

Oregon Fire Resilience Network Hosts Learning Exchange Centered on Engaging Vulnerable and Underserved Communities

By Jean-Paul Zagarola

The combined impacts of violent displacement of Native Americans who used fire to manage healthy ecosystems, over 170 years of fire suppression, and climate change have created forest conditions across the West ripe for unprecedented catastrophic wildfire. By some estimations, area burned in the western United States is expected to double or even triple by mid-century.

The impacts of these megafires are numerous and include significant impacts to ecosystems, natural resources and communities. Moreover, these impacts are spread inequitably across race, ethnicity, age and socio-economic status. For example, Black, Hispanic and Native American populations experience 50% greater vulnerability to wildfire compared to other census tracts in the West.¹ In Oregon, days of heavy smoke exposure for houseless populations tripled from 2011–2015 to 2017–2021. The houseless are some of the most impacted by wildfire due to the lack of refuge from smoke exposure and because of the high rate of underlying health conditions in these populations.² Low-income communities often can't afford or don't have access to fire

adapted or recovery resources—such as being able to update HVAC systems, conduct home hardening or create defensible space.³ In order to achieve wildfire resilience, it is imperative that our recovery and resilience systems engage all sectors of the population, especially the most vulnerable.

Conservation and wildfire practitioners, planners, and decision makers often lack the tools and/or resources to appropriately engage with vulnerable communities that suffer the worst effects of wildfire. This has emerged as a high priority topic for many OR FRN members as we, at BEF, have observed through a series of surveys, facilitated discussions and one-on-one conversations with practitioners. In response, BEF and the Oregon Fire Resilience Network hosted a virtual learning exchange on September 28th to gain a shared understanding of how decision-makers and wildfire practitioners can better serve some of the most vulnerable in their communities in wildfire resilience actions.

Doug Green from Headwaters Economics kicked off the guest presentations with a discussion on the [Wildfire Risk to Communities](#) tool, where a variety of community risk variables can be analyzed. Factors that influence “vulnerability” with this particular tool and that can be selected to identify

vulnerable populations include age (over 65 and under 5), English as a second language, populace of color, access to transportation, prevalence of disabilities, poverty level, and low income homes. Doug followed his explanation of the tool with an example of the tool in practice where Headwaters Economics was able to identify communities in Austin that had historically been underserved and unprepared for wildfire. This work led to a successful campaign to better engage these communities in community wildfire adaptation work.

Focusing closer in on an example of a population that was severely impacted by the 2020 Wildfires, Mackenzie Ni Flainn presented on her work as founding member of Black Thistle Street Aid, a non-profit that provides free healthcare to people experiencing homelessness in the Eugene-Springfield area. Mackenzie expanded upon her discussion in a previous [Treeline interview](#) on Black Thistle Street Aid's role in providing critical aid to people who were experiencing multiple layers of trauma over the summer of 2020. She also shared some of the ways practitioners can be better prepared to support vulnerable populations through major disasters while promoting community resilience at the same time. It was clear from her talk that there is a lack of flexible resources and funding for community based organizations that can quickly and effectively respond to crises. Housing and healthcare are [inherently connected](#) and the work Black Thistle Street Aid does is one of the last lines of defense against perpetual homelessness.

Mackenzie ended her talk with additional suggestions to improve preparation for future disaster

1 Davies IP, Haugo RD, Robertson JC, Levin PS (2018) The unequal vulnerability of communities of color to wildfire. *PLoS ONE* 13(11): e0205825. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0205825>

2 Lappe, Brooke, and Jason Vargo. (2022). “Disruptions from Wildfire Smoke: Vulnerabilities in Local Economies and Disadvantaged Communities in the U.S.” Federal Reserve Bank of San Francisco Community Development Research Brief 2022-06. doi: 10.24148/cdrb2022-06

3 Nicole Lambrou, Crystal Kolden, Anastasia Loukaitou-Sideris, Erica Anjum, Charisma Acey (2023) Social drivers of vulnerability to wildfire disasters: A review of the literature, *Landscape and Urban Planning*. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.landurbplan.2023.104797>

response. These included forming partnerships early, and establishing permanent mutual aid hubs that provide the space and logistics to support communities that might be impacted by future wildfire events. This point provided for a near seamless transition into the next talk by Alessandra de la Torre.

Alessandra de la Torre, former director of Advocacy and Programs at Rogue Climate, a nonprofit dedicated to climate justice in Southern Oregon and the South Coast, also began her talk by speaking about the 2020 Labor Day fires, in this case the Alameda Fire. Rogue Climate was able to rapidly respond to the incident by setting up temporary mutual aid sites, coordinating a massive team of volunteers and providing essential services such as transportation, storage, and funding for gas, groceries and emergency housing. National disaster relief entities did not begin distributing aid until two weeks after the fire, further emphasizing the need for locally based organizations like Rogue Climate to provide immediate and long-term assistance.

Alessandra then pivoted to discuss a wildfire and community resilience solution called **resilience hubs**. A resilience hub is a type of permanent mutual aid site that offers a number of other community benefits. Rogue Climate defines resilience hubs as “trusted community-centered places that are set up to address daily community needs, and that are also equipped to provide support in the face of disasters like fires, earthquakes, and other extreme weather events.” Resilience hubs can facilitate year-round activities like wildfire preparedness workshops, solar energy generation, and community gardening. Additionally, they can be rapidly transformed into mutual aid centers where essential goods and services are distributed, or temporary shelter during major disaster events. Mackenzie, who gave the previous talk, described the chaos that ensued in getting aid out to those most impacted by the 2020 fires and in finding temporary shelter for those affected. Establishing a network of permanent resilience hubs would go a long way in addressing this issue.

Tour a resilience hub

Interested in seeing what a resilience hub can look like? Watch a video tour of a Puerto Rico resilience hub [here](#).

Supporting community based organizations that reflect and are in tune with the cultural nuances of the communities they serve was the central tenant of the presentation given by the next speaker. Jamila Wilson is the Climate Resilience Manager at United Way of the Columbia-Willamette and is also the principal coordinator for the Disaster Resilience Network. United Way formed the Disaster Resilience Network in collaboration with the Oregon Health Authority and Trauma Informed Oregon and in response to the 2020 wildfires to support leaders of color immersed in local disaster response in their communities. The Network used the Oregon Health Authority’s **Social Resilience Report on Climate Change** to drive its early development. Key principles in that report focus on:

- Fostering social connection and relationship-building
- Supporting work at the state level
- Local and Tribal public health connections and shared planning

At the center of the Network is a heavy emphasis on trust building between members to weave in and take action on these principles. Recognizing the role trauma plays with respect to disasters is also very important in addressing the needs of Network members.

With core principles in place, the Network has brought needed resources to community leaders of color across Oregon. Examples include the development of wellness resources that address burnout for community leaders, education and training opportunities specific to disaster resilience, trust-based resilience funding for activities that generate community joy, health and wellness, and support for members to take leadership roles within the network. In general, the Network has emphasized generating funding that invests in

the human infrastructure in disaster resilience, an area that too often goes unfunded.

Most of the learning exchange speakers discussed or alluded to the extreme trauma that many communities experience after catastrophic wildfire, especially the most vulnerable. Hannah Buehler, project manager with BEF, rounded out the discussions of the day to address this topic directly. Hannah works at the intersections of trauma, homelessness and the environment. Their presentation focused on a trauma informed emergency readiness and response training module that was developed in partnership with Trauma Informed Oregon and Łush Kumtux Tumtum. This training module is ideal for natural resource managers and wildfire practitioners seeking tools to more effectively interact and engage with vulnerable populations. The training module covers topics that include:

- A timeline of the recovery process
- Caring for oneself and community during emergency events
- Building adaptive teams and organizations to respond to crises
- Practices to bring yourself back online
- Equity and accessibility considerations in planning and response
- Cultivating compassion satisfaction, conviviality, and meaning throughout the recovery timeline

What is Trauma Informed Care?

Trauma informed care is an approach, based on knowledge of the impact and prevalence of trauma, that aims to create environments and organizations that are welcoming, safe and engaging for both staff and the communities and ecosystems they serve. Trauma informed care aims to elevate awareness of trauma and resistance to retraumatization out of the individual and interpersonal levels, and into the program, organization, and system level. To find out more, visit <https://traumainformedoregon.org/>

An added benefit of the training module is that BEF can host a discussion group with the participants. The discussion group allows practitioners to share and reflect on the content of the training, share their own experiences and learn from each other. If you or your colleagues are interested in taking the training module, you can create an account and sign up by following this link: ticforenviro.learnworlids.com If you are interested in joining a BEF hosted trauma informed care discussion group around the training module, please contact Hannah Buehler at hbuehler@b-e-f.org.

Each of the speakers throughout the learning exchange touched on common themes. Resources for culturally rooted, community-based organizations in response and recovery processes are

either short-lived or are lacking all together. Large and nationally based organizations do extremely important work post-disaster however they are often not fully attuned to the different characteristics of all the communities they are serving. This can lead to delays in delivering aid to areas where it is most needed. That is where community-based organizations are skilled in taking a culturally appropriate approach to distributing resources that is efficient and effective in addressing the most relevant community needs. Establishing community infrastructure like resilience hubs will further facilitate the flow of resources to where they are most needed while better preparing communities for future disasters. Finally, the trauma that people experience during disasters like catastrophic wildfire can make it extremely challenging

for community organizations and aid workers to distribute much needed resources, slowing or preventing the long-term recovery process. Community leaders are also community members who may experience severe levels of trauma after major disasters. Trauma informed care is an approach to providing support that addresses root causes of trauma and ultimately leads to better recovery outcomes for community members and leaders.

If you are interested in watching any of the presentations from this OR FRN learning exchange, participating in future OR FRN learning exchanges, or would like to learn more, please contact Jean-Paul Zagarola at jpzagarola@b-e-f.org.

