

Tips for Advancing Community Wildfire Resilience

BACKGROUND

In 2023-2024, the Community Resilience project of the Arizona Wildfire Initiative worked within three communities across Arizona identifying opportunities to advance their wildfire resilience. These communities were Pinetop-Lakeside, Patagonia, and Oak Creek Canyon in Sedona. These consultations resulted in projects and materials to support all communities across the Southwest to live with wildfire. This is a summary of recommendations for community leaders.

What are we learning about wildfire adaptation in Arizona?

While all communities have socially distinct conditions, capacities, and challenges, there are commonalities that have begun to emerge across communities in Arizona. Knowing these commonalities can support improved wildfire adaptation in policy and practice.

Image: Residence in rural Arizona surrounded by vegetation that could fuel wildfire entering the community.



Overarching Lessons

Acknowledge and address pre-conceived notions of the sources of fire risk in local planning

Local fire histories can lead communities to prepare for fire events they are historically familiar with, rather than for the full suite of potential events

- e.g. bias towards recreation ignitions on adjacent public lands may lead a community to overlook the possibility of an ignition from private lands within the community

One approach to reduce these assumptions may be to evaluate sources of risk more frequently via modeling to inform policies based on accurate trends rather than historical perceptions.

Community leaders can benefit from guidance on how to prioritize wildfire risk reduction efforts

Numerous communities have cost share grants for retrofitting or vegetation removal that are currently operated on a first come, first serve basis; however, this may prevent strategic, high impact investment. Solutions might include tiered cost share structures based on household income, or the use of risk maps to determine properties where treatment would have the greatest impact for community safety.

Identify geographic overlap in federal and state grant awards

Understanding where there is overlap can help leverage capacity and improve the identification of the most suitable funds for adaptation activities.

- For example, in a landscape where Bipartisan Infrastructure Law funds and Community Wildfire Defense Grants are both available, there may be opportunities to extend fuel breaks from public to private lands.

Overarching lessons continued

“Bundle” wildfire risk concerns with other prominent local issues

Incorporating wildfire adaptation into issues that may be of greater importance to residents and professionals can help expand adaptive actions by demonstrating their relevance relative to local values.

- For example, in an area where watershed health is socially salient, discussion of protecting watershed functioning and water quality by reducing hazardous vegetation as a tool for avoiding high severity fire can help demonstrate interconnectivity.

The potential loss of insurance coverage is a powerful motivator

The risk of losing insurance is a strong motivator for self-funded mitigation on private property in more affluent areas of Arizona. Greater local capacity for vegetation removal is needed to support this renewed interest in risk reduction (e.g., chippers, communal green waste drop off locations). Paired with this is a need to go beyond the Firewise program – which is largely successful in wealthier, older populations with pre-existing structures like HOAs – to design programming better suited for rural, low income, and socially disparate populations.

Jurisdictional fragmentation of fire-related resources can inhibit community resilience

This should be considered in municipal planning. Mapping out gaps in jurisdictional systems is the key to strengthening them.

- For example, in areas with numerous water districts who each have varied structures and capacities, all-hands meetings to discuss wildfire response and run tabletop exercises can help better define issues like hydrant water pressure and their implications.

A lack of cohesion or leadership in some communities means they may be overlooked for partnerships and funding opportunities in the future.

Federal, state, local entities and their collaborators should explore how they will work to prevent populations from being left behind in favor of communities that are further along in their adaptation journey. This is particularly challenging as many funding opportunities require partnerships, yet rarely provide support or capacity to establish these working relationships prior to funds being awarded. This may indicate the need for funds that support community meetings, relationship building, and small-scale planning as a precursor to larger awards.

“Unknowns” about wildfire in Arizona’s ecosystems may become collaborative catalysts for place-based discussions about wildfire resilience.

- For example, uncertainty about how a fuel break should be designed in southern Arizona ecosystems may provide an opportunity for communities and experts to come together and discuss ecological concerns, resulting in the development of best practices that both address fire risk while also being culturally appropriate.

Other observations

- Trusted sources for communication are not synonymous with reliable and accurate
- Evacuation planning needs to go beyond general processes. Planning needs to include an intentional invite to all partners with exercises involving fast-moving, immediate threats that allow no time to “figure it out” as the situation unfolds.
- Solutions are needed to curtail people from waiting for adaptation resources to be given to them when they can already afford it

Community consultations conducted by Catrin Edgeley, Megan Rangel-Lynch, and Travis Paveglio. Report developed by Megan Rangel-Lynch and Catrin Edgeley. Access a digital copy of the fact sheet here:

