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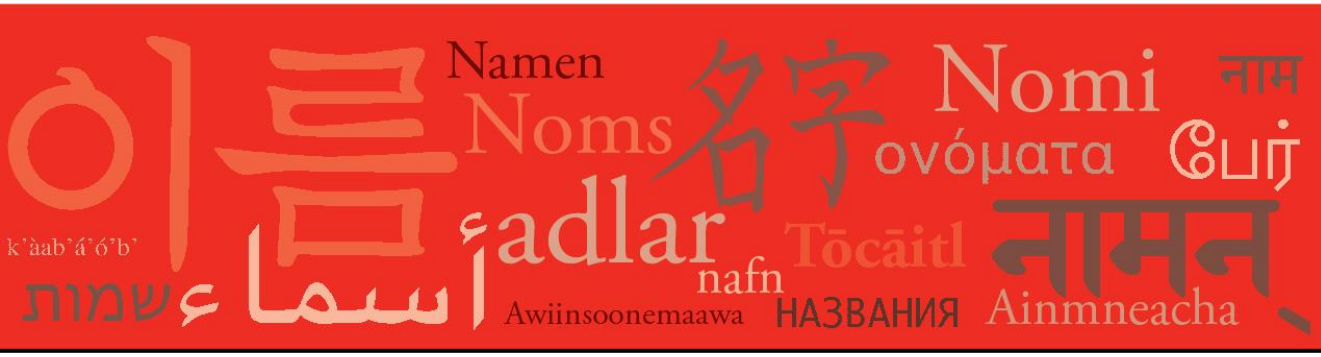


# Creeks and Peaks: Wildfire Name-Giving in the United States

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## Abstract

Wildfires pose a growing problem in the US and elsewhere. Many US wildfires acquire a name, and the naming of such fires is what this article chronicles. The centerpiece herein is a from-scratch, thousand-fire corpus that we created, for which we can defend the provenance of each fire name and from which we have extracted a tally of how many names derive from each of 43 source classes. The corpus is wide-ranging, with fires that burned in 4 different centuries, 22 decades, and all 50 states. Stream names (hydronyms) are the leading name source for fires in the corpus, followed by summit names (oronyms) and road names (hodonyms).


**Keywords:** wildfires, name-giving, provenance, classification, toponyms, United States

## Introduction

George R. Stewart was not only among the early stalwarts of the American Name Society but also a novelist.[1] In *Fire*, his forest fire-focused novel, Stewart tasked the fire dispatcher in the fictional Ponderosa National Forest to explain to their new weather prognosticator how they kept track of simultaneous fires. Instead of numbering them, as the weather guy had expected, the dispatcher said, "We've named them in the Forest Service since I don't know when—helps keep the records straight, and helps giving orders when maybe there's a lightning-bust and you have thirty fires going all at once. If somebody over a telephone gets one figure wrong, it throws out the whole thing, but a name doesn't get mixed up that way" (Stewart 1948, 88).

Wildfires pose a growing problem in the United States and elsewhere. Brown (2022, 2:2) paraphrased a United Nations report, writing, "A warming planet and changes in land use patterns will scorch large parts of the globe in coming decades, causing spikes in unhealthy smoke pollution and other problems that governments are ill prepared to confront [. . .]". Popovich and Plumer (2022, 7:1) noted, "Across the Western United States, wildfires are growing larger and more severe as global warming intensifies". In the United States, according to the 2021 official annual summary of wildfires, the country endured 58,985 of them that year, fires that burned through 7,125,643 acres.[2] The five-year and ten-year averages leading up to 2021 ran even higher, at 61,350 and 62,799 US fires respectively (US National Interagency Coordination Center 2022).

Many US wildfires acquire a name, and the naming of such fires is what this article chronicles. After providing background on fire naming practices through the years, we narrow our focus to the names in a 1,000-fire corpus. We explain how we prepared the corpus and then classified the sources of the fire names, using a system with 43 classes. Wildfire name provenance is our principal interest.

## Background

Naming of US wildfires preceded the naming of tropical cyclones by many decades. The naming practice for the latter began with Atlantic hurricanes in 1954 (Gudde 1955).[3] And, unlike the hurricane or typhoon name lists that appear well in advance of these seasons, fire names emerge only after the first smoke. Hurricane names descend from the World Meteorological Organization; fire names, on the other hand, bubble up from the depths of the firefighting corps, from lonely fire tower lookouts, dispatchers, initial on-scene engine crews, and first incident commanders.

Newspaper coverage of forest fires started early, partly because fire stories helped sell newspapers. Monstrous fires like *Peshtigo* in 1871 and *Hinckley* in 1894 devastated the timber cutover region of the northern Great Lakes. People wanted to read about the fires, so editors sent reporters to the affected areas and picked up newswire stories as the fires raged and recovery efforts began. "Fire journalism" became a respected career direction for newspaper people (Kates 2010, 9). Early name-giving was pretty much up to those writing the stories. If they felt a fire needed a name, writers often picked the major affected settlement (like Peshtigo, Wisconsin, and Hinckley, Minnesota) and referred to the fire by that name, usually after the fire had subsided (*Racine Journal Times* 1894, 8).

Contemporaneous naming of wildfires did not become routine until well into the twentieth century, and even today not all fires garner a name. Nevertheless, fire-affected members of the public seem to want names for their fires. "We should start naming our fires, like hurricanes, so we could get a little status", said Amelia



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Harrison, half-jokingly to a *New York Times* reporter during a big fire in California's Malibu Canyon. "Now we just call them by the years" (*Oklahoma City Daily Oklahoman* 1970, 80).

