



WHEN DISASTER **STRIKES**

A STATE PLAYBOOK FOR OUTDOOR
RECREATION RESILIENCE



THE VF
FOUNDATION

With generous support from the VF Foundation

IN SHORT: DISASTER RESILIENCE PREP CHECKLIST FOR STATE RECREATION LEADERS

Preparedness strategies and an actionable, step-by-step framework to assess vulnerabilities, protect natural and physical assets, and ensure rapid post-disaster recovery.

Highest Priority

- ☐ **Identify** your recreation resilience lead and backup.
- ☐ **Convene** a pre-disaster partner call or tabletop this year.
- ☐ **Create** a one-page contact tree and build operational continuity protocols for securing alternate communications during a disaster.
- ☐ **Choose** the public-facing home base for recreation disruption information.

Next Steps

- ☐ **Create** a recreation damage and business-impact intake form.
- ☐ **Pre-draft** safety message templates for wildfire, flood, smoke, extreme heat, and closure scenarios.
- ☐ **Clarify** what business-support tools are available through your local and state agencies and Small Business Administration (SBA).
- ☐ **Plan** an after-action review format before the next disaster occurs.

When managing the impact of natural disasters, state recreation leaders don't need to be the incident commander—their **best role is as the convener, translator, information broker, and advocate for recreation infrastructure and communities.**

INTRODUCTION

As more states face the impacts of natural disasters (floods, tornadoes, hurricanes, ice storms, wildfires, drought, and more), treasured recreation locations across the country will be impacted in significant ways, from closures to ensure public safety, long-term damage, stress, and shuttering for nearby businesses, and beyond. Each year brings significant new events and devastating impacts—in recent years, [historic flooding in Vermont](#), [Hurricane Helene in the Southeast](#), and [wildfire in New Mexico](#), to name a few, have all left an indelible and devastating impact on local recreation activities.

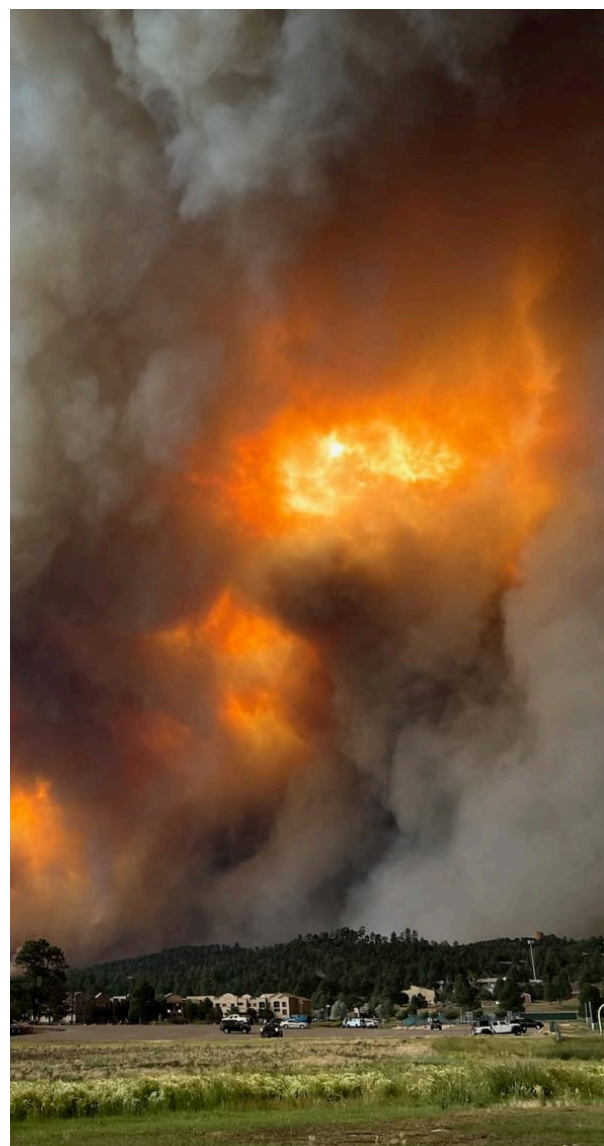
This playbook is intended to help state recreation leaders respond efficiently and effectively to disasters when they strike to ensure that public and private recreation infrastructure returns to safe public use as quickly as possible and supports the local recreation economy and the health benefits it provides. The recommendations below draw on interviews with state-level leaders across the country, combined with publicly available emergency management and small-business recovery guidance from Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), SBA, and federal public-health agencies.

