Diverse Pathways to Community Recovery

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MCKENZIE VALLEY LONG TERM RECOVERY

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About the Ecosystem Workforce Program

The Ecosystem Workforce Program (EWP) is an applied social and ecological science research program at the University of Oregon. We partner with natural resource managers, policymakers, and other practitioners to provide original research, monitoring, and communication products that promote landscape and community resilience.

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Front cover photo:

Robbie Lefebvre, a member of the Oregon Department of Forestry, displays two cones of a Douglas fir tree at the Schroeder Seed Orchard. Credit: Andrew Studer/American Forests

Back cover photo:

Misc trees, trails and roads near Chehalem Ridge Nature Park, Gaston, OR. Credit: Jason Houston/ American Forests

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GLIDE REVITALIZATION

SANTIAM RECOVERY

Introduction

In this working paper, we share key lessons learned for policy and practice from organizations engaged in long-term recovery efforts of the wildland megafires (fires >100,000 acres) that ignited September 7-9, 2020, west of the Oregon Cascades[1]. These fires, collectively known as the 2020 Labor Day fires, burned around 850,000 acres, affecting people across the state. In post-fire recovery efforts, communities navigate a range of social and organizational processes after experiencing wildfire disasters. Learning from people's experiences with disasters, identifying successful strategies, and learning from mistakes can improve future disaster responses. In the figure below, we organize these lessons under four key themes: proactive planning; community-centered collaboration; sustained coordination and funding; and adaptability. We conclude with considerations for how to best approach and frame recovery.