Despite what the dispatcher on Stewart's Ponderosa Forest told the weather rookie about numbers, every wildfire under federal, state, or local oversight is to receive a fire number. For instance, 201855223 is the "Unique numeric record identifier" for the *Yarnell Hill Fire* of 2013 that burned nearly 9,000 acres in central Arizona and took the lives of 19 members of the Granite Mountain Hotshots (Short 2022).[4] When delivering this sad story at the time or reviewing events years later, which identifier, *Yarnell Hill* or 201855223, is going to resonate better?

Since its creation in 1905, the United States Forest Service (USFS) has been the leader in the country's wildfire confrontations. Gifford Pinchot, the original USFS (Chief) Forester, incorporated several pages of fire suppression guidance in his first agency manual, *The Use of the National Forest Reserves: Regulations and Instructions*. Despite fire incident details, including admonitions such as "Protect the valuable timber rather than the brush or waste", Pinchot never mentioned naming the blazes, even though he prescribed a thorough reporting system that required fire location, probable cause, damage done, and cost of fighting it (US Department of Agriculture 1905, 69-70).

It was not long, however, before forest administrators took a hint from the newspapers and began naming fires, if not at first contemporaneously, at least in after-action reviews. By the early 1920s, the USFS had adopted a reporting document for each fire on a national forest. Form 929, the "Individual Fire Report", gave high priority to a fire's name. On the first line of the first page, the district ranger or a designee filling out the 929 got a chance to provide the "Name of fire". We know the USFS was using this version of the 929 in the 1920s because the next line on this blank form asks when the fire started and provides "192_" as a prompt ("Individual Fire Report" 1922). Form 929 was still in service in 1943 when the *Hauser Creek Fire* occurred on California's Cleveland National Forest. Though the USFS had modified the form in the intervening years to include 14 numbered blocks, the form remained at two pages. Line a, Block 1 asked for "Name of fire", once again illustrating the importance of the fire's name ("Individual Fire Report [Hauser Creek]" 1943).

Guidelines accompanied Form 929 at least as early as the 1940s. In the 1945 version of the 929 instructions appears this segment: "Enter name which received greatest use during period of action. Name should associate fire with nearest prominent geographic or cultural feature. Do not use F-1, F-2, or some similar method of naming fire. Follow above instructions explicitly" ("General Instructions for Preparation of Form 929: Individual Fire Report" 1945, 5). What do we learn here? First, fires sometimes had competing names. We still find that to be the case, but there is always an official name in the end. Second, a "nearby prominent geographic or cultural feature" was to be the inspiration for the name. Third, local codes were not appropriate. Fourth, higher headquarters did not take kindly to on-scene name-givers straying from official name-giving rules. Fire reports using the 929 and its successor, the Individual Wildland Fire Report, Form FS-5100-29, continued through the twentieth century and into the twenty-first. "Fire Name" was always in the fire report's first block.

On-the-ground information about large wildfires and fires that the Forest Service expects to be active beyond 72 hours also goes up the chain of command today, using the Incident Status Summary, Form ICS-209. Prominently placed on the 209, in block 1 of its 53 blocks, is the "Incident Name". Block 1 appears not only at the top of the form's first page but also at the top of every other page (US Department of Agriculture 2020).[5]

Federal guidance for naming wildfires has become increasingly more explicit. Over the past decade, the National Multi-Agency Coordinating Group, a Boise-based (Idaho) government consortium of seven fire-responding authorities, has issued at least three sets of naming instructions for ICS-209 and related reports: 2012, 2017, and 2021.[6] The 2017 memo suggested using nearby "geographic locations or landmarks" as inspiration but cautioned about the adoption of any names, even though on the map or in the local parlance, that would "reflect negatively on the unit, fire organization, or agency". It added, "What may seem to be a purely innocent name to the local unit may in fact have negative repercussions far beyond the fire itself". Name-giving authorities were to avoid anything "offensive, derogatory or inappropriate". The memo specifically admonished that there be no fires named after a person, a previous catastrophic fire, or what seemed "cute or funny" at the time (Buckley 2017).[7]

To obtain first-hand insights into the naming of fires, we spoke to a dispatcher on a western national forest. He preferred to remain anonymous. On his current USFS forest and on the forest where he worked previously, the dispatch offices usually have deferred to the name call by the first incident commander on the ground. Our informant noted that officials on a forest in Arizona had become unhappy with commander choices, which were "too random". Now dispatchers on that forest do the naming. Geographical features remain the premier name inspiration in his world, noting that it is easy to change a name up to the time that the fire team has ordered resources and set financial codes into motion. Local roads are popular for fire names, something we found in creating the corpus for this project. Our contact advised against the use of business or ranch names, as a fire name brings attention to said business/ranch and might give it "a bad reputation". Tragic


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fires of the past are obviously not a good choice for a new fire's name, and the US has retired a number of such fire names. Namers need to be culturally sensitive, thus "Indian" is not a good fire name choice. More than two words in a fire's name invites acronyms, so one or two words are better if you want the name to stick. Toward the end of our conversation, the dispatcher reminded us that fire names evoke memories for those who have fought them or otherwise supported their suppression, sometimes good memories and sometimes not.

## Methodology

The centerpiece of this article is a thousand-fire corpus that we created from scratch and from which we have extracted a tally as to how many names derive from each source class. The corpus grew, one fire at a time, until it topped out at 1,000. Corpus creation was basically a two-step process, multiplied by 1,000: first, find a US wildfire with a name and, second, determine with a high degree of certainty the inspiration for that name.