What this playbook is designed to help states do

- **Keep recreation participants safe** through clear, credible, fast-moving public communication.
- **Help law enforcement, land managers, and emergency responders do their jobs** without added confusion or interference.
- **Catalog impacts to recreation infrastructure** and prioritize the most urgent recovery needs.
- **Equip lawmakers and agencies with plain-language information** about recreation impacts, business losses, and funding gaps.
- **Support small businesses and rebuild recreation infrastructure** quickly, transparently, and to a higher standard where possible.

KEY TAKEAWAY

Outdoor recreation recovery works best when there is a clearly identified state-level entity that can **convene partners, translate field impacts into plain language, and keep recreation from getting lost** inside broader emergency response and recovery systems.



PHASES OF DISASTER RECOVERY FOR RECREATION LEADERS

The role of recreation leadership shifts significantly between phases of a natural disaster:

1) PREPAREDNESS

Prior to a disaster, **recreation leaders can improve their preparedness and resilience by building networks and rehearsing response, recovery, and rebuilding needs.**



2) INCIDENT RESPONSE

Evacuation, rescue, active hazard management—this is the life safety phase. This phase must be led by emergency management, law enforcement, and first responders. **Recreation leadership should play a limited but supportive role focused on communication alignment and avoiding interference.**



3) RECOVERY

Stabilizing conditions, assessing damage, documenting impacts, and beginning cleanup. **Leadership becomes more distributed, and recreation leaders can play a stronger coordinating role.**



4) REBUILDING

Long-term infrastructure repair, economic recovery, and resilience planning. **Recreation leaders can help define priorities, align funding, and ensure the recreation economy is fully represented.**



INCIDENT PHASES IN PRACTICE

- **Attempting to define or shift roles during active incident response can create confusion;** clarity should be established in advance through pre-convenings and planning.
- **Disasters vary in how they unfold.** Some are fast-moving and response-driven (wildfires, tornadoes, floods), where incident command dominates early actions. Others are less acute but with profound economic and community impacts (drought, low-snow seasons), where impacts are primarily felt through prolonged disruption and recovery needs. Disasters don't always move clearly from one phase to the other. Recovery and rebuilding sometimes overlap.
- These differences also influence federal engagement, with more immediate events often led through emergency management frameworks (e.g., FEMA), while slower disruptions may rely more heavily on economic and business support systems (e.g., SBA, U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA)). **Recreation leaders should be prepared to navigate both pathways.**



Preparedness Phase: Build a State-Based Recreation Resilience Network and Playbook

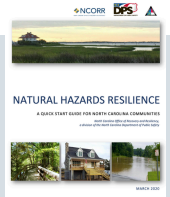
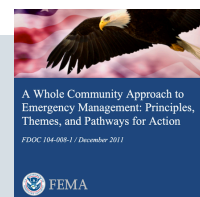
Every interview pointed to the same first lesson: get the right people around the table early and often, and before it is urgent, to understand roles, capabilities, and coordination pathways. This can ensure that systems are ready to be engaged in a timely manner, and partners have a level of familiarity and trust with one another prior to entering a high-stress situation.

Pre-convenings and advance coordination are not just helpful—they are essential. State recreation leaders who had already established relationships, shared expectations, and basic protocols before an event were able to move faster, reduce confusion, and avoid duplicative efforts. These early touchpoints are among the most immediately actionable steps states can take to improve disaster outcomes.

KEY NETWORK PARTICIPANTS

Each state should identify (organizations, key contacts, outreach info) a standing recreation resilience network that includes some combination of:

- Emergency management
- State parks, fish and wildlife or natural resources
- Transportation
- Guides and outfitters
- Tourism
- Tribes
- Public health
- Legislative or governor's office staff
- Local Parks and Rec
- Federal land managers
- Local search and rescue
- Chambers of commerce
- Higher education institutions
- Destination management organizations
- Trusted recreation nonprofit or user-group partners.
- Economic development
- Utility companies
- State resilience offices



Go Deeper: Existing Frameworks

FEMA's **Whole Community approach** (Page 5 and beyond) and **National Response Framework** (Page 8) both reinforce this model of shared responsibility and cross-sector coordination. North Carolina's **Natural Hazards Resilience toolkit** provides a state-level approach.