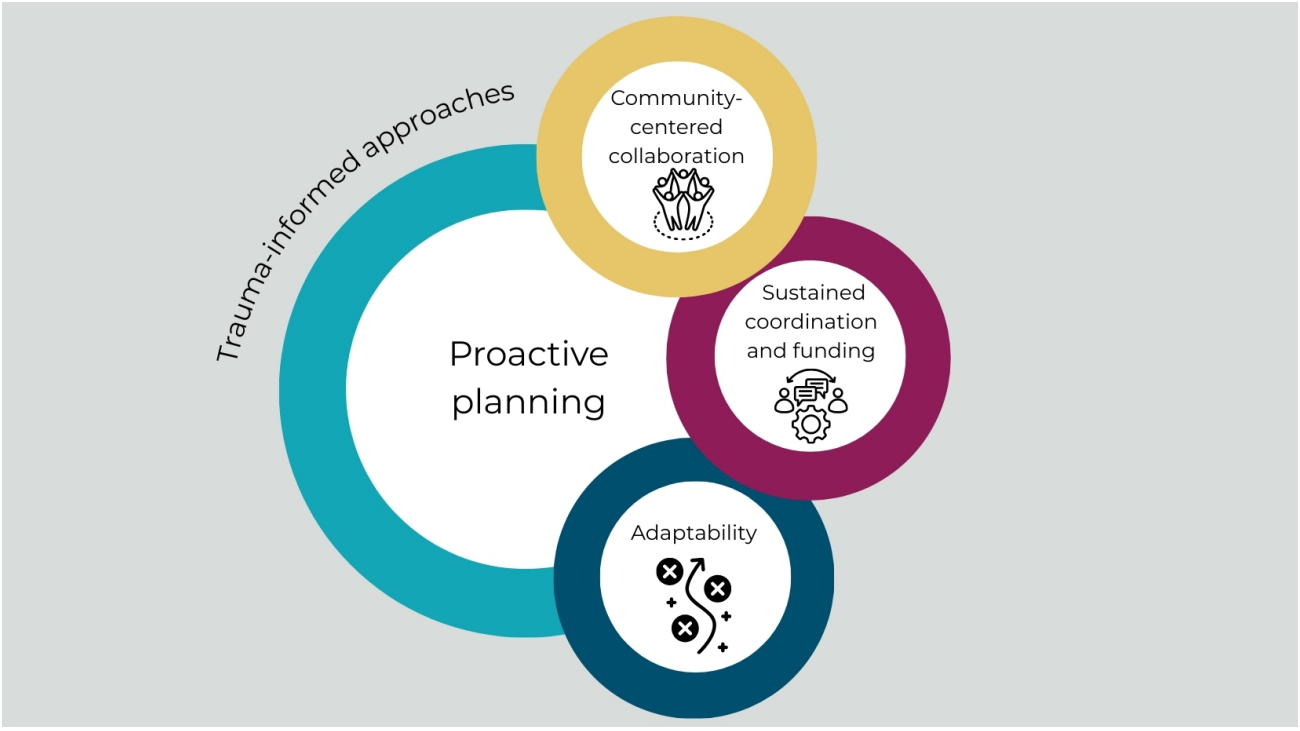
Trauma-informed approaches

Recovery efforts should incorporate trauma-informed approaches tailored to the needs of local communities. Addressing trauma-informed care at both the individual level and organizational level is essential to delivering services that disaster survivors can realistically access and engage with.

Trauma-informed resources:

Trauma-informed toolkit

Community engagement in fire preparedness



[1] Research derived from multiple studies. We compiled lessons learned from long-term recovery groups (LTRGs) through two Joint Fire Science Program-funded research projects on post-fire recovery in the Pacific Northwest (Grow Back Better and Persist, Adapt, Transform) and the Landowner Experiences After Fire (LEAF) survey.

Proactive planning

Developing recovery plans before disasters happen can foster a more structured and efficient response after a disaster occurs. Communities and local governments can respond faster, coordinate better, and reduce long-term impacts if they have plans in place for recovery, such as funding and technical support, before a wildfire event. In this document, we provide examples of how local governments, long-term recovery groups, and community-based organizations can identify key resources (people, infrastructure, funding), priority landscapes, and vulnerable populations ahead of time to help streamline processes and provide stability in crisis.

Proactive planning should incorporate a range of social and ecological considerations, such as risk assessments, landscape assessments, emergency communication plans, and evacuation and shelter planning. Risk assessments can help identify geographic areas and vulnerable populations with a higher likelihood of experiencing wildfire-related impacts, limited internet or cellular reception, or transportation barriers. Proactively conducted landscape assessments can identify ecological vulnerabilities that may affect how a landscape responds to wildfire. Recognizing these factors pre-emptively helps prioritize actions and support decision-making for post-wildfire restoration efforts.

Emergency communication plans support clear and accurate information for residents during and after a wildfire. Communities and local governments can increase the timeliness and accessibility of their emergency communication plans by pre-designating evacuation routes, temporary housing locations, as well as essential service providers. Incorporating informal neighborhood and friend networks and providing multi-lingual emergency text alerts are also ways to increase community accessibility of post-fire recovery resources.

Other proactive planning tools include Community Wildfire Protection Plans (CWPPs) and Multi Hazard Mitigation Plans (MHMPs). These tools guide communities before, during, and after wildfire events. Their collaborative development processes strengthen communication and help identify shared priorities and strategies that improve coordination and outcomes during wildfire response. The wildfire preparedness activities that communities conducted as part of Firewise USA further support this work by engaging residents in proactive, neighborhood-level risk reduction activities that can complement and reinforce the broader goals outlined in plans such as CWPPs and MHMPs.

Proactive planning should also incorporate relationship-building. This includes developing pre-existing relationships and partnerships within the community, as well as finding additional ways to link philanthropic organizations, county, state, and federal agencies with local organizations that play a key role in the effective implementation of post-fire and disaster recovery plans.

Other lessons learned that can help enhance proactive planning for disaster recovery are organized in the following sections under the themes of community-centered collaboration, sustained coordination and funding, and adaptability.



Kimberly Johnson loading seedlings at 'The Cooler' in Lyons, OR for the day's planting. Credit: Jason Houston/American Forests

Proactive planning in practice: The Santiam Service Integration Program

In the Santiam Canyon, the Santiam Service Integration Program consists of Service Integration Teams (SITs) that operate within a school district service area. Since the model was adopted in 2017, five SITs have been established in five different school districts (Cascade, Santiam Canyon, Scio, North Santiam, and Jefferson). Each SIT is unique to its community, and is comprised of around 30-40 engaged citizens forming partnerships between Santiam Hospital, school districts, faith-based groups, non-profits, social service agencies, local clubs, government agencies, businesses, and community members.