Creating the corpus, we decided that we wanted as large a time span as possible, going back as far as possible and ending with 2021. We sought fires for as many consecutive years as possible, and we wanted fires from as many of the 50 states as we could find. Fires that killed firefighters, consumed large areas of timber or other groundcover, were the subject of a Major Disaster Declaration,[8] or otherwise had special meaning were high priority for inclusion. The *Capitan Gap Fire* of 1950, for instance, in New Mexico's Lincoln National Forest joined the corpus because it carries special meaning to the USFS. Firefighters rescued there a singed black bear cub, the bear who ultimately became the inspiration for Smokey Bear, the long-time symbol of the need for caution with burning practices in the wild. The corpus should include not just well-known fires that brought forth abundant press coverage but also tiny fires about which only local inhabitants and firefighting personnel knew. We chose to include several of what firefighters call a fire complex, as complexes have become more common in recent decades.[9]

There exists a huge wildfire literature, including monographs, textbooks, scholarly articles, government research reports, master's theses, doctoral dissertations, specialized journal material (for example, *International Journal of Wildland Fire* and *Fire Management Today*), conference proceedings, popular magazine pieces, and newspaper coverage. Many of these authors provide examples of fires by name; but, with the exception of fire journalists, seldom do they address the provenance of the wildfire names with which they populate their prose. Many fires that early on became candidates for the corpus were from our review of wildfire books, including *Great Forest Fires of America* (Guthrie 1936), *Burning an Empire: The Story of American Forest Fires* (Holbrook 1943), *Fire in America: A Cultural History of Wildland and Rural Fire* (Pyne 1982), and *Forest Fires: A Reference Handbook* (Omi 2005).

Especially helpful at this stage were items from Newspapers.com, along with four other newspaper databases: Newspaper Source, Nineteenth Century U.S. Newspapers, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times, and ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Chicago Tribune. Fire journalists provided day-by-day information about what was burning and where. Newspapers permitted us to search gap years where we had no fires. Newspaper coverage allowed us to employ a snowball technique. We would go to a particular newspaper article, looking for one fire; and, not uncommonly, the correspondent would write about the fire we were seeking but also name and provide updates on other fires. A single press clipping could yield several contemporaneous fire names. Newspaper articles also might reference relevant fires from the past, excellent name fodder for the corpus.

*Spatial Wildfire Occurrence Data for the United States, 1992-2018* (Short 2022), a dataset of 2.17 million wildfires, proved invaluable in acquiring fire names and tracking down their name sources. This dataset was especially helpful when we searched for fires from states where fires are typically small and press coverage is minimal. *Spatial Wildfire* is searchable so that when we lacked a fire from Rhode Island we could search for a fire handled by a reporting unit with "Rhode Island" in its name. Using this tactic, we added the *Sachuest Point Fire* of 2011, a 0.1-acre blaze at the Rhode Island National Wildlife Refuge, as well as a number of fires from other states.

Once the working corpus contained 1,000 fires, the more difficult of the two steps in the construction process—finding the source of the name for every fire with a high degree of accuracy—could occur. A considerable number of fires fell to the wayside at this juncture as, trying our level best, we could not determine name provenance. When this happened, we had to keep adding fires to the mix.

Knowing a wildfire's name made searching for the source of that name easier. What we primarily sought were newspaper articles about individual fires, say the 2004 *Jacket Fire* southeast of Flagstaff, Arizona, hoping for a clear indication of name origin. From previous experience and knowing fire-naming protocols, we doubted



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that the USFS had named *Jacket* after a garment. What we did find in the *Arizona Daily Sun* was that namegivers had "called the Jacket Fire after nearby Yellowjacket Canyon" (Muller 2004, A1). The great majority of fire articles, however, did not provide name provenance; and for a lot of the smaller fires in the corpus, we could find no newspaper coverage whatsoever.

One option in tracking a fire name was to contact a relevant government agency in the fire's vicinity. That option yielded several positive results. For example, email replies from an interpretive park guide at Mesa Verde National Park allowed us to pin down the *Bircher Fire* of 2000 as having begun on the nearby Bircher family property and the *Todd Mine Fire* of 1926 as receiving its name from a coal mine adjacent to the park. We even went beyond government agencies for help. Take the *Gus Fire* of Arizona in 2000. *Gus* burned 5,700 acres of the Buenos Aires National Wildlife Refuge (BANWR). The press covered the fire but did not divulge its name's provenance. Nothing in the maps we checked carried the fire's name, and the refuge had closed for the season, so we contacted the Friends of the BANWR to ask for help. Alas, their network of contacts was not able to source the name; and we had to drop *Gus*. Several of our email and telephone queries went unanswered; and it became obvious that this direct approach, while encouraging when it worked, required more resources than we had available.

What turned out to be our best way to track down the most elusive fire name sources was to find the origin point of the fire and then seek out similarly named toponyms in the surrounding landscape. Over and over again, that approach proved fruitful. If available, we used precise latitude and longitude coordinates, such as those that *Spatial Wildfire* (Short 2022) provides for fires during 1992 through 2018. Locational clues about fires burning before 1992 and after 2018 came largely from press coverage, when writers gave solid information about where a fire started, like a road intersection, stream junction, or peak. With either precise coordinates or good landscape clues, we went to online map databases to determine fire start locations. For this purpose, we used Google Earth Pro, United States Geological Survey Topographic Maps, Bing Maps, and Google Maps. Incidentally, neither Form 929 nor Form FS-5100-29 nor Form ICS-209 sought or seeks the provenance of fire names.