ADVICE FROM THE FIELD



AMY ALLISON

Director

North Carolina
Outdoor Economy
Office

The partnerships built before a disaster become the support system during one. Remember that every community and agency leader, nonprofit director, business owner, and tourism partner may also be living through the disaster personally; leading with empathy and regularly checking in on one another is essential to sustaining the long recovery ahead.

DISASTER RECOVERY TIMELINE

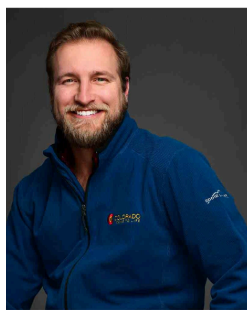
Preparedness → Incident Response → Recovery → Rebuilding



PREPAREDNESS CHECKLIST

- ☐ **Designate a recreation resilience lead (and back-up contact)** within a state recreation agency who can convene partners quickly.
- ☐ **Build and maintain a simple directory** of agencies, county leaders, federal contacts, nonprofit partners, and business intermediaries.
- ☐ **Agree in advance on the recreation office's role:** convener, translator, information broker, and advocate. Leave incident command to state emergency services.
- ☐ **Consider creating a dormant web page to be activated when needed** to serve as a single public-facing information home base for disaster communications that can be fed by multiple agencies. The page should be able to house safety updates, closures, reporting tools, agency contacts, business recovery resources, and sector-specific recreation guidance in one place. [Vermont's outdoor recreation flood recovery page](#) provides a strong example of this approach.
- ☐ **Develop a basic recreation damage and disruption intake form** covering location, ownership, access status, safety implications, visitor or economic significance, and immediate next steps.
- ☐ **Run an annual tabletop or planning call** with core partners using a loose but realistic scenario such as wildfire, flood, tornado, low-snow winter, or similar event to assess each organization's tools, resources, and competencies.

ADVICE FROM THE FIELD



**CONOR
HALL**

Director
Colorado Outdoor
Recreation
Industry Office

Consider pre-negotiated Memoranda of Understanding (MOUs) for immediate post-disaster work such as trail repair or field support, and a dedicated emergency fund or fast-turn grant pool so businesses and nonprofit partners can quickly respond to impacts and focus on recovery.

DISASTER RECOVERY TIMELINE

Preparedness → **Incident Response** → Recovery → Rebuilding

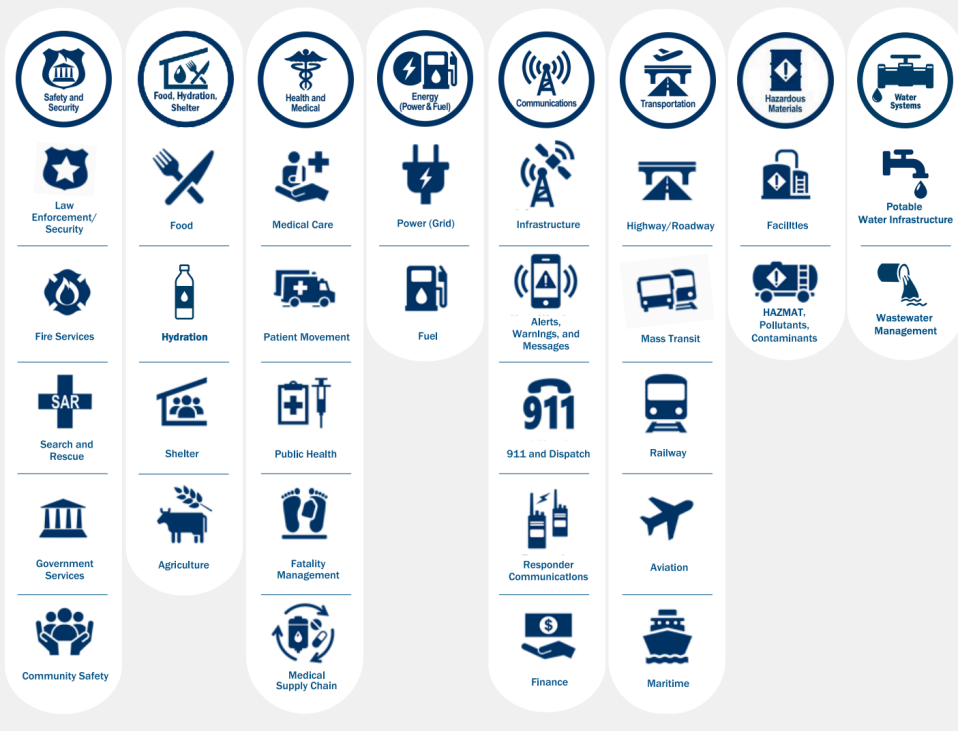
Incident Response: Support Life Safety, Clear Communication, and Fast Intelligence

