

Long-term recovery group reimagines resilient Rogue Valley following wildfires

When the Almeda and South Obenchain wildfires hit the southern Oregon towns of Talent and Phoenix and surrounding Jackson County in September 2020, government agencies and community-based organizations knew they would need a uniquely local plan for helping residents and communities recover.

The Federal Emergency Management Agency, or FEMA, urged community leaders to develop a long-term recovery group, a cooperative body comprised of representatives from faith-based, nonprofit, government and private-sector organizations that help individuals and families in disaster recovery. But for Caryn Wheeler Clay, what Rogue Valley needed was not so much a FEMA best practice in post-disaster recovery, but a plan for managing what she saw as a developing local humanitarian crisis.

“In extreme circumstances, tribalism becomes stronger. Conflict increases. One of my colleagues ended up having to stop farming because there was no longer water coming to her farm, and she'd been on the land for 20 years,” Clay said. “You have these compounding issues, which creates a humanitarian crisis that puts increased pressure on our systems. At the end of the day, it's about the way climate change will affect our relationships, how we work together.”

Clay is executive director of the [Jackson County Community Long-Term Recovery Group](#). Its mission is to support the disaster recovery and rebuilding for an estimated 6,800 individuals and families who suffered catastrophic damage to their homes and lives recover from disaster.

Guiding the Jackson County Community LTRG's work is [Rogue Reimagined](#), a community-led planning process developed through a partnership between local government agencies and community-based organizations working in housing, senior services, food relief, business development, and advocacy for Latinx and other communities of color. In October 2023, Rogue Reimagined published a regional long-term recovery plan focused on providing “actionable, implementable projects that will help with the recovery, rebuilding, and reimagining of a resilient Rogue Valley and carry momentum of past recovery efforts forward into the future,” according to the plan.

The plan unites resources through recovery projects organized into three categories: post-fire recovery, focused on issues directly triggered by the 2020 wildfires; long-term adaptation, examining the Rogue Valley's wildfire risk and advancing building practices, environmental policies and human behaviors to adapt to the wildfire threat and prevent future disasters; and regional resiliency, looking to solve issues that existed before the fires in areas such as housing, food insecurity, transportation, multilingual communications and social determinants of health.

Clay believes Rogue Reimagined and the Jackson County Community LTRG can, and should, do more than simply return Rogue Valley communities to “the day before the fires.”

“For a lot of these households, they were living in substandard housing conditions” before the fires, she said. “We want a community that is more resistant to fire because the building codes are such that the houses are more able to withstand fire. We want communities where people are paying less than 30% of their income on household expenditures. We need this community not just to recover. We need them to thrive.”

Lomakatsi brings traditional ecological knowledge to fight against climate change

Lomakatsi Restoration Project is a multicultural organization working to restore healthy and resilient forests and communities in Oregon and Northern California.

Founded in 1995, Lomakatsi has continuously prioritized its partnerships with Tribes, recognizing the ecological knowledge and wisdom that Indigenous people have held and passed down since time immemorial. Lomakatsi looks to this traditional knowledge to build resilient ecosystems in the face of increasing wildfires within our state, as shared in its short film, [Tribal Hands on the Land](#).

“In the context of the forest lands in Oregon, before Oregon was called Oregon and throughout the whole United States and the West, these lands were carefully and very mindfully stewarded with fire. Most of the fire that was put on the ground in our area was low intensity, 6 inch to 1 foot flame lengths, and managed by women predominantly,” Marko Bey, Lomakatsi founder and executive director.

Prescribed burning, the practice of intentionally setting a small and controlled fire, is a perfect example of bringing traditional ecological knowledge together with Western science to reduce the risk of catastrophic fires in Oregon. Lomakatsi works with governmental agencies, forest communities and industry to implement forest restoration projects that set the stage for the return of beneficial fire as well as conduct trainings and educate the public about prescribed burning. Belinda Brown, Lomakatsi’s tribal partnerships director and an enrolled member of the Kosealekte Band of the Ajumawi-Atsuge Nation (federally recognized as the Pit River Tribe), talks about fire as “medicine for the land. The land has been missing the people and the fire and the tools that we need to be able to keep our forests and our communities healthy and resilient.”

Another focus of Lomakatsi is building the ecosteward workforce and investing in youth development, especially Tribal youth. They recently were awarded more than \$1 million by the US Forest Services to co-develop Indian Youth Service Corps projects in Northwest national forests. These projects will provide meaningful education, employment, and training opportunities for Tribal youth and young adults while fostering cultural connections to nature through ecological restoration projects on Indian and public lands.

