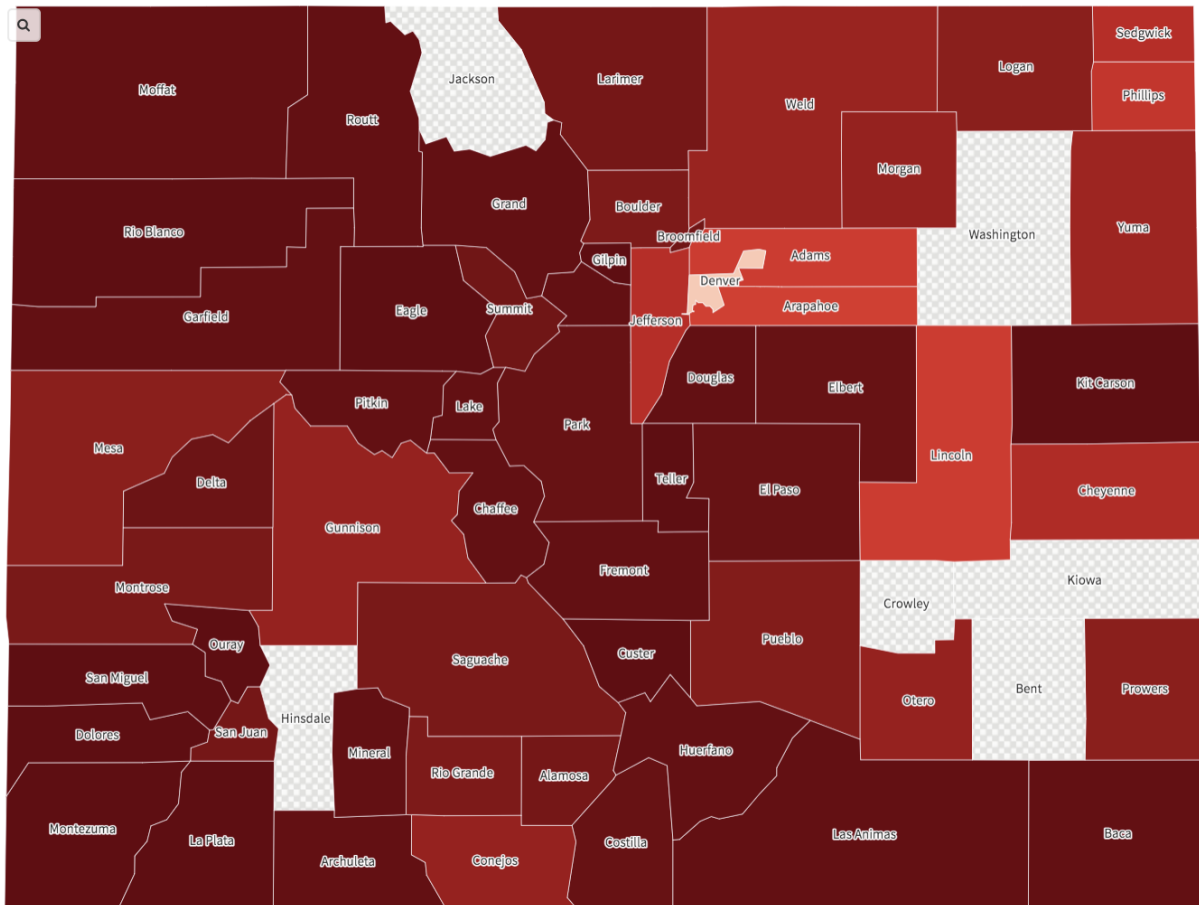
Research conducted by the First Street Foundation reveals that the vast majority of properties in Colorado will face high risk from being affected by wildfires in the next 30 years. The First Street Foundation culminated their data into the website [Risk Factor](#), which has information on fire, heat, and flood risk for cities, counties, and neighborhoods throughout the United States.

Risk Factor has data on fire risk for 58 out of Colorado's 64 counties. Part of what goes into that fire risk analysis is the percentage of properties in a county that are expected to face risk from wildfire.