Classification of fire name sources could finally occur once we had in place the completed corpus of 1,000 fires.[10] We base our classification system on the "Feature Class Definitions" (2022) page in the Home Town Locator website, a list that consists of a mixture of natural and human components of the geographical landscape. From the original "Feature Class Definitions" list of 58 classes we dropped 21 that did not provide source inspiration for any corpus names. We added six classes of our own out of necessity: "chronological", "local incident number", "other fire(s)", "person(s)", "road", and "whimsical". Thus, we end with 43 classes of source names for the 1,000 fires. Almost all fire name sources fit nicely in a single classification category, but there were five fires that needed two. In those split incidents, we assigned half a fire to each of two classes.[11]

## Results

The corpus is wide-ranging. It contains fires representing four different centuries and 22 decades (including the 1820s through the 2020s). We were able to incorporate named fires from 127 years (105 of them consecutive years from 1917 through 2021). Of the 127 years, 29 contributed only one fire, while a total of 10 years added between 26 and 50 fires each to the total (Table 1). All 50 states have at least one fire in the corpus (Table 2). The 10 states at the top of the list are in the West, which is where the greatest wildfire threat exists. Somewhat of a surprise are the 20 fires that crossed a state line and two that went international. The leading cross-boundary situation involved three that started in California and landed in Nevada.


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**Table 1:** Corpus Wildfires per Year, 1762-2021

| Corpus Wildfires per Year | Number of Years | Example Years |
|---|---|---|
| 1 | 29 | 1762, 1846, 1952 |
| 2 | 24 | 1825, 1919, 1975 |
| 3–5 | 26 | 1926, 1973, 1980 |
| 6–10 | 22 | 1910, 1944, 2014 |
| 11–25 | 16 | 1953, 1999, 2016 |
| 26–50 | 10 | 2000, 2002, 2021 |
| **Total Years with Wildfire in Corpus** | **127** | |

**Table 2:** Wildfires in Corpus, by State

| State | Wildfires in Corpus | State/Province/Territory | Wildfires in Corpus |
|---|---|---|---|
| California | 344 | Arizona/Utah | 1 |
| Idaho | 87 | Arkansas | 1 |
| Montana | 85 | California/Oregon | 1 |
| Arizona | 64 | Connecticut | 1 |
| New Mexico | 54 | Delaware | 1 |
| Colorado | 53 | Georgia/Florida | 1 |
| Oregon | 46 | Hawaii | 1 |
| Washington | 43 | Idaho/Nevada | 1 |
| Wyoming | 43 | Idaho/Oregon | 1 |
| Alaska | 25 | Illinois | 1 |
| Florida | 21 | Iowa | 1 |
| North Carolina | 14 | Kansas | 1 |
| Nevada | 10 | Kentucky | 1 |
| Maine | 8 | Louisiana | 1 |
| Minnesota | 8 | Maryland | 1 |
| South Dakota | 7 | Massachusetts | 1 |
| Utah | 6 | Mississippi | 1 |
| Michigan | 4 | Montana/Idaho | 1 |
| New York | 4 | Montana/South Dakota | 1 |
| Texas | 4 | Nebraska | 1 |
| Wisconsin | 4 | Nevada/California | 1 |
| California/Nevada | 3 | Nevada/Oregon | 1 |
| Georgia | 3 | New Brunswick/Maine | 1 |
| New Jersey | 3 | New Hampshire/Maine | 1 |
| Arizona/New Mexico | 2 | North Dakota | 1 |
| Idaho/Montana | 2 | Ohio | 1 |
| Indiana | 2 | Oregon/California | 1 |
| Missouri | 2 | Pennsylvania | 1 |
| Montana/Wyoming | 2 | Rhode Island | 1 |
| New Hampshire | 2 | South Carolina | 1 |
| Oklahoma | 2 | Tennessee | 1 |
| Oklahoma/Kansas | 2 | Washington/Oregon | 1 |
| Vermont | 2 | West Virginia | 1 |
| Virginia | 2 | Wyoming/Colorado | 1 |
| Alabama | 1 | Yukon/Alaska | 1 |
| Arizona/Nevada/Utah | 1 | **Total** | **1,000** |
| Arizona/Utah | 1 | | |



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## *Stream Class*

"The Sleeping Child is safely back in its crib", wrote an anonymous Montana fire journalist as the 1961 *Sleeping Child Fire* completed its 28,000-acre run (*Kalispell Daily Inter Lake* 1961, 8). *Sleeping Child*, named for Sleeping Child Creek, is one of 217.5 fires in the corpus carrying a stream's name (Table 3). Although the first half dozen stream-inspired fires in the corpus, 1825–1876, sported river names (*Miramichi, Sebois, Yaquina, Nestucca, Coos,* and *Bighorn*), creeks quickly surpassed rivers as a stream name source. *Creek* is a common generic term across much of the United States for a modest stream of flowing fresh water, with exceptions such as New England (Zelinsky 1955, 323). Creeks are obvious on large-scale topographic maps, usually have names, and can stretch for dozens of miles, thus making them an appealing source for a fire's name as the first engine crew arrives at the scene or dispatch scans the map.