When the 2020 fires occurred, the Santiam Canyon SIT was able to pivot their COVID-support practices to fire-related support. The SIT formed an unmet needs committee and focused on case management of individuals affected by the fires. At first, they channeled financial and logistical support to help house evacuees and fire survivors. Then, they helped fire survivors, particularly low-income, renters, and primary homeowners, navigate grant applications and other assistance channels to meet their ongoing physical and mental health needs.

Community members living in areas where the Santiam Service Integration Program was already established before the 2020 Labor Day fires were able to access needed support within days of the wildfire. By comparison, others affected by the Labor Day fires, but not in an established service area, were unable to access support for weeks to months. This disparity in access underscores how existing relationships, consistent communication, and established resource-sharing processes can help agencies and community partners quickly identify needs and coordinate services during and after a wildfire.

As a non-governmental organization, the SIT helped survivors feel comfortable interacting with them for support because trust was already built. The SITs' already established social networks and case managers' personable natures meant survivors felt supported and guided through confusing aid application processes and other elements of post-fire recovery.

The Santiam Service Integration Program is ongoing, utilizing proactive planning through its thoughtful, standardized meeting structures and processes for resource sharing. Monthly in-person meetings continue to develop relationships, understand community needs and service gaps, and share currently available services. Together, SITs share resources and work efficiently and effectively to benefit those most in need.

For more information visit:
https://santiamhospital.org/s-i-t/
https://santiamhospital.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/09/SI-One-Pager.pdf

Community-centered collaboration

Community-centered collaboration engages community members, offers individualized assistance, and works through existing trusted messengers. Long-term recovery groups (LTRGs) or similar local organizations build on existing relationships to create sustained multi-organizational leadership over time. LTRGs, community-based organizations (CBOs), local governments, emergency management agencies, non-profits, businesses, watershed councils, soil and water conservation districts, SITs, informal community-based networks, and residents have collaborated on recovery in western Oregon since the 2020 Labor Day fires.

Local people and organizations frequently serve as trusted messengers, as they know the social and ecological context well and are often trusted more than unknown outside groups. Organizations who have built trust in communities also play a critical role in outreach and communication to landowners and households seeking recovery support.

Strengthening local organizations' capacity by ensuring that they have adequate funding is essential for effective and equitable post-wildfire recovery. Community-centered collaboration supports community centers, clinics, and other resource hubs in distributing resources and providing mental health and resource support. Conducting workshops and training sessions to enhance community preparedness builds trust, fosters community support networks and develops relationships with philanthropic partners, county emergency managers, or state agency personnel.

Results of the Landowner Experiences After Fire (LEAF) study showed that landowners recovering from wildfire were significantly more likely to have successfully completed restoration activities when working with a locally based organization, despite also reporting elevated levels of stress, anger, and other negative emotions after a wildfire event. Local organizations and agencies such as soil and water conservation districts, local OSU Extension offices, or Oregon Department of Forestry have existing relationships with forest landowners prior to wildfire. Landowners often turn to these entities for technical support and other guidance. Even though many local organizations might have limited budgets, their provision of technical assistance or related landowner support can often make the difference in whether a landowner completes restoration work post fire.



Douglas-fir seedling. Planting in a burn site in Santiam Forest near Gates, OR. Credit: Jason Houston/American Forests

Community-centered collaboration in practice: McKenzie Valley Long-Term Recovery

Local knowledge and trust are crucial to rural disaster recovery. In the case of the McKenzie Valley, it took twenty months after the Holiday Farm Fire to secure sufficient funding to hire the first local post-fire disaster case managers for the area. The McKenzie Valley Long Term Recovery Group (MVLTRG) – formed in the aftermath of the Holiday Farm Fire – secured funding and positions to help the affected community. With their deep knowledge of the community, the new case managers identified 113 households (approximately 25% of the fire-impacted population) that had not yet been contacted and registered in the state's disaster case management system. Once contacted, MVLTRG learned that this population represented some of the most vulnerable members of the community – elderly, people living with disabilities, and people living on low incomes. Pre-disaster community organizing and capacity-building could have saved nearly two years of post-fire recovery delays in hiring case managers to support displaced individuals and households.