Colorado faces high wildfire risk across the state

Properties in counties across the state of Colorado have a high chance of being impacted by wildfires over the next 30 years. Denver County has the lowest percentage of properties at risk.

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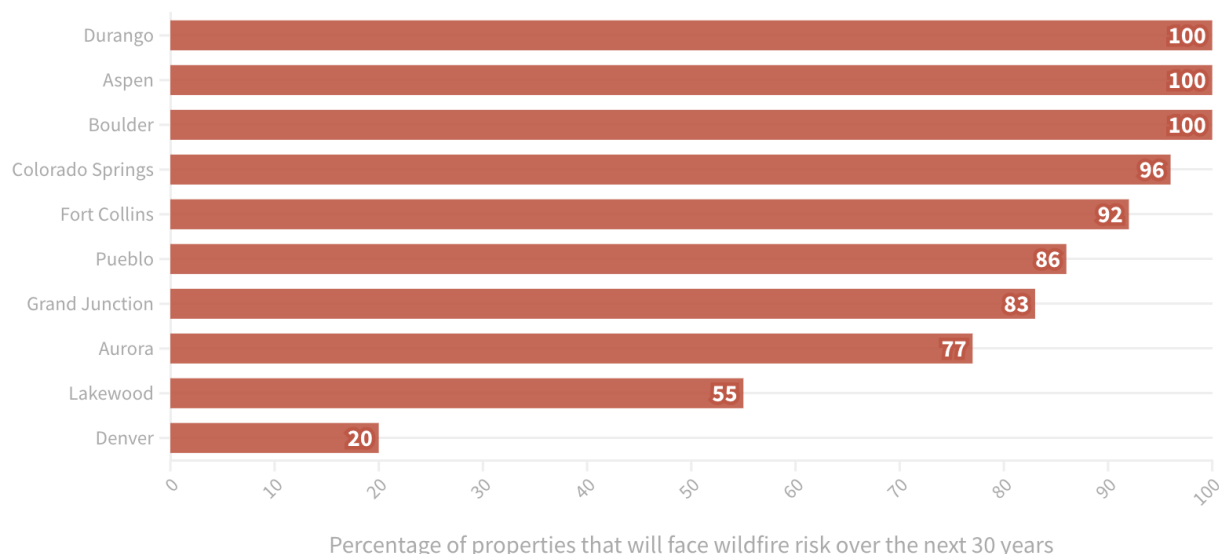
Source: [Risk Factor](#) • Data for Jackson, Washington, Hinsdale, Crowley, Kiowa, and Bent Counties unavailable.

[View this interactive graphic on Flourish](#)

At least 51 out of 64 counties face a 90% or larger rate for properties at risk. Imagine the places a person visits every day. The grocery store, a nearby elementary school, a favorite restaurant. And of course a home, be it a condominium someone had saved up years to purchase, or a house that a family has occupied for generations. All of these places, including people's entire livelihoods, could disappear overnight.

High wildfire risk to properties in major Colorado cities

Many key cities in the Front Range and Western Slope face will face significant wildfire risk to properties in the next 30 years. The heart of the Denver metropolitan area has the least properties at-risk while all properties in cities such as Boulder and Durango will face wildfire risk. Boulder is the city with the highest population with 100% of properties at risk.



Source: [Risk Factor](#), [U.S. Census Bureau](#)