**Table 3:** Name Source Classes for Wildfires in Corpus, by Frequency, 1762-2021

| Name Source Class | Freq | % | Wildfire Examples from Corpus |
|---|---|---|---|
| Stream (creek, fork, river, etc.) | 217.5 | 21.75 | *Miramichi* (1825), *Trimbly Creek* (2002) |
| Summit (mountain, peak, etc.) | 131 | 13.10 | *Pony Peak* (1951), *Las Conchas* (2011) |
| Road (drive, street, etc.) | 125.5 | 12.55 | *Evans Road* (2008), *Grand Prix* (2008) |
| Valley (canyon, gorge, etc.) | 110 | 11.00 | *San Gabriel* (1919), *Mann Gulch* (1949) |
| Locale (boundary, café, drinking fountain, ranch, etc.) | 74.5 | 7.45 | *Mastic Park* (1927), *McVey* (1939), *Skinner Mill* (1976), *Panorama* (1980), *Rock House* (2011) |
| Civil Division (county, etc.) | 57.5 | 5.75 | *Silverton* (1865), *Redwood Valley* (2017) |
| Populated Place | 39.5 | 3.95 | *Laguna Junction* (1944), *Rhea* (2018) |
| Lake (natural feature) | 34 | 3.40 | *Chain Lake* (1827), *Bootleg* (2021) |
| Ridge (linear high ground) | 21.5 | 2.15 | *Valentine* (1917), *Pinnacle Ridge* (2008) |
| Chronological (time factor) | 18 | 1.80 | *Holiday (1998), Fourth of July* (2009) |
| Gap (notch, pass, saddle, etc.) | 15 | 1.50 | *Gap* (2008), *Gunsight* (2009), *Bear Cub* (2012) |
| Park (wildlife area, etc.) | 14 | 1.40 | *Griffith Park* (1933), *KNP Complex* (2021) |
| Person(s) (man, family, etc.) | 14 | 1.40 | *Eric* (2001), *Pack Rat* (2002), *Robert* (2003) |
| Plain (flat, prairie, etc.) | 13 | 1.30 | *Big Meadows* (2013), *Roosevelt* (2018) |
| Range (of hills or mountains) | 12 | 1.20 | *Adirondack* (1903), *Hochderffer* (1996) |
| Reservoir (dammed lake, etc.) | 12 | 1.20 | *Canyon Ferry Complex* (2000), *Alisal* (2021) |
| Spring (geyser, etc.) | 9.5 | 0.95 | *Kraft Spring Complex* (2002), *Geysers* (2004) |
| Area (BLM district, zone, etc.) | 9 | 0.90 | *Thumb* (1881), *Pilitas* (1921), *Tioga* (1932) |
| Forest (national forest, etc.) | 8 | 0.80 | *Bass River* (1977), *SQF Complex* (2020) |
| Pillar (pinnacle, outcrop, etc.) | 6 | 0.60 | *Rattlesnake Complex* (2006), *Table Rock* (2016) |
| Rapids (falls, riffles, etc.) | 6 | 0.60 | *Falls* (1988), *Nine Mile* (1991), *Cedar* (2003) |
| Military (practice ranges, etc.) | 5 | 0.50 | *Air Force Bomb Range* (1971), *Range 7A* (2015) |
| Trail (hiking, biking, etc.) | 5 | 0.50 | *Trough* (2001), *Aspen* (2003), *Jesusita* (2009) |
| Basin (cirque, lowland, etc.) | 4 | 0.40 | *Basin* (1961), *Devil* (1994), *Edes Hollow* (2015) |
| Reserve (native reserve, etc.) | 4 | 0.40 | *Barona* (1913), *Inaja* (1956), *Viejas* (2001) |
| Swamp | 4 | 0.40 | *Green Swamp* (1955), *Green Swamp* (2001) |
| Cave | 3 | 0.30 | *Ramparts Cave* (1978), *Skeleton* (1996) |
| Other Fire(s) | 3 | 0.30 | *Big Burn* (1910), *Coal Seam* (2002) |
| School | 3 | 0.30 | *Wright* (1970), *Thomas* (2017), *CalWood* (2020) |
| Whimsical (tongue in cheek) | 3 | 0.30 | *Warm* (2006), *Not Creative* (2015) |
| Arch (natural bridge, etc.) | 2 | 0.20 | *Tunnel Rock* (1960), *A-Rock* (1990) |
| Bench (hill flank, terrace, etc.) | 2 | 0.20 | *Red Bench* (1988), *Goat Rock Complex* (2015) |
| Cliff (vertical rock face) | 2 | 0.20 | *Glacier Wall* (1936), *Glacier Wall* (1967) |
| Local Incident Number | 2 | 0.20 | *747* (2002), *416* (2018) |
| Mine | 2 | 0.20 | *Todd Mine* (1926), *Homestake Mine* (1960) |
| Island | 1.5 | 0.15 | *Staten Island* (1963) |
| Airport | 1 | 0.10 | *Airstrip* (1967) |
| Bar (sandbar, etc.) | 1 | 0.10 | *Chetco Bar* (2017) |
| Bay (shoreline indentation) | 1 | 0.10 | *Bearpaw Bay* (2009) |
| Beach | 1 | 0.10 | *Zuma* (1956) |
| Lava (cooled and consolidated) | 1 | 0.10 | *Lava* (1988) |
| Tunnel (human construction) | 1 | 0.10 | *Tunnel* (1991) |
| Woods (not federal or state) | 1 | 0.10 | *Big Scrub* (1935) |
| **Totals** | **1,000** | **100.0** | |

Within the "stream" class of wildfire names, creeks are the source of 181.5 names (18.15 percent of the corpus). Also in the "stream" class are 27 river (or *rio*) sources for fire names, plus six from fork and one each from brook, springs, and wash, making the total of 217.5 or 21.75 percent of the 1,000. *Lime Creek,* 1879



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in Colorado, was the earliest corpus fire to have a creek as its name's inspiration. As in *Lime Creek,* inclusion of the generic *creek* is fairly common among the 181.5 creek-inspired wildfire names that we classified here. To be exact, 79 or 43.53 percent of the 181.5 fires with a creek inspiration have creek in their fire's name, including the 11,000-acre, 2001, California blaze called simply the *Creek Fire*.