Case managers have been key in many fire recovery footprints in Oregon, with many of these positions being filled by members of the community with invaluable local expertise. For example, in the McKenzie area, one of the case managers was also a founding board member of McKenzie Locals Helping Locals, a McKenzie Valley CBO that formed in the immediate aftermath of the fire, because they helped network and communicate across organizations.



Holiday Farm Fire survivor, Bob Campbell, with MVLTRG Recovery Program Director Mary Ellen Wheeler, during delivery of Mr. Campbell's new home as part of MVLTRG's Rapid Rehousing Program, Spring 2024. Credit: McKenzie Valley Long Term Recovery Group

Sustained coordination and funding

Strong leadership and sustained coordinated efforts are essential in mobilizing resources, facilitating communication, and guiding the recovery process. Leadership at all levels—government officials, community organizers, and volunteers—plays a crucial role in driving recovery efforts.

Sustain coordination efforts

In the aftermath of a disaster, many agencies and organizations operate in the same space which can lead to unnecessary duplication of efforts and gaps in service. Defining clear roles and responsibilities, holding regular coordination meetings, and implementing a leadership structure can help mitigate these challenges.

Organizations can strengthen coordination efforts by communicating clearly, sharing data, and using structured approaches to securing long-term funding and resources. Retaining at least one core, full-time employee to guide long-term coordination efforts has been critical to many organizations' operations. Developing coordination structures before a disaster occurs can facilitate improved outcomes for community recovery and landscape restoration after a disaster.

Leverage local capacity and trusted organizations

Organizations with strong existing rapport in communities also play a critical role in outreach and communication to landowners and households seeking recovery support. For example, watershed councils, soil and water conservation districts, or existing community-based organizations may provide long-term recovery groups (LTRGs) with support. LTRGs, which are often formed after disasters, provide sustained support beyond the initial emergency response phase. LTRGs, which bring together local organizations, businesses, and government representatives to oversee long-term recovery, can build on existing relationships to create sustained leadership over time.

Anticipate funding challenges

There are ongoing challenges for managing an influx of funding (private donations and philanthropic support) right after a disaster event, followed by a significant drop-off in financial resources after 5-6 weeks. This impacts grant and direct recovery programs, and constrains organizational capacity to help communities prepare for and adapt to the aftermath of a wildfire. Thus, programs such as educational programming and technical assistance do not often receive adequate long-term funding. Organizations can strengthen coordination and allocate resources more effectively with long-term planning, forecasting needs, and identifying future funding sources[2] such as grants, insurance, and disaster relief funds.

2 Resource lists can be found at:

https://fireadaptednetwork.org/understanding-federal-post-fire-resources/

https://rogueworkforce.org/wildfire-resources/

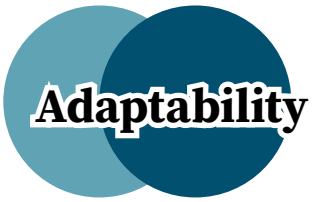
Sustained coordination and funding at Glide Revitalization

Glide Revitalization serves as both a CBO and a LTRG. This model enabled Glide to leverage existing relationships within the community and establish their own in-house system for funding requests, thus increasing efficiency and the number of survivors they were able to help.

By focusing on community recovery as a whole, Glide was also able to identify other community needs that were impeding the effectiveness of fire recovery efforts. These needs included a childcare center (with fire impact priority enrollment and discounted tuition), resource center with monthly revolving services to the county (Oregon Department of Human Services, Oregon Housing and Community Services Department, and reforestation and mitigation work, in partnership with OSU Extension). CBOs like Glide Revitalization can sometimes streamline processes within one organization - like requests for funding - and have the added value of being a familiar face within the community. Higher levels of trust contributed to Glide Revitalization's success in helping residents navigate complex processes, like insurance claims and housing reconstruction, and extended a helping hand to residents who are distrustful of government assistance or who might not otherwise seek help due to complicated processes.