During a disaster, timely information is often scarce, communication networks are strained, and basic safety and life support is paramount. **During this phase, recreation leaders should use the same safety language as the lead response agencies, stay behind the scenes, monitor social media for impacts, and wait for the immediate crisis to subside.**

Note: Local recreation leaders are often vital resources for shelter, response management, and triage. Parks and recreation professionals should have clear records of facilities and their capabilities (e.g. water, electricity, cell service) to share with emergency personnel, and prepare advance intake forms for evacuees.

Community Lifelines

lifelines@fema.dhs.gov fema.gov/lifelines



Go Deeper: Existing Frameworks

FEMA's **Community Lifelines framework** (shown at left) is useful because it encourages plain-language communication about service disruptions and economic effects, not just internal agency terminology.



Recovery: Making Recreation Impacts Visible in the First Days and Weeks

In the first days and early weeks that follow a disaster, **the recreation leader's job is to reinforce life-safety priorities, reduce public confusion, and translate recreation impacts to decision-makers.** Priority actions may include:

- **Translating operational updates into plain recreation language for traditional and social media channels:** what is closed, what is open, what routes are affected, what visitors and businesses should do now.
- **Standing up a rapid intake process for recreation impacts (both direct and indirect)** from land managers, counties, businesses, nonprofits, guides, volunteers, and the public.
- **Discouraging well-intended interference,** such as unauthorized cleanup, trail work, or entry into closed areas. Expect that volunteers and donations will arrive and need direction.
- **Assisting overburdened agencies** by filtering, organizing, and routing requests for support.
- **Pushing concise updates to the governor's office, legislators, and agency leadership** on the implications for safety, access, tourism, and small businesses.

ADVICE FROM THE FIELD



JACKIE DAGGER

Manager
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Recreation
Economic
Collaborative

Early messages during Vermont's historic floods focused on safe behavior in the outdoors, including telling the public not to enter dangerous waterways or remove debris. That message mattered not only because conditions were unsafe, but because premature cleanup could compromise documentation that FEMA and others would later need. Vermont also relied heavily on partner organizations to spread messages because those groups had deeper reach into recreation communities than the state office alone.

DISASTER RECOVERY TIMELINE

Preparedness → Incident Response → **Recovery** → Rebuilding



Post-disaster recovery is where state recreation leaders can add the most strategic value. A statewide recreation working group should not try to micromanage every washed-out bridge or damaged trail segment. Its job is to synthesize patterns, identify barriers, shape funding strategy, and keep the recovery conversation moving after the immediate crisis passes.

CATALOGING IMPACTS TO OUTDOOR RECREATION

The following categories of impacts are valuable to be catalogued by the recreation leader through a unified intake form or informal communications with partners.

Category	Examples	Why it matters
Life safety / access	Closures, evacuations, road washouts, alerts, stranded users	Prevents injuries and keeps messages aligned with lead responders
Infrastructure status	Trails, bridges, campgrounds, boat launches, trailheads, signage, sanitation	Supports damage assessment and recovery prioritization
Business disruption	Canceled bookings, lost access, workforce impacts, supply issues	Helps lawmakers and economic agencies see indirect losses
Public information gaps	Conflicting messages, missing maps, unclear reopening timelines	Shows where a home-base information hub is needed most

ADVICE FROM THE FIELD



JUSTINE CUCCHIARA

Director
Tennessee Office of
Outdoor
Recreation

Outdoor recreation recovery is more than reopening facilities. Long-term recovery often includes ecological restoration, hazard mitigation, volunteer coordination, public access restoration, and rebuilding community connections. Outfitters, guides, nonprofits, and other local recreation partners bring local knowledge, specialized equipment, river and trail expertise, volunteer networks, public trust, and field capacity that can support damage assessment, hazard identification, public communication, debris monitoring, and access restoration.



