



WILDFIRE SPURS DISASTER RESPONSE REORGANIZATION

THE 2012 CHARLOTTE FIRE NEAR POCATELLO, IDAHO

FACT SHEET 3 • SUMMER 2014

While wildfires present a host of challenges to impacted communities, they also provide opportunities to learn and improve preparation, response, and recovery for future events. The 2012 Charlotte Fire ignited in the Mink Creek area just outside of Pocatello, burning over 1,000 acres and destroying more than 60 houses in less than four hours. In the aftermath of the fire, widespread community support through fundraising events and donations for victims led to the creation of the Long-Term Recovery Organization to better account for and administer donations. Local nonprofit organizations also realized the need for better coordination in disaster events and initiated a new organization to better mobilize response and recovery efforts. This case study documents one community's ability to draw on community support and networks after a devastating wildfire for recovery, and to reorganize voluntary organizations for enhanced communication and collaboration in future events.

COMMUNITY CONTEXT

The Mink Creek area is located in the hills just south of the city of Pocatello, Idaho. The area is characterized by densely growing juniper and low-density residences built along steep valleys. Narrow roads wind up to residences with limited connections between them. The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and U.S. Forest Service own surrounding land, and outreach efforts by the local BLM office, working through the Three Rivers RC&D, attempted to educate landowners about the danger of a destructive wildfire as a result of overgrown vegetation. Although these outreach efforts were aimed at reducing fuel loads on private property, most landowners did not complete extensive thinning on their land prior to the fire, and enacted efforts were generally either insufficient or isolated.

Despite modest efforts to manage vegetation, homeowners were generally familiar with fire risk in the area. In 1988, the Johnny Creek Fire burned in an adjacent neighborhood, forcing evacuations and burning three homes. The Johnny Creek Fire illuminated the potential for extreme wildfire activity in the area and led to the creation of the Gateway Interagency Fire Front (GIFF), a mutual aid agreement between regional departments and agencies to provide cost-free suppression services for 12 hours.



THE CHARLOTTE FIRE

The Charlotte Fire began on June 28, 2012. Although an official cause was never released, an investigation deemed it was the result of an unintentional action by an individual resident. Due to dry conditions and extremely strong winds, the fire spread rapidly, necessitating imme-



UNIVERSITY OF OREGON



diate evacuations of over 5,688 residents, many with only minutes notice. The GIFF mutual aid agreement provided a fast and effective response, but the extreme fuel and weather conditions drove a fire that overwhelmed capacity. The fire burned more than 1,000 acres in four hours before it started to wane. It was nearly contained by the time the 12-hour GIFF agreement ended; as a result of this and cost concerns, the County decided against bringing in a federal incident team. In total, the fire destroyed over 60 homes and 29 outbuildings but there were no injuries or deaths. The final cost of the fire was \$1.5 million, with an additional estimated \$8 million in damages.

RECOVERY

Community recovery efforts after the fire were enthusiastic. An outpouring of furniture and clothing donations proved overwhelming, and surplus donations that could not be absorbed by local thrift shops and organizations were shipped elsewhere. Community-organized fundraising events collected extensive monetary donations, and several local nonprofit chapters worked together to form the Long-Term Recovery Organization, or LTRO, to help account for and administer these funds for long-term support to Charlotte Fire victims. While insurance policies assisted nearly all the displaced residents in rebuilding, the LTRO has continued to assist homeowners with unmet needs in the two years since the fire.

In the wake of the fire, local nonprofit organizations recognized that a general lack of coordination limited the most effective response, as many organizations eager to help were not aware of the best way to do so. As a result, non-profit organizations from 16 counties collaborated to create the Southeast Idaho chapter of Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster (VOAD), a network of organizations designed to facilitate more effective disaster preparation, response, and recovery. VOAD members meet regularly, participate in trainings, share information and lessons, and adopt common procedures for communicating and responding to incidents. Two years after the fire, members of the VOAD felt that they were much better prepared for effective disaster response than they were at the time of the Charlotte fire.

Landscape cleanup was led primarily by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, which organized cleanup events that drew thousands of volunteers. With guidance from the local NRCS office, coordination from local officials, permission from individual landowners, and donations of tools, volunteers helped remove the large amount of burned trees and debris from the fire; the nearby landfill accepted this material free of charge.

LESSONS LEARNED

While wildfires always require recovery efforts in the communities they affect, they can also be significant drivers of community reorganization and learning. Both the 1988 Johnny Creek Fire and the 2012 Charlotte Fire demonstrated the importance of stock-taking and adaptation to reduce wildfire vulnerability. The GIFF agreement formed after the Johnny Creek Fire was effective in providing rapid response to the Charlotte fire. The local and regional needs for enhanced coordination and mobilization of response organizations led to the creation of both the LTRO and the Southeast Idaho VOAD after the Charlotte Fire. The LTRO has been instrumental in assisting with recovery specific to this fire, and the VOAD has been vital in establishing ongoing collaboration and training for addressing future emergencies in the area. By recognizing and acting to address areas of need, communities can learn from wildfire events in ways that enhance local capacity for preparation, response, and recovery.

ONGOING EFFORTS

Despite adaptation at local emergency and humanitarian response levels, dangerous fuel conditions in the Mink Creek and surrounding areas persist, and landowner efforts remain modest. The Three Rivers RC&D, the primary organization providing landowner outreach and education around fuels reduction, has been consistently defunded. New or rejuvenated efforts to encourage proactive risk-reduction efforts on private property may help progress residential wildfire preparation to the headway made among community organizations.



LEARN MORE

For more information about the project and additional publications go to:

ewp.uoregon.edu/wfresilience

Contact: ewp@uoregon.edu

This fact sheet series is part of a research collaboration between University of Oregon, Washington State University, Portland State University, and University of Idaho, with funding from the USDA National Institute for Food and Agriculture, Grant #2011-67023-30695. Photo credits: header: Autumn Ellison; p.1: Oregon BLM; p.2: U.S. Forest Service, Gila National Forest.