Planting in a burn site in Santiam State Forest near Gates, OR. Credit: Jason Houston/American Forests



Communities should adopt flexible strategies that can be adjusted as situations evolve. While past experiences can inform recovery strategies, no two wildfires impact a community in the same way. Long-term recovery is not linear and often takes longer than anticipated. Remaining adaptable and prepared to adjust plans as new challenges emerge helps communities navigate challenges more effectively as recovery unfolds.

Common challenges

Priotitizing basic needs first: Immediate survival needs always take precedence over other elements of property recovery. For example, residents aren't thinking about replanting trees on their property if they are unfed, unhoused, or navigating other urgent needs.

Recognizing the scale and duration of housing shortages: Many communities find that temporary housing options—hotels, shelters, rental units—are insufficient post-disaster. Housing shortages often persist for several reasons. Rebuilding can take years, insurance payments can be delayed, and available rentals are quickly absorbed by displaced residents. In some cases, federally declared disaster status led to allocation of community development block grant disaster recovery (CDBG-DR) funds which focused primarily on homeowner recovery, with just some planning infrastructure and economic recovery (PIER) funds, and some medium-term rental support and homeownership assistance. Many fire survivors who were renters rather than homeowners were more likely to relocate long before they could re-establish local, long-term rental housing. In some fire footprints, the real estate market accelerated after a post-fire lull, causing lot prices to increase, and many new owners built short-term vacation rentals on the lots that had previously held owner-occupied or permanent rental housing. In 2020, these challenges were compounded by the need for non-congregate temporary shelter required by the COVID pandemic.

Ensuring sustained, locally appropriate services for long-term mental health and trauma: Survivors often struggle with PTSD, anxiety, and depression, requiring long-term support. Social and emotional healing is not always visible, but is extremely important. There are many ways that people find support and it's important that options are affordable, accessible, and culturally appropriate.

Addressing barriers that slow communication and aid delivery: Limited internet access, cell service, computer skills, language unfamiliarity, and/or mobility issues can affect who can access resources, especially for marginalized or underserved groups. Infrastructure delays including slow restoration of roads, water systems, and power grids can further complicate recovery.

Considering trust-related barriers: Distrust in or unfamiliarity with government systems, cumbersome application processes (which can reinflict trauma), and unclear reimbursement rules hinder recovery and can discourage residents from seeking assistance.

Acknowledging ripple effects of social and economic disruption: Businesses may be destroyed, jobs lost, and local economies can take years to recover. Social and economic impacts can cascade, for example, affecting tax revenue or school enrollment.

Identifying organizational capacity limitations: Agencies supporting fire-impacted communities may face turnover or demand beyond their capacity after a severe fire season, resulting in loss of institutional knowledge and familiarity with grants and recovery programs as new staff are hired.

Based on learning from communities affected by the 2020 Labor Day Fires, the following strategies can be adapted to strengthen recovery capacity and resilience in Oregon communities:

Flexible strategies for proactive recovery planning

- Speed decision-making through community-led recovery efforts: Some communities have proactively organized their own recovery through volunteer groups, neighborhood associations, and grassroots initiatives instead of waiting for external aid. Some created disaster-response funds that can be reallocated as needs change. Others use data tracking and feedback systems to continually assess needs and adjust recovery plans. Some communities have successfully implemented "phased recovery" strategies that focus on the most urgent needs first and expand as capacity grows.

- Strengthen community organizations to support capacity, continuity, and reduced burnout: Local organizations have strong ties to their communities and deep knowledge of community needs. Sustained funding allows these organizations to operate at capacity during sudden demand spikes, shift organizational roles when needed, and avoid burnout. Maintaining updated lists of funding sources and recovery resources—and sharing them widely—helps communities act quickly when a disaster strikes.

- Center continuous improvement as a core resilience strategy: Communities that regularly update disaster plans based on past events can improve their ability to recover from future wildfires. Building this preparedness for multiple hazards, like ice storms or floods, supports ongoing learning and adaptation.