**Table 4:** Year of First Corpus Wildfire in Name Source Class, by Year

| Name Source Class | Year of First Corpus Wildfire in Class | Name Source Class | Year of First Corpus Wildfire in Class |
|---|---|---|---|
| Civil Division | 1762 | Chronological | 1947 |
| Stream | 1825 | Swamp | 1955 |
| Lake | 1827 | Beach | 1956 |
| Populated Place | 1871 | Lava | 1959 |
| Valley | 1878 | Arch | 1960 |
| Area | 1881 | Basin | 1961 |
| Range | 1903 | Island | 1963 |
| Other Fire(s) | 1910 | Airport | 1967 |
| Reserve | 1913 | School | 1970 |
| Ridge | 1917 | Military | 1971 |
| Spring | 1917 | Cave | 1978 |
| Forest | 1921 | Bench | 1988 |
| Summit | 1925 | Rapids | 1988 |
| Mine | 1926 | Plain | 1989 |
| Locale | 1927 | Tunnel | 1991 |
| Park | 1933 | Person(s) | 2000 |
| Woods | 1935 | Trail | 2001 |
| Cliff | 1936 | Local Incident Number | 2002 |
| Reservoir | 1938 | Pillar | 2005 |
| Gap | 1940 | Whimsical | 2006 |
| Road | 1944 | Bay | 2009 |
| | | Bar | 2017 |

Not every fire in the corpus with creek in its name, however, went into the "stream" category. Canyon Creek, a hamlet in Montana, lent its name to the *Canyon Creek Fire* of 1988, a fire that we placed in the "populated place" class, as we also did with the 1996 *Buffalo Creek Fire,* named after the Colorado hamlet of Buffalo Creek. Into our corpus's "road" class went the *Aarons Creek Fire* of 2001 in southern Ohio because the name emanated from Aarons Creek Road. Similarly, the *Lick Creek Fire* burning in 2005 through part of the Cascade Range of Washington state took its name from Lick Creek Road.

## *Summit Class*

Among other obvious toponyms from which to draw fire names are high points of the natural landscape, visible in many cases for miles as firefighters approach the smoke and, like streams, stand out on topographic maps. We use "summit" as our classification heading for these landscape prominences. The corpus includes 131 fires or 13.10 percent of the total serving as a "summit" denominatum. Of these fires, 52 received their names from a mountain, with peak coming in at 43, butte at 10, mesa at 8, and hill at 6. Scattered through the remaining 12 were namesakes of *cerro,* dome, knob, knoll, ridge, rock, and summit. Oddly, given how many "summit" class fires we finally counted, the first such fire does not appear in the corpus until 1925, with Idaho's *Watson Mountain Fire*. By then, the first entry in 12 other corpus classes had already appeared (Table 4). Another notable aspect of the "summit" class is that the mountain/mount fires greatly outpaced those carrying peak names early in the corpus timeline. By the time we get to the Idaho's *Trapper Peak Fire* of 1967, only the fourth peak-named fire chronologically, we have already passed 18 fires with a mountain (or mount) as their inspiration.



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## *Road Class*

We count 125.5 fires in the corpus that carry the name of a vehicular pathway. Because the "Feature Class Definitions" list does not provide a class for these landscape features, we created the "road" class. Initial firefighter responses to assess and suppress wildfires tend to occur via a firetruck on a road, not on foot or horseback as in the early years of the USFS, or via rail, boat, or aircraft. Naming at the initial attack point is not nearly as important to the first engine as is corralling the fire before it can spread, but a fire name is important in relaying reports to dispatch. The road an engine crew takes to reach the fire is a logical choice for the fire's name.

The *South Grade Fire* of 1944 in California's Cleveland National Forest, after South Grade Road, is the oldest of the 125.5 names in the "road" class. Florida's *Mowry Fire,* on the edge of the Everglades, after Mowry Drive, a street in the city of Homestead, burned in 1950. The *Elliott Fire* of 1971 is the namesake of Elliott Highway, north of Fairbanks, Alaska. Roads were the inspiration in 2021 for two of the most massive fires ever in California. The 960,000-acre *Dixie Fire,* which consumed the village of Greenville and killed one firefighter, took its name from Dixie Road in Butte County. Later in the season, the *Caldor Fire,* one of only two fires in the historical record to cross the Sierra Nevada, carried the name of Caldor Road.

## *Other Classes*

We could go on and illustrate with examples and wildfire details all the other fire-name classes in Table 3, but space does not permit such in-depth analysis. Overall, corpus fire name-givers picked natural features (streams, summits, valleys, lakes, etc.) as name sources 597.5 times (59.75 percent). They went with human landscape feature names (roads, locales, civil divisions, reservoirs, etc.) or non-landscape names (chronological, personal, whimsical, etc.) for the other 402.5 fires (40.25 percent).

# Discussion and Conclusion

Among the dozens of terms that the International Council of Onomastic Societies (ICOS) includes on its "List of Key Onomastic Terms" (2010) are 10 that would prove useful if we were to attempt to classify in a different manner the wildfire name sources in the corpus (Table 5). Overlap problems would require some advance definitional work in order to guide placement of fire names into the choronym, microtoponym, and toponym categories. But other categories look to be immediately employable.