Belinda speaks to the value of culture for Native youth: “Our ceremonies, rituals and everything we celebrate in our culture keeps our communities together, keeps our communities healthy, keeps our youth understanding why they're put here on this earth and what their purpose and meaning is, to be able to care for the land.”

Oregon Resilience Summit centers innovative work of CBOs

Where do you go to find a one-stop shop for ideas and support for building community resilience against wildfires and other climate-related disasters?

Enter the Oregon Resilience Summit, a unique conference held in May 2024 in Sunriver, Ore., to help local agencies and nonprofit organizations share knowledge, gather ideas and showcase local expertise in effective disaster response, recovery and prevention. The event gathered participants and presenters from across the state interested in engaging in a wide range of interconnected, resilience-related topics, from building community partnerships and conducting community outreach to priority populations, to supporting children and youth during disasters and what federal resources are available for response and recovery.

Kristin Kelley Monahan, owner of Kelley Nonprofit Consulting, organized the event alongside four cohosts, and with input from more than 60 local, state and regional agencies and community-based organizations, said demand for a conference focused on climate resilience – where groups involved in disaster response and recovery could connect and collaborate – rose dramatically following highly destructive wildfires that occurred across Oregon in 2020 and 2021.

“We knew there was a need for an event, a gathering that brought folks together,” Monahan said. “We would have organizations dealing with challenges or wanting to know best practices, and their counterparts just a couple counties away were dealing with the exact same thing. Sometimes they were connected, but a lot of times they weren't. So, creating a space for them to come together felt needed.”

Participating organizations included Lomakatsi Restoration Project, McKenzie Valley Long Term Recovery Group, Raíces de Bienestar and Unite Oregon – the event cohosts – and Disaster Resilience Learning Network, Oregon Housing and Community Services, Benton Community Foundation, United Way of the Columbia-Willamette, United Way of the Pacific Northwest, Green Oregon and The Roundhouse Foundation, along with the Community Rebuilding Fund – stewarded by Oregon Community Foundation, The Ford Family Foundation and Meyer Memorial Trust - also provided support for the event.

The schedule for the two-and-a-half-day, in-person event was organized within three overarching topics: reflecting on the challenges faced during the 2020 and 2021 wildfires; embracing a hopeful, innovative and collaborative path toward the future; and offering access to a variety of experts and information, during and after the summit, so what was learned could be applied in local communities.

“We purposely had the first day and a half focused on reflections – looking in the past, recovering from the challenges – and the second day and a half was on ‘horizons,’ what’s coming ahead, what are some models of resilience, whether it’s building resilience in our food systems, or building resilience through a community land trust model or through childcare models. What does a more resilient Oregon look like across these different areas?”

Excitement about the summit – before and after it happened – reflected a sense of relief among organizations involved in disaster response and recovery that a conference of its kind was finally taking place.

“One organization said, ‘This will be the first gathering to center community-based organizations and how their on-the-ground innovations and response, recovery and preparedness, largely developed in response to the Labor Day 2020 fires, can contribute to the larger work of Oregon as we adapt and prepare for future disasters,’” Monahan recalled. “Other feedback we heard is that there is not a conference like this in Oregon, and from many that it was the most impactful preparedness or resilience conference they had been to, largely because it was focused on relationships and on centering those organizations that are really doing the work in community.”

Raíces de Bienestar delivers mental health resiliency to Latinx community

In 2014 and 2015, licensed psychologist Ruth Zúñiga, Ph.D., was providing mental health services in the field to migrant and seasonal farmworkers when she began hearing stories from clients about employment displacement due to climate change.

By 2016, conversations with her farmworker clients turned to their concerns about the United States political climate and its effects on immigration. This prompted Zúñiga and a team of graduate students to begin research on how the Latinx community could build resiliency to dramatic shifts in the political environment.

But Zúñiga knew she was on to something with her work's increasing focus on resilience within the Latinx community, whether it was for helping the community manage major shifts in U.S. politics or severe climate events, so she developed and began implementing a psychology model for disaster recovery and resilience within the Latinx community. The start of the COVID-19 pandemic only further fueled Zúñiga's passion for resiliency work and the need for her model, and by September 2020, when wildfires swept through Oregon and destroyed entire communities, her mission was crystal clear.