- Remove barriers to flexible assistance pathways: Adapting application processes to meet community needs can remove obstacles for people seeking recovery assistance.

- Reduce inequities through adaptive communication systems: Multiple and sometimes redundant communication methods such as vehicle-mounted speakers, phone trees, or neighborhood leadership networks help reach residents when standard communication channels fail. Using multiple channels after a fire ensures recovery information is accessible to more community members.

- Improve resource alignment by integrating formal Incident Command Structures (ICS) with community groups: Strong coordination ensures incident commanders understand available local resources and how to connect with them. Liaison Officers, Public Information Officers and Community Mitigation Assistance Teams (CMATs) play key roles in building these relationships and linking community organizations with Incident Management Teams.

Implementing flexible, community-centered strategies such as these can help support Oregon communities in being better prepared, more connected, and more capable of recovering from future wildfire or other disasters events.

Community connection at Conexión Fénix

In the aftermath of the Echo Mountain Complex in 2020, residents of Otis and nearby Lincoln City on the Oregon coast organized a Long-Term Recovery Group (LTRG) to coordinate resources, advocate for survivors, and fill gaps left by existing disaster aid and assistance programs. As rebuilding progressed, LTRG participants recognized that recovery needs were not evenly distributed in the community. Language barriers, immigration concerns, and limited access to services shaped Latino residents' experiences in distinct ways. In response to this gap, the organization developed a dedicated Spanish-language branch to support Latino families navigating housing, documentation, and aid applications. Over time, as immediate disaster case management wound down, this branch, called Conexión Fénix, stayed active. The group pivoted toward broader community education and support, addressing ongoing needs that extended beyond wildfire recovery. Workshops, information-sharing events, and culturally grounded gatherings became central to its work. One example of an information-sharing event is the Tacita de Café, a recurring, informal gathering designed especially for Latina women. Framed simply as time to share coffee and conversation, these meetings create space for connection, mutual aid, and emotional processing without explicitly labeling the space as mental health support. This approach encourages greater participation by avoiding cultural stigmas that might be associated with more formally organized "therapy" sessions. In this way, community-led initiatives on the Oregon coast demonstrate how recovery infrastructure can evolve into enduring, culturally responsive forms of social and emotional support.



Planting in a burn site in Santiam State Forest near Gates, OR. Credit: Jason Houston/American Forests

Future considerations

Conversations in Oregon between state agency personnel (i.e. Oregon Department of Human Services, Office of Resilience and Emergency Management; Oregon Department of Emergency Management), legislators, and recovery groups have emphasized the importance of preserving the significant investment made in long-term recovery capacity following the 2020 Labor Day wildfires. Community-based groups have consistently noted that the systems, relationships, and organizational knowledge built during that period remain essential for a variety of possible future disasters.

Recent reductions in federal funding to agencies supporting hazard mitigation, forecasting, and land management, such as the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), the US Forest Service, and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's National Weather Service (NOAA/NWS) have affected the capacity of these agencies. These changes can influence their ability to provide technical assistance, manage workloads, and sustain support for community-based preparedness and mitigation activities.

As emphasized throughout this document, strengthening organizational capacity before a wildfire or other disaster involves more than forming a recovery group to act after the event. This is especially important in rural or resource-limited areas with fewer communication channels. True preparedness requires building sustainable organizations that can serve as planning and coordination hubs before a disaster and scale up operations during response and recovery.

At the same time, the terms and limited functions attributed to 'long-term recovery groups (LTRGs)' and 'community organizations active in disaster (COADs)' no longer fully capture the scope of work these organizations are being asked to take on. Community-based organizations in post-fire landscapes have noted that they are experiencing expanded mission demands on their organization from across the state related to preparedness and recovery. This underscores the need for investment in flexible, durable community organizations to meet community needs, including before a disaster strikes. The more ways a community can be supported before and after a fire, the better off they will be long-term.

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For more information visit the following:

Grow Back Better

Glide Revitalization

Landowner Experiences After Fire (LEAF) study

McKenzie River Long Term Recovery

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