After Disaster: Organize Recovery, Document Losses, and Rebuild Smarter

Unlike incident response, leadership during the rebuilding phase is often diffuse and less clearly defined, **creating a critical opportunity for state recreation offices to provide structure, coordination, and visibility for recreation-related needs.**

PRIORITY ACTIONS IN REBUILDING PHASE

- Organize recreation assets across three categories to identify long-term priority areas: **safety-critical, access-enabling, and economically catalytic.**
- **Use local partners to gather business-loss information and qualitative evidence of downstream economic harm.** Many federal and state recovery programs require clear evidence of revenue loss compared to prior periods (e.g., year-over-year comparisons). Small Business Development Centers (SBDCs), outdoor business alliances, chambers of commerce, and tourism offices can play a key role in helping businesses compile the necessary documentation to qualify for assistance. State recreation leaders can help by connecting businesses quickly to chambers, SBDCs, tourism offices, and economic development staff.
- **Brief legislators and agency leadership in plain language:** what remains closed, what communities are affected, what funding gap remains, and what is time-sensitive.
- **Map what federal programs will and will not cover** - especially for private-land or mixed-ownership recreation assets.
- **Rebuild to a higher standard where possible,** especially for repeatedly damaged crossings, trailheads, campgrounds, and river access points.
- **Conduct an after-action review** with responders, land managers, business groups, and nonprofits, then convert lessons into written protocols.

ADVICE FROM THE FIELD



CONOR HALL

Director
Colorado Outdoor
Recreation
Industry Office

Use the recreation office as a convener. Build proactive relationships with transportation, tourism, public health, natural resources, county commissioners, municipal associations, and federal land managers. Consider advance MOUs and a flexible emergency fund for businesses and nonprofit partners.



BRAD GARMON

Director
Michigan Office of
Outdoor Recreation
Industry

Treat the state office as a translator that holds the big picture while empowering local actors to do intake. Keep the big picture in mind while empowering the people closest to the problem — regional staff, community groups, chambers, and local land managers — to do detailed intake and relationship management. Strong coordination often matters more than building a large new program.



JACKIE DAGGER

Manager
Vermont Outdoor
Recreation Economic
Collaborative

Impacts from disasters can compound for years, especially when repeated events hit the same places. Remember to lean on your partnerships to expand your reach and understand the impacts from past events that are still present, lead with messaging about safe-behavior when a disaster happens, and don't forget about recreation resources on private lands which require different strategies for recovery



JOE IMPEHOVEN

**Special Assistant,
Outdoor Recreation**
Washington
Governor Bob
Ferguson

Make yourself available early and often, but know when to stop acting as the middleman. Build a single home base for information, feed local and volunteer intelligence into official cataloging, and do not let secondary impacts to guide services, ski areas, and gateway communities get lost. Complacency around continued recovery often sets in months later, once the headlines fade.



AMY ALLISON

Director
North Carolina
Outdoor Economy
Office

One of the most important roles a state outdoor recreation office can play after a disaster is convening land managers, tourism leaders, emergency management, and local communities around a shared understanding of what is open, what is closed, and how that information is communicated. Coordinated messaging protects public safety while helping communities and businesses preserve economic activity by directing visitors to places that can safely welcome them.

Go Deeper: Existing Frameworks

FEMA's **Preliminary Damage Assessment guidance** offers a useful discipline for recreation leaders: collect information in a structured way that helps decision-makers understand magnitude, unmet need, and where further action is warranted. For businesses, **SBA disaster assistance** can become part of the toolkit in declared events, but only if owners know where to go, what documentation is needed, and who can help them navigate the process.



FEMA Preliminary Damage
Assessment Guide

June 2023

CONCLUSION

The \$1.3 trillion outdoor recreation economy will keep intersecting with major emergencies, whether the trigger is wildfire, flood, smoke, low snowpack, extreme heat, or compound events that blur the lines between public safety and economic disruption.

To best set their recreation infrastructure, businesses, and communities up for success, state recreation leaders need to become reliable coordinators: people who can convene early, translate fast, keep recreation visible in state decision-making, support local partners, and help communities rebuild with more resilience than they had before.



First 72 Hours: Key Tasks for Recreation Leaders

☐ **Confirm who is leading the response.**

Identify the lead agencies for emergency management, public safety, transportation, and land management, and make sure your office is plugged into that structure rather than creating a parallel one.

☐ **Designate one recreation point person.**