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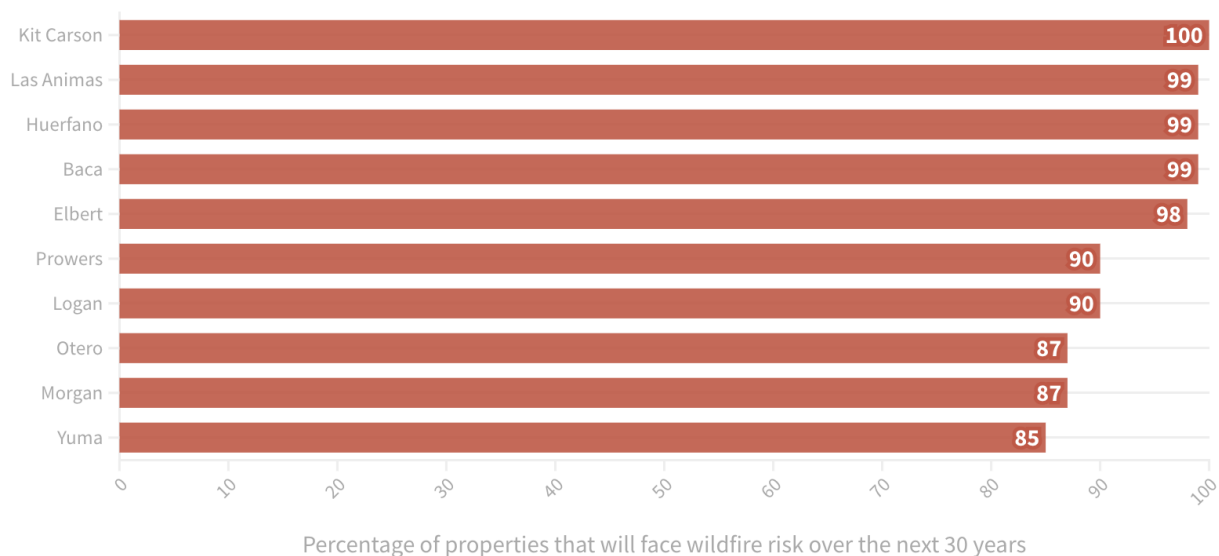
Denver County and the heart of the Denver Metropolitan area has the lowest rate of at-risk properties. The core of the city has its fire risk buffered by the surrounding suburbs, which are made more more risky due to [suburban sprawl](#). However, if a fire does get into Denver County, the damage will likely be worse due to the close proximity of buildings.

A factor that elevates the risk for the cities Durango, Boulder, and Aspen is the proximity to forests and structures built in what is known as the Wildland Urban Interface (WUI), a general term for where forest ecology interacts with human development. Durango sits at the mouth of the San Juan Valley, while Boulder is at the foothills of the Rocky Mountains, and Aspen—known as a ski town—is nestled in the Rocky Mountains and surrounded by national forests.

When people think of wildfires, what comes to mind are often crowded forests, with junipers and aspens, and a dense herbaceous layer. The Marshall Fire, which occurred on December 21 2021, burned through the grasslands of Boulder County, causing damage to the towns of Broomfield, Louisville, and Superior, as well as Unincorporated Boulder County. The event was a harsh reminder that grassland fires can not only happen in the Eastern Plains of Colorado, but also outside of what is perceived as a regular fire season.

Top 10 Counties in the Eastern Plains With Wildfire Risk

Properties in Eastern Plain counties in also face very high wildfire risk in the next 30 years. Kit Carson, Las Animas, Huerfano, Baca, and Elbert counties have almost 100% of their properties at risk. All Eastern Plains counties, even the ones not displayed, will face significant wildfire risk.



Source: [Risk Factor](#), [U.S. Census Bureau](#)

[View the interactive graphic on Flourish](#)

Fires in the plains are exasperated by grass growth from wetter seasons. As the grasses grow and die by the winter season, they dry out and become fuel for flames.

Dr Deserai Crow, a professor of Public Affairs with a research speciality in natural disaster risk mitigation, has studied the Marshall Fire. “Typically, we haven’t really thought about prairie grass as such a wildfire risk to suburban Colorado communities,” she noted. “It was an unusual event. However, I think it highlighted that things have changed, and we need to think about wildfire mitigation beyond just the Foothills and those traditional landscapes.”

In addition to wildfires, certain counties in Colorado are also [vulnerable to floods](#). Flood disasters will only be [exacerbated by the increased rate of wildfires](#) as forests struggle to retain water and prevent erosion.

Following the Marshall Fire, Boulder County is beginning to take action to prepare for wildfires. County commissioners have proposed a sales tax whose gains will support wildfire mitigation and emergency services. The sales tax will be voted on in the November 8th 2022 election.