

# 2002 Rodeo – Chediski Fire

In the summer of 2002, the Rodeo-Chediski forest fire, the second largest in state history, threatened the communities of Show Low and Pinetop-Lakeside in the White Mountains of eastern Arizona. Because these same communities had to evacuate their citizens during a smaller fire the previous winter, city officials anticipated that there was a high potential for summer wildfire activity due to a continuing drought.

Key Words: Wildfire; multijurisdictional response; evacuation; sheltering; community recovery.

## Background or History

The sister towns of Show Low and Pinetop-Lakeside sit along the Mogollon Rim in east central Arizona. They have a combined population of just under 15,000, which expands significantly during the summer months due to summer residents and tourism.

In the summer of 2002, town officials became appropriately concerned that their communities could be impacted by wildfire due to persistent drought. In anticipation of that eventuality, they began to plan in a proactive and informed manner through multijurisdictional coordination and collaboration. Their main objective was to protect the lives, property, and cohesiveness of their communities.



## The Intervention

City officials, in concert with partners in local fire departments, government and volunteer response agencies, state and local health departments, and the US Forest Service, began to lay the groundwork for a coordinated response.

Based on knowledge of area geography, Show Low and Pinetop-Lakeside officials were able to develop a grid map of multiple evacuation routes and shelter sites that would be available regardless of where a fire occurred. In addition, they communicated this information to the public via televised town meetings.



Town officials also mailed educational flyers outlining personal preparedness activities, including personal evacuation planning, to all their residents. During televised town meetings, they encouraged the public to call in with questions. Their goal was to raise citizen awareness regarding fire and evacuation preparedness.

When the fire started south of the communities on June 18<sup>th</sup>, one of the first things officials did was issue a public advisory to summer residents and visitors to either leave or not to travel to the area. This significantly reduced road congestion and the need for shelter space when mandatory evacuation orders were eventually issued.

## Positive Impacts

As the fire continued to spread and moved closer to Show Low and Pinetop-Lakeside, the on-site Incident Commander recommended evacuation to city officials. The decision to evacuate was made jointly by the mayor, city managers, and police chief of each community.

Once the decision to evacuate was made, town law enforcement began delivering door-to-door evacuation messages verbally to residents. The response included the evacuation of more than 30,000 residents and the sheltering of over 3,000 people in the nearby town of Eager. During preplanning, Eager officials anticipated the need for a special needs shelter and one was established in a local church facility and was staffed by area public health nurses and other medical personnel. Prior planning also allowed for the establishment of shelters for evacuated pets. The local animal rescue agency assisted with shelter management, and Animal Planet even provided a mobile veterinarian clinic.

## Lessons Learned

While there were many positive aspects during the response that can be attributed to foresight and good planning, there were a few issues that came to light that need to be addressed.

Although police went house to house to verbally advise residents to evacuate, in hindsight some of those messages were not consistent. Officials stated that next time they will distribute written messages to ensure that everyone is receiving consistent, accurate information.

In Eager, where the majority of shelters were located, officials assumed that the American Red Cross (ARC) would manage their general population shelter. However, a formal agreement between Eager and ARC was not established during the planning stage. As a result, Eager city and school personnel had to assume responsibility for shelter management.

Another unforeseen development was the overwhelming quantity of donations, both material and human, received at the Eager shelter. The Logistics Chief had to appoint a donations and volunteer manager to handle the inflow of assistance.

## Conclusion

The multi-agency, multi-jurisdictional response to the Rodeo-Chediski Fire was successful in protecting the health and safety of the affected population. No major adverse health effects occurred, and the majority of residents were able to return safely to their communities shortly after the fire was contained.

## Contact

For more information about this program, please contact:

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