

# Planning for Wildfire Disasters

**Author :** Shelley Ross Saxer

**Date :** February 13, 2019

Stephen R. Miller, Jaap Vos & Eric Lindquist, *Informal Governance Structures and Disaster Planning: The Case of Wildfire*, \_\_ **U. Ark Little Rock L. Rev.** \_\_ (forthcoming 2019), available at [SSRN](#).

Are fire-prone communities in the western United States pondering whether they should follow the lead of the Finnish people and begin raking their forests? Doubtful, but how should they prepare for the ongoing threat of increasing wildfires brought on by climate change?

A new article by Stephen R. Miller, Jaap Vos, and Eric Linquist offers a framework for wildfire planning that engages rural communities using informal governance structures currently in place. As state and local governments become more proactive in responding to the local impacts of climate change, it is vital that we develop tools to deal with the ongoing disasters that will continue to impact our communities.

This article offers important guidance on planning for disasters in the wildland-urban interface (WUI) as urban population growth encroaches into wilderness areas and generates the need for increased wildfire suppression.

Current wildfire planning strategies emphasize community engagement, regulatory and non-regulatory tools to reflect the community's values, implementation, enforcement, and assessment of the process. The authors propose an additional level of community engagement to bridge the gap between planning strategies used in larger-scale local governments and those strategies needed by rural communities lacking the resources to implement the more formal planning processes.

Instead of using formalized local government structures such as enforcing planning and building codes and investing in emergency response equipment, rural communities are encouraged to rely on their informal governance structures such as the local Chamber of Commerce, community club, homeowners' association, and, — I would add to the authors' suggestions — religious groups.

Rural communities interested in wildfire planning will still need to rely on formal local government processes such as comprehensive plans and zoning. Nevertheless, the legal processes put in place must recognize the importance of "unofficial rules" and the role of informal sources of governance power to develop wildfire disaster planning that will be successful.

One of the most significant contributions of this article is the suggestion that leaders in the wildfire planning process consider using the rapid assessment tools that researchers have employed to understand the dynamics of rural communities in developing countries. The main tool used in the development world is the participatory rural appraisal (PRA).

The PRA is a mechanism to engage informal governance structures in the disaster planning process by using techniques that allow local people to conduct their own analysis upon which they can plan and take action. As the authors explain, PRAs progressed from the practice of rapid rural appraisals (RRAs) that allowed outsiders to learn about the local community.

The PRA seeks to learn quickly about the local community and find ways to use existing informal structures to allow the community to help itself. This ground-up process has been successful in understanding the informal governance structures in developing world rural communities. Similarly, uncovering and empowering informal governance in U.S. communities in conjunction with formal government structures will help enhance the disaster planning process.

Disaster planning in the face of increasing wildfires in the WUI will only be effective if rural communities utilize the power of their deeply-rooted informal governance structure to enrich the local government legal processes. Such rural community engagement will help improve the potential success of disaster planning as we confront the realities of climate change disasters. If you are interested in learning more about wildfire planning, please see a model guide developed for Idaho generated by these authors in collaboration with others, [Planning for Wildfire in the Wildland-Urban Interface: A Resource Guide for Idaho Communities](#).

Cite as: Shelley Ross Saxer, *Planning for Wildfire Disasters*, JOTWELL (February 13, 2019) (reviewing Stephen R. Miller, Jaap Vos & Eric Lindquist, *Informal Governance Structures and Disaster Planning: The Case of Wildfire*, \_\_ **U. Ark Little Rock L. Rev.** \_\_ (forthcoming 2019), available at SSRN), <https://property.jotwell.com/planning-for-wildfire-disasters/>.