The result is Raíces de Bienestar, a non-profit Zúñiga co-founded in June 2021, to improve the emotional health and well-being for Latinx communities in Oregon and beyond in response to traumatic events – be it pandemics, changes in the agricultural industry, shifts in U.S. immigration policies, or climate change effects such as wildfires or extreme heat.

Raíces de Bienestar works alongside community leaders and traditional health workers to create safe healing spaces and culturally grounded community engagement practices. It offers training programs, education resources, direct clinical mental health services, and expert consultation on culturally responsive clinical practice and systems change.

Using a recovery grant from Oregon Community Foundation, Raíces began its work by offering disaster-related recovery training and support in Latinx communities in Marion, Polk, Clackamas, Jackson and Josephine counties.

“The first component was to create a training that I call ‘*Más fuerte que la adversidad*’ – that is, ‘Stronger Than Adversity.’ It is a training focused on understanding trauma as it relates to disasters, and one of those disasters is climate change, or wildfires,” Zúñiga said.

A training module Raíces offers focuses on storytelling as a way of developing a sense of connection within a community.

“A prompt we give is ‘When is a time that you feel a sense of community and what does it feel like? How does it look, in your community?’ Then let’s do collective probing and tell the story with individual drawings and artistic work, and then we come together as a group to come up with a collective story of what that concept is,” Zúñiga said.

Training participants are taught different breaching exercises and other self-regulation and co-regulation activities that help them manage stress and achieve a sense of calm when in distress. “A lot of it is for them to focus on their own healing so they can bring those concepts of community resilience,” Zúñiga added. “We present resilience models that are more in line with the Latinx community.”

Current work for Raíces de Bienestar involves supporting the Latinx community with trainings and mental health services in southern Oregon, including Jackson County, where community members continue to recover from the Almeda and South Obenchain wildfires of 2020 and more recent conflagrations.

Understanding where hottest areas are drives Tri-County heat mapping project

Knowing where “hot” neighborhoods are located isn’t just a practice of the real estate industry. For public health agencies in Oregon’s tri-county Portland metropolitan area, better understanding which neighborhoods literally have the highest temperatures is helping them build community resilience against climate effects such as extreme heat.

The Portland Metro Region Heat Mapping Campaign is a collaboration of the health departments in Washington, Clackamas and Multnomah counties to reduce the health impacts of extreme heat by tracking heat distribution patterns across the Portland metro region. To do so, in July 2023 – during a hot, clear day – more than 100 community volunteers from the three counties drove cars along planned routes with sensors that collected air temperatures, humidity, and their location and speed. The data provided a snapshot in time of how heat varies throughout neighborhoods within the region’s urban growth boundary.

“This tool basically tells us where the hottest neighborhoods are in our region,” said Kathleen Johnson, community environmental health senior program coordinator at Washington County Public Health. “It looks at the differences in temperature – ambient air temperature – across different land uses.”

The data on the map shows how temperatures in open outdoor spaces, parks and natural areas compare with suburban and urban areas, including those with mixed family developments, commercial industrial areas and mixed-use developments.

“What it tells me is we’re seeing higher temperatures in neighborhoods where we have housing mixed with commercial and industrial, where we have a lot of major roadways,” Johnson said. “This is true when looking at Washington County – we see that in the south part of our county, along Highway 217 intersecting I-5, and we see that, too, in some parts of Clackamas County. It tells us, in some respects, things we were expecting, but it also gives us new information for the kind of work we can be doing and what that work could look like with partners.”

Future projects could include “greening our environments,” Johnson said, such as by planting trees to maintain and expand established canopies, and

encouraging use of heat-reducing structures, materials and methods in land use planning, transportation and housing, such as reflective roofs that deflect heat rather than absorb it. The heat mapping data could also be used to inform where cooling centers and shelters are located, and help health care and outreach workers support people most at risk during extreme heat events. Multnomah County, which developed a Heat Vulnerability Index tool that assesses population-level factors to determine how areas sections of the county are affected during heat events, also is updating its tool with the Tri-county heat-mapping data.

“Part of public health modernization is being able to look at data more deeply, to pull in additional datasets to really understand what is happening in our community,” Johnson said. “Having this very specific, highly detailed data set allows us to use the resources that we have more effectively and really understand the ways our community is being impacted.”

“A lot of climate work is public health work,” she added, “because whatever we're doing – whether it's a local city government or county government or a nonprofit organization – at the heart of it we're helping to prevent illness and prevent death and keep people safe and healthy during climate events, whether it's through tree plantings or adding pedestrian, public transit or bike-friendly infrastructure so we have more ways to get around.”
