



## Research Brief for Resource Managers

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## Roles of NGOs in wildfire relief and recovery

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Local non-governmental organizations (NGOs) play critical roles in supporting wildfire relief and recovery. Here, we identify challenges and opportunities for local NGOs involved in wildfire recovery drawing on three case studies from recent wildfires in Northern California: 2017 Sonoma Complex Fires, 2018 Carr Fire, and 2018 Camp Fire.

Local NGOs often support both community short-term relief and long-term recovery lasting up to months or decades. Some NGOs like the Red Cross are primarily focused on disaster and mobilize locally in response to events. By contrast, smaller, local, community-based NGOs often have less disaster experience. However, these smaller organizations may have access to valuable local connections, expertise, and resources.

We draw on 24 semi-structured interviews with representatives from NGOs and Long-Term Recovery Groups that participated in wildfire relief and recovery efforts following three of the most destructive fires in California's history. Interviews took place approximately two years after the fires.

### Study results

#### **Management and wellbeing**

Pre-existing NGOs often expanded their missions or activities following the wildfires, with new

### Management implications

- Local non-governmental organizations (NGOs) play important roles in community wildfire relief and recovery.
- NGOs often expand their missions and activities following a wildfire. NGO staff may experience ongoing trauma and burnout from supporting recovery.
- Pre-disaster coordination with government agencies and other NGOs improves both relief and recovery efforts.
- NGO staff are more confident responding to a wildfire if they had any prior disaster experience, though the COVID-19 pandemic produced unique challenges.
- NGOs should build relationships with other local stakeholder groups prior to a disaster and remain flexible as an organization after a disaster to best support community recovery.

NGOs established to meet otherwise unmet needs. Organizations often adapted to the wildfires by focusing on affordable housing availability and supporting populations with newly exposed or exacerbated vulnerabilities.

In addition, interviewees recognized the ongoing trauma and negative mental health impacts associated with the wildfire on NGO staff. Staff reported high burnout and stress levels during both short-term relief and long-term recovery.

## Coordination

Having personal professional relationships improved relief and recovery efforts. Preexisting close working relationships contributed to faster relief, often through pre-disaster preparedness groups like a local VOAD (Volunteer Organizations Active in Disaster). In addition, NGO staff often reported sharing or receiving resources or disaster playbooks from similar organizations. NGO representatives also appreciated coordination with government representatives, who could often cut through red tape to expedite recovery.

By contrast, an absence of personal professional relationships with other NGO or government agencies slowed relief and recovery activities. For example, interviewees noted that the Red Cross and FEMA coordinated infrequently with other NGOs, which subsequently prompted those NGOs to expand their own services to support survivor recovery.

## Disaster experience

Interviewees felt more confident responding to a disaster if they had any prior disaster experience, including from non-wildfire events. For example, responding to the Oroville Dam flood in 2017 helped local NGOs respond more effectively to the Camp Fire the following year.

However, the COVID-19 pandemic produced unique challenges for ongoing wildfire recovery efforts. The pandemic slowed recovery by exacerbating the negative mental health effects of the wildfires on staff, delaying rebuilds because of more expensive housing materials, and forcing virtual rather than in-person recovery meetings.

## Discussion

Despite repeated comments from interviewees that each wildfire and its impacts were distinct, interviewees listed similar sets of challenges and opportunities across wildfires. Such commonalities indicate that wildfires and other types of disasters will likely have similar impacts on communities and local NGOs, though the exact nature of each fire and its impacts will likely be distinct.

Wildfires are projected to continue to devastate local communities across the Western United States, prompting local NGO engagement in relief and recovery. NGOs can prepare for wildfires by preemptively coordinating with staff from government agencies and other NGOs. NGOs should remain flexible following a disaster to respond most effectively to its impacts and new community needs. In addition, full recovery may take years or decades, requiring local NGOs to incorporate disaster recovery in their long-term missions and activities. Actively preparing for a disaster and adapting to changing community needs in its aftermath may improve long-term community recovery.

## Suggestions for further reading:

Carroll, Matthew S., Travis Paveglio, Pamela J. Jakes, and Lorie L. Higgins. "Nontribal Community Recovery from Wildfire Five Years Later: The Case of the Rodeo-Chediski Fire." *Society and Natural Resources* 24, no. 7 (2011): 672-687.  
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