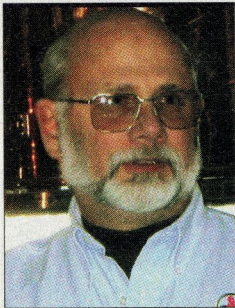


Resiliency and Recovery



Chuck Bushey

Based on the short time frame of human perspective, it often seems that we live during the worst times of nature's trials and tribulations on humanity. Of course, natural disasters have always affected civilizations through the ages. And archeologists tell us that calamities have led to the downfall or disappearance of major cultures around the world, so maybe there is some reason for concern.

In recent decades, we truly have developed the ability to learn about manmade and natural disasters around the world — practically in real time. Ongoing discussion of climate change and the potential impacts associated with a warming world have made us pay more attention to the situation. Perhaps we do live in a more active period of weather-induced disasters that affect our lives and livelihoods, as an abundance of multiple natural disasters destroy community infrastructure and stress local and regional emergency response systems.

Wildfire is certainly one of these weather-driven events that affects our lives and built environment. In recent years, wildfires also have occurred during periods of floods, hurricanes and tornadoes, as well as during the normally wildfire-associated heat waves, droughts and windstorms. Throw in earthquakes, blizzards, tsunamis and epidemics, plus manmade disasters, and you have a profusion of major impacts to civilization's infrastructure and human lives.

Nature has a built-in resiliency to disturbances — a combination of natural engineering developed over millennia and the ability to repopulate the landscape. The ability of ecosystems to respond, though, is limited depending on the initial health before the disturbance and whether that impact is followed by subsequent disturbances and their degree of severity. From our perspective, what returns may be very different than what had existed before. But that is not nature's priority — only the return of life in its many varied forms to fill all available niches.

Man can be very resilient to disaster. Unfortunately, our local manmade environment — our civilization — only has the ability to recover based initially on our level of technological and social engineering, which has frequently proved to be inadequate, followed by our own abilities and self-determination, which can vary widely. When disasters prove particularly dire, local communities frequently need to request assistance that our larger civilization has built in as a safety net. The ability to rely on outside regional resources — such as volunteer organizations or financial and expert assistance from larger government entities — can be instrumental in maintaining a regional or community resiliency. As disasters become more frequent or severe, those outside resources get spread thin to the point of eventually having to establish priorities of who receives how much and when. No pot is bottomless, no resource inexhaustible. Like natural ecosystems, recurring disturbances can eventually wear down the most resilient of our efforts.

So what can be done in the face of increasing weather-driven disasters? We need to engineer our civilization's infrastructure to a higher capability. Too often, we plan and build for a known threat level rather than trying to exceed the threat, thereby inviting eventual destruction. We also need to plan on maintaining that infrastructure by allocating the long-term funds and labor necessary for repairs and preservation.

For example, wildland fire funding is known for boom and bust cycles, with money thrown at disasters followed by reduced budgets. Fire prevention messaging needs to be directed at building fire-adapted human communities and associated infrastructure to increase community resilience at the homeowner and community government levels. We need to encourage the abilities of volunteer organizations to prepare for disaster assistance in a cost-efficient manner that gets the money to the ground when and where it's needed.

Finally, we need to continue to improve upon our regional and international safety net of disaster assistance, including wildland fire, while realizing that priorities will need to be established in allocating assistance. It is a matter of planning, implementation and helping your neighbors when they become overwhelmed.



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