



CASE STUDY

Arizona Wildfire Recovery

A COORDINATED NETWORK OF RECOVERY SUPPORT

Learning Objective: Examine how Arizona applied its Disaster Recovery Framework to leverage federal and philanthropic resources to recover from a complex, non-declared wildfire disaster that devastated a small community in 2013.

Keywords: Recovery, Non-Declared Disaster, Wildfire, Local Government, State Government, Coordination, Infrastructure Systems, Low-Income Population, Identifying and Leveraging Resources, Philanthropic Organizations

PART ONE

Background

In June 2013, the unincorporated community of Yarnell in Yavapai County, Arizona experienced a dangerous wildfire caused by a lightning strike. It took 12 days for emergency personnel to contain the fire, during which time mandatory evacuation orders were in place for the communities of Yarnell and Peoples Valley.

When the fire was contained, over 8,300 acres had burned. Most devastating to the community, 19 local firefighters lost their lives attempting to contain the fire. This was the greatest loss of U.S. firefighter life since the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks and the most wildland firefighters ever killed in a single fire.

According to the initial Preliminary Damage Assessment, 116 residences were impacted, 93 of which were completely destroyed. Approximately 30 of the destroyed structures were uninsured residential homes, and 50 percent of the impacted community was classified as low-income. Among many other infrastructure impacts, the fire caused approximately \$1 million in structural damage to the Yarnell Water Improvement Association, a private water co-op that served as the sole water supply for the entire Yarnell area.

Damages stemming from the fire in Yarnell did not meet the threshold for FEMA funding. The Governor’s Emergency Fund also could not provide funding for repairs to privately-owned infrastructure, including the water co-op.

Challenges

Local leadership and the Yarnell community were facing a major, complex recovery effort following the wildfire. In the days immediately following the disaster, the community was not only physically impacted, but also emotionally impacted by the loss of fellow community members and the severe interruption to day-to-day life.

In the midst of this, the realization that local leadership would have to take the lead in facilitating and directing the recovery effort was daunting. The level of support available from the state or federal government was a looming question: how much financial or technical expertise would these other governmental partners be able to offer to aid in Yarnell’s recovery? The extensive damage to local residences and infrastructure, combined with the uneven insurance coverage and lack of direct funding from the state or federal government, meant that the Yarnell community would need to find innovative ways to obtain funding and drive recovery progress.

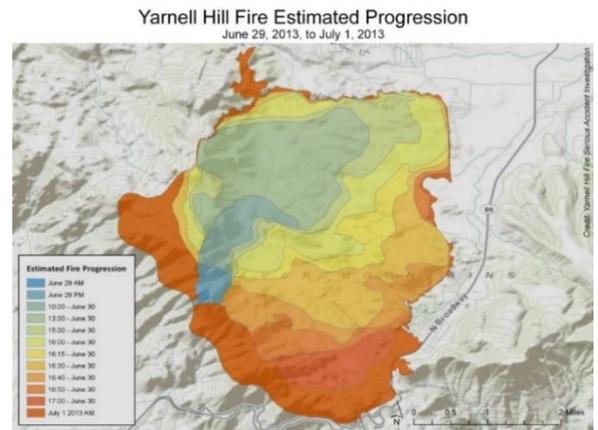


Figure 1. Estimated fire progression over time in Yarnell, Arizona in 2013. Graphic created by the National Centers for Environmental Information, NOAA.

PART TWO

Actions

In 2012, Arizona had published the *Arizona Disaster Recovery Framework* (AZDRF), identifying the roles and responsibilities of a State Recovery Coordinator (SRC) and six State Recovery Support Functions (SRSFs). The AZDRF created a structure that identified, organized, and coordinated key state and federal stakeholders for recovery at any scale. Under the framework, the SRC and the SRSFs collaborate to assess impacts, prioritize needs, and engage additional partners in order to meet recovery goals.

