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Challenges and Opportunities in Post-Wildfire Response and Recovery: A Case Study from the Hermit's Peak-Calf Canyon Wildfire

William Cole Buettner and Courtney A. Schultz

Wildfires in the western United States have become an increasingly complex management challenge, as effects are distributed across jurisdictional boundaries and occur at different temporal scales. In 2022, two escaped prescribed fires merged and became the Hermit's Peak-Calf Canyon Wildfire (HPCC) burning over 340,000 acres and becoming the largest fire in New Mexico state history. Utilizing qualitative methods, we interviewed 22 individuals with intimate knowledge of the HPCC post-wildfire response and recovery efforts, and who held positions across local, state, and federal agencies, to obtain detailed perspectives on the efficacy of post-wildfire programs. Our objectives were threefold:

1. Understand the major challenges that communities face in post-wildfire response and recovery in terms of effects on livelihoods and landscapes and how these were addressed through policy and governance.
2. Identify factors that allow organizations and agencies to navigate response and recovery policies.
3. Inform future policy changes to facilitate more effective post-wildfire response.

Key Findings

Interviewees perceived that FEMA Individual Assistance programs lacked the flexibility to address local contexts, resulting in low eligibility for program participation. Interviewees said FEMA would not provide temporary housing units to individuals who did not previously have sewer, water, or electricity connections, despite many rural New Mexican communities using alternatives like outhouses, river water, and solar or hydroelectric power. Strict policy guidelines contributed to low Individual Assistance eligibility, and interviewees perceived additional disincentives to participate because of funding available through the Assistance Act.

Interviewees perceived that FEMA Public Assistance programs had prolonged reimbursement and treatment timelines, and variable post-wildfire knowledge among federal employees. FEMA Public Assistance programs are based on reimbursements to applicants (state and local governments) which create barriers for communities that cannot pay project costs upfront; the agency does not guarantee which projects will receive funding and subsequent reimbursement, creating challenges for quick project implementation, given uncertainty about reimbursement. Interviewees said there is variable post-wildfire knowledge among FEMA staff; interviewees thought staff in Region 6 (New Mexico, Texas, Oklahoma, Arkansas, and Louisiana) did not have institutional knowledge of post-wildfire contexts, especially compared to other regions (e.g., Region 9 and 10).

Interviewees discussed challenges with the Hermit's Peak Assistance Act, including slow funding disbursement, an unfamiliar claim process, and were not certain how it would be implemented effectively. The Hermit's Peak Assistance Act provided \$4 billion in supplemental funding to settle damages or loss to property, businesses, critical infrastructure, economic loss, and physical or emotional damage. FEMA was tasked with creating a Claims Office to distribute the funding appropriated through the Act. Most interviewees said the disbursement of funding was slow because of the delayed establishment of the Claims Office and regulations. Interviewees already had familiarity with the Torts Claims process, the use of which could have reduced confusion across levels of governance and the public on how claims are processed. Most interviewees said they wanted the Hermit's Peak Assistance Act to

provide funding that can be implemented across jurisdictional boundaries, but instead provided payouts for claim settlements.

Most interviewees discussed challenges associated with the Stafford Act's policy guidelines, particularly the fact that disasters that result from wildfires, like subsequent floods, are not covered by initial disaster recommendations. The most common challenge mentioned was that cascading events (disasters that result from a post-wildfire environment) are not eligible for funding through the initial disaster declaration and must either go through a separate disaster declaration or be funded by the state. Many cascading events did not meet disaster thresholds, despite communities needing assistance. After data collection, multiple interviewees shared that an application extension was established to account for cascading events; the deadline was extended nearly two years after the disaster. This extension is HPCC-specific and does not apply to post-wildfire disasters more broadly.

The Monsoon Taskforce and the Lines of Effort Framework were coordination and collaboration frameworks that helped establish a sense of familiarity among actors, create channels for communication, and reduce information overload (Box 2). The Monsoon Taskforce was created to provide a platform for daily updates where agencies could share progress on project planning, expected field conditions, and immediate emergency tasks. The Lines of Effort was an adaptation of the FEMA Interagency Recovery Coordination Framework; through this effort, actors organized according to the seven identified efforts (watershed mitigation, housing, community development, water quality, economic development, historic and cultural resources, and health and social services) to distribute resources efficiently and encourage collaboration among actors.

Recommendations

The following is a synthesis of the key recommendations our interviewees offered regarding post-wildfire response and recovery policies and frameworks:

- Increase standing and surge capacity, specifically at the state and local level, to better manage contract procurements, land assessments, project implementation, and community engagement.
- Improve/create federal and state education on programs and ecological considerations around post-wildfire response and recovery.
- Develop and implement a navigator concept (i.e., a post-wildfire caseworker) to connect individuals and agencies with expert post-wildfire knowledge as they traverse response and recovery programs and policies.
- Create funding that can be implemented across boundaries and allow for a holistic post-wildfire approach.

Based on our broader research, we add the following policy recommendations to consider:

- Policymakers should address, at the federal level, inconsistency with EWP program implementation on National Forests so that cross-boundary opportunities are not missed.
- The USDA should continue to consider how existing collaborative authorities, like the Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Program or the Joint Chiefs Landscape Restoration Partnership, can be leveraged in post-wildfire contexts.
- Federal support should be purposeful and not overextend state employees who regularly fulfill multiple responsibilities.

More Information

Find reports and other publications about this research at:

<https://sites.warnercnr.colostate.edu/courtneyschultz/plpg-practitioner-papers/>

For more information about this project, contact:

Dr. Courtney Schultz Courtney.Schultz@colostate.edu
Colorado State University Fort Collins, CO 80521-1472