**Table 5:** Onomastic Terms for the Entities from which Firefighting Authorities Chose Wildfire Names in the United States, with Examples from the Corpus

| Onomastic Term | Corpus Example | Name Source | State | Year |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| choronym (large area) | *Thumb Fire* | Portion of Michigan | MI | 1881 |
| eponym (person or group) | *Ryan Fire* | Firefighter's name | AZ | 2002 |
| ergonym (enterprise/brand) | *Race Track Fire* | Gainesville Raceway | FL | 1998 |
| hodonym (route name) | *Eighth Street Fire* | Eighth Street, in Boise | ID | 1996 |
| hydronym (water feature) | *Medio Fire* | Rio en Medio | NM | 2020 |
| microtoponym (small place) | *Mormon Row Fire* | Mormon Row His. Dist. | WY | 1994 |
| nesonym (island) | *Staten Island Fire* | Staten Island | NY | 1963 |
| settlement name (all sizes) | *Westberry Fire* | Westberry Subdivision | SD | 1988 |
| oronym (elevated terrain) | *Thirtymile* | Thirtymile Peak | WA | 2001 |
| toponym (any US place) | *Honey Prairie Fire* | Honey Island Prairie | GA | 2011 |

Hydronym covers the name sources for all 217.5 fires in our "stream" class. To the 217.5 we would add names emanating from 34 lakes, 12 reservoirs, 9.5 springs, 6 rapids, 4 swamps, and 1 bay. The hydronym grand total would be 284 fires, or 28.40 percent of the corpus.

Roads, drives, highways, and other routes carry names that ICOS onomasticians categorize as hodonyms, or "route names". Hodonym sources resulted in 133.5 fire names. To reach that total, we began with the 125.5 names in our "road" class. We then added the hodonyms that inspired six "trail" names, plus one "tunnel" name and one bridge-inspired name, a name source that we classified as "locale".



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Oronym would catch the 131 names in our "summit" class, as well as 21.5 in "ridge", 12 in "range", and 6 in "pillar". Thus, we have an elevated terrain total of 170.5 fire names. One might also argue that names from the "gap" and "cliff" classes deserve a look as oronyms.

Nesonyms here are easy. There are only two island-inspired names, *Staten Island* and *Blackjack Bay Complex*. Actually, there are only 1.5 because the "Bay" portion of that name comes from Bay Creek.

The 10 ICOS terms listed in Table 5 would not cover, however, all the fire names in the corpus. Just as we had to add several classes to our "Feature Class Definitions" model, anyone striving to categorize according to the ICOS list would have to find other ways to categorize more than two dozen fire names. Not even toponym would account for fires like *Jet, Gale, Lava, Radio, Friendly, Day, Taxtime, Holiday, Bum Knee, Warm, Not Creative,* or *Average Bad Day*.[12]

Extension of research about fire names would logically include other areas of the world having well-documented histories of wildland fires. Australia and Canada come to mind; but substantial fires, even megafires, have burned recently elsewhere around the globe (Linley et al. 2022). Wildland fires in Australia, like the *Pinery Bushfire* of 2015 in South Australia and the *Murray Road Bushfire* of 2016 in Western Australia, acquire names in a prescribed manner. See, for instance, the four pages on incident naming in the State of Victoria's Emergency Management *Joint Standard Operating Procedure* (Victoria 2020). Scientists in Australia publish on many bushfire topics, including a recent article about non-human considerations of prescribed burning in the Blue Mountains west of Sydney (Lange & Gillespie 2022). Canada has a long history of naming its wildfires, like the 1941 *Swastika Fire* in Ontario (McClement 1969, 152) and the *Swiss Fire* in British Columbia (*100 Mile House Free Press* 1983, 12).

Tracking the name sources for US wildfires, we discovered that journalists have been pondering name-giving practices and have disseminated a number of items focused just on fire name origins, often for local audiences (Table 6). We believe that we have identified here a significant subset within the fire journalism genre. Subset writers typically begin with examples of contemporary oddball fire names that have led the writer (or the editor) to ponder, "What were they thinking?" Articles may include peculiar fire names from the past that somebody recalls. These journalists typically interview a representative or two from among those who name fires or know something about naming. Humor in the face of danger seems to be a major underlying motive for the subset, as a respite from covering another fire season.



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**Table 6:** Press Coverage of Wildfire Name-giving in the United States, by Year, 1980–2021

| Year | Examples of Press Coverage |
|---|---|
| 1980 | "Hot Monikers: Naming Forest Fires Helps Eliminate Confusion" (Ahrens 1980, B1) |
| 1980 | "Forest Fire Names Easy in Arizona" (*St. Joseph Gazette* 1980, 4C) |
| 1983 | "Little Glamour Involved in Naming Fires" (Foran 1983, A5) |
| 1994 | "Colorful Fire Names Reflect State's Unique Geography" (Silbernagel 1994, 8A) |
| 2000 | "Be There 1st, and Name that Fire" (Leibowitz 2000, B2) |
| 2000 | "Wildfire Names Mark the Spot" (*Madison Capital Times* 2000, 8A) |
| 2000 | "Thought, Frustration Go into Naming Fires" (Smith 2000, 11A) |
| 2001 | "Naming Flames is Hot New Way to Track Fires" (Cerabino 2001, 2C) |
| 2002 | "From Cheddar Cheese to Storm King, Fire Names Tell a Story" (*Santa Fe New Mexican* 2002, A6) |
| 2002 | "Fire Officials Now Name the Flames" (Majors 2002, B1) |
| 2002 | "Fire's Name Sparks License Plate Rumor" (Vanhorne 2002, A3) |
| 2002 | "Flames' Claim to Fame is Name Game" (Dillard 2002, 1A) |
| 2005 | "Forrest Ownbey a Legend of the Name Game" (Rodkey 2005, A12) |
| 2006 | "What's in a Fire Name? Almost Anything" (Summers 2006, A1/A7) |
| 2007 | "What's in a Name? Not Much, When it Comes to Wildfires" (Christensen 2007, A3) |
| 2008 | "Fire Monikers Tend to Come from Landmarks near Place of Origin" (Ross 2008, A1/A7) |
| 2008 | "The Flames Need Names: Crews Choose Fire Labels Carefully" (Yale 2008, A1/A6) |
| 2008 | "How Wildfires Get Their Names: The Story of Burnt Bread and Dirty Face" (Engber 2008) |
| 2009 | "Fire by any Other Name Still Burns" (Pacheco 2009, B3) |
| 2012 | "How Wildfires Get Their (Sometimes Strange) Names" (Chilton 2012) |
| 2013 | "Naming Wildfires" (Williams-Brackett 2013, A2) |
| 2015 | "How do Wildfires Get Their Names? The National Park Service Explains" (Greene & Inskeep 2015) |
| 2017 | "Who Decides What a Wildfire is Named?" (Wilson 2017, A5) |
| 2018 | "'416,' 'Witch,' 'Not Creative': How Fires Get Their Names" (Stevens 2018) |
| 2018 | "Sour Biscuit Fire and Not Creative Fire? How Wildfires Get Their Names" (Accuweather 2018) |
| 2018 | "Did a Campfire Ignite the Camp Fire? How Wildfires Get Their Names" (Sweeney 2018, A2) |
| 2019 | "Control of Wildfire Names Lies with Many" (Olson 2019, A1) |
| 2019 | "There's a Science, If Not an Art, Behind Those Blaze Names" (Netburn 2019, B4) |
| 2020 | "How are Wildfires Named? What's the Lightning Complex? Answers for California Fire Season" (Lin 2020) |
| 2020 | "Fire 'Complexes' are Giving Me a Complex" (Smith 2020, B2) |
| 2021 | "Bootleg Fire Meaning: What is the Oregon Blaze Named After?" (Edwards 2021) |
| 2021 | "How do Wildfires Get Their Names?" (Cowan & Stevens 2021) |

"Say, what's the name of this fire?" the dispatcher on George Stewart's fictional Ponderosa Forest asked the district ranger via telephone in *Fire*. The ranger opined that Onion Creek ought to suffice as a name source. "Can't be", responded the dispatcher. "What other names you got up there? There's nothing else on the map". Well, "They're all those old mines . . . Golden Queen . . . Spitcat, Broken Nose . . .", the ranger countered. "Oh, Spitcat will do!" as the dispatcher "matter-of-factly entered *Spitcat* in his log" (Stewart 1948, 111). *Spitcat* turned out to be quite a beast.

## Notes

[1] In 1941, Stewart published *Storm*, the novel that some credit with the idea of naming significant weather events.

[2] These statistics understate the actual fire situation. As the 2021 *Annual Report* notes, "Some wildfires, including many that are suppressed solely by private citizens or local fire departments (not by wildland fire management agencies), are never reported to any Dispatch Center [. . .] Additionally, ICS-209 reports are not required for the small, short duration wildfires that comprise the vast majority of overall fire occurrence annually" (US National Interagency Coordination Center 2022).



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[3] Natural event naming in the United States now includes winter storms (Nuessel 2015), while Hobday et al. (2018) spoke favorably about naming marine heatwaves.

[4] The Forest Service and other federal agencies maintain roughly a hundred Hotshot crews whose special training makes them crucial fire-suppression resources.

[5] The federal ICS or Incident Command System originated with efforts by California to bring order out of chaos when multiple agencies were fighting fires.

[6] Partners in the National Multi-Agency Coordinating Group are Bureau of Indian Affairs, Bureau of Land Management, National Association of State Foresters, National Park Service, United States Fire Administration, United States Fish and Wildlife Service, and United States Forest Service.

[7] Contact the corresponding authors for a copy of the Buckley letter.

[8] For the years 1950 through 2021, we were able to seek out wildfires in the United States that were the subject of a Major Disaster Declaration on the website of the Federal Emergency Management Agency: https://www.fema.gov/disaster/declarations

[9] A fire complex in the United States is a significant wildfire event in which two or more fires are burning near one another and come under the direction of a single incident commander or unified command, e.g., *Sadler Complex,* 1999, Nevada.

[10] Contact the corresponding author for a copy of the corpus.

[11] A total of five fires out of the 1,000 carry names from two different corpus classes. They are as follows: *Matilija-Wheeler Springs,* 1917, California ("valley" and "spring"); *Topanga Canyon-Malibu*, 1943, California ("valley" and "civil division"); *Rumsey 16,* 1999, California ("populated place" and "road"); *Blackjack Bay Complex,* 2002, Georgia ("island" and "stream"); and *Rodeo-Chediski,* 2002, Arizona ("locale" and "ridge").

[12] Several fire names on this short list would fall under the process of *onymization*, taking a common noun, like jet, and turning it into a proper name for a fire, *Jet* (Zgusta 1998, 195). This 1956 California fire on the San Bernardino National Forest occurred when a jet aircraft crashed and started the blaze.

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