Arizona State Recovery Support Functions (SRSFs)

- Community Planning and Capacity Building
- Economic
- Health and Social Services
- Housing
- Infrastructure Systems
- Natural and Cultural Resources

Several community groups were also key to the firefighting and recovery efforts. The Granite Mountain Hotshots, a local municipally-funded wildland firefighting crew, worked nearly nonstop alongside crews who had traveled from other regions to help contain the fire.

Key Partners

- Infrastructure Systems SRSF
- Arizona Department of Water Resources
- Arizona Department of Environmental Quality
- Arizona Corporation Commission
- USDA Regional Offices
- U.S. Small Business Administration
- National Rural Water Association

The media coverage of the fire generated a significant amount of attention, and financial donations stemming from news reports covered the cost of rebuilding the approximately 30 uninsured residential homes.

The nonprofit Yarnell Hill Recovery Group was formed to apply for grant funding and address the community's unmet needs, and the Arizona Community Foundation and Yavapai County Community Foundation jointly awarded \$400,000 to address the initial and most critical recovery issues. Additional funding and support

from the Arizona Foundation for Charitable Support, the 100 Club of Arizona, and other non-governmental organizations contributed to the community's long-term recovery. In total, approximately \$13 million in public donations was distributed to victims and their families.

The U.S. Small Business Administration also stepped in, offering business loans of up to \$2 million, home loans of up to \$200,000, and personal property loans of up to \$40,000, all low interest, for residents and business owners in Yarnell and other affected communities.

The state activated the Infrastructure Systems SRSF to coordinate the repair effort for the water co-op. The Arizona Department of Water Resources and the Arizona Department of Environmental Quality took the lead and formed a working group that convened and coordinated relevant stakeholders to find a recovery solution that would incorporate resiliency and leverage federal interagency support.

Results

Through the working group, the Arizona Corporation Commission, USDA Rural Development, and the National Rural Water Association assessed the current state of the water supply and relevant infrastructure systems and identified available financial resources, including consolidated and restructured loan options for the privately-owned water infrastructure. The stakeholders worked together to effectively



Figure 2. Firefighting efforts in Yarnell, Arizona in 2013. Source: NBC News.

reorganize the private co-op's debt by expediting loan approvals and consolidating existing loans. These collaborative efforts allowed the co-op to maintain the Yarnell community's water supply during the recovery period.

In 2015, another fire struck the Yarnell community. Though local officials were better prepared because of the actions taken in 2013, the Yarnell community partnered with USDA Rural Development once again for additional fire preparedness improvements during the recovery, including repairs to water infrastructure owned by the Yarnell Water Improvement Association and upgraded equipment for the Yarnell Fire Department.

The 2013 fire had a significant emotional impact on the community. The Yarnell Hill Fire Memorial Park and the Granite Mountain Interagency Hotshot Crew Learning and Tribute Center were both established to honor the 19 firefighters who lost their lives and provide spaces for remembrance and reflection.

Lessons Learned

- Having a state recovery framework in place pre-disaster greatly improved the state's ability to coordinate recovery efforts in the absence of a federal disaster declaration.
- Leveraging financial donations and private sector grants for home repairs and victim needs allowed the Yarnell community to use federal funding for infrastructure improvements, both aiding recovery from the 2013 fire and increasing the community's resiliency for future disasters.
- The interagency, cross-sector working group was crucial to finding a sustainable, long-term solution for the damaged water co-op.
- As a result of lessons learned after this fire, the *Arizona Disaster Recovery Framework* was updated to include specific tools for conducting recovery assessments, activating State Recovery Support Functions, and establishing clear communication post-disaster.

Additional Resources

- [Arizona State Emergency Response & Recovery Plan](#) (updated 2017)
- [Yarnell Hill Recovery Group](#)
- [USDA Yarnell Community Update](#)
- [Outside Magazine: The True Story of the Yarnell Hill Fire](#)
- [Arizona Central: Yarnell Charitable Donations](#)