



RESEARCH BRIEF SERIES

MITIGATION MATTERS

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FEMA defines mitigation as the effort to reduce loss of life and property by lessening the impact of disasters. Effective mitigation requires that we all understand local risks and invest in long-term planning to reduce risks and enhance community well-being.

FROM THE ASHES: MITIGATION POLICY AFTER WILDFIRE IN CALIFORNIA

SUMMARY

Communities across the state of California have experienced wildfires at unprecedented scales in the past decade. In the wake of those fires, state and local policymakers must balance facilitating a rapid recovery for affected households while also instituting measures to reduce future fire exposure. This study focused on policy and practice barriers to wildfire mitigation in Butte, Lake, and Sonoma Counties in California. These communities were selected because they vary in population size and density, proportion of housing in the wildland-urban interface, and level of affluence.

To explore this issue, we conducted 29 semi-structured interviews with 37 participants, including federal, state, and local officials, wildfire professionals, and community leaders knowledgeable about ongoing wildfire recovery and/or risk reduction efforts. Interviewees addressed organizational priorities in wildfire recovery, risk reduction, status and success of current efforts, policies or strategies proposed but not implemented, challenges balancing recovery and mitigation goals, and prospects for the future of wildfire risk in the region.

Our interviews revealed four overarching themes central to understanding the post-fire environment: (1) conflicts between state and local priorities and perspectives, (2) environmental concerns that delay recovery and mitigation actions, (3) competition for resources among neighboring jurisdictions, and (4) challenges in fostering collective action to reduce wildfire losses.



U.S. Forest Service Law Enforcement and Investigations team survey damage after the Camp Fire in 2018. ©U.S. Forest Service/Tanner Hembree.

KEY FINDINGS

- While both state and local stakeholders agreed that wildfire risk reduction is a shared responsibility that must be prioritized, differences were evident in each group's strategies for meeting mitigation goals and balancing mitigation efforts with basic community needs.
- The scale and scope of wildfire recovery and the remaining wildfire risk led to resource competition among stakeholders at many levels, including residents, community organizations, local and state government agencies, and emergency response organizations. Participants frequently described how resource scarcity (e.g., lack of adequate equipment, personnel, contractors, and materials) challenged fire suppression, mitigation, and housing reconstruction efforts, with stakeholders implying a sense of zero-sum competition

for key resources. These challenges were particularly apparent in less affluent communities, but even well-resourced communities faced daunting mitigation needs.

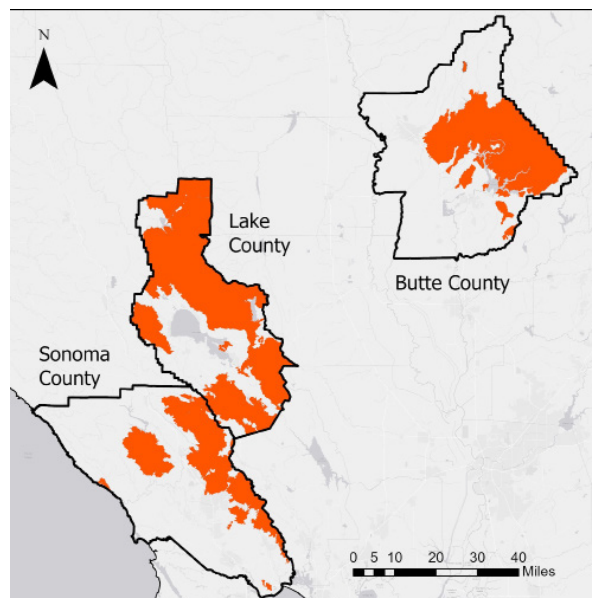
- Efforts to effectively mitigate wildfire risk require a commitment to collective action that is beyond what is necessary for other hazards. The degree of cooperation and collective action required at very fine scales (e.g., between neighboring households, where mitigation actions or inaction directly affect each other's wildfire risk) makes the process of mitigating this hazard especially vexing.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

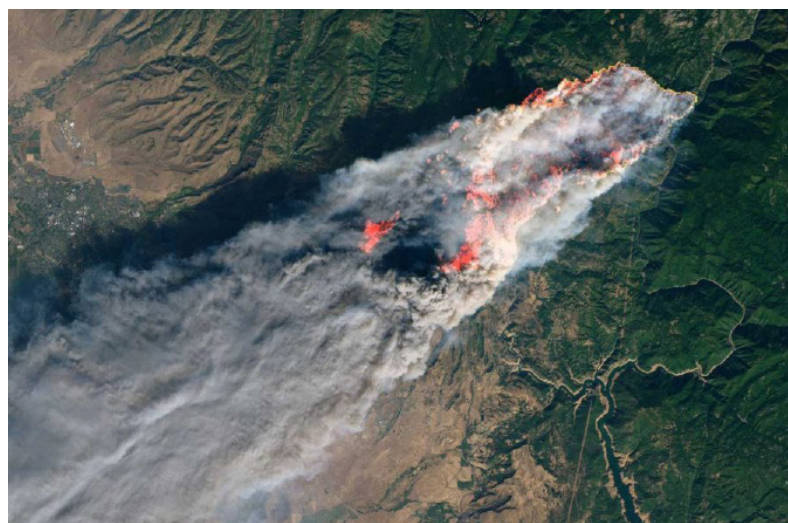
- Communities struggled to balance requirements of state- and federal-level directives with their desire for expedient recovery and mitigation efforts, specifically citing challenges associated with the California Environmental Quality Act, Regional Housing Needs Assessments, and eligibility and evaluation requirements associated with federal funds. Enhanced collaboration between local communities, states, and the federal government could alleviate these potential conflicts between recovery and mitigation efforts.
- Regional planning efforts for recovery and mitigation could help reduce competition for resources and promote synergies in a post-fire environment.

STAKEHOLDERS

- Stakeholders who may find this work interesting include land-use planners, emergency managers, community organizers, community leaders, consultants, and wildfire professionals. This research can help inform policies that affect recovery and mitigation following wildfires.



Between 2015 and 2020, wildfire burned nearly 25% of Sonoma County, 30% in Butte County, and 64% of Lake County. Data source: *Monitoring Trends in Burn Severity (mtbs.gov)*.



LANDSAT8 imagery showing the Camp Fire burning in Butte County, California on November 8, 2018. Image credit: NASA, 2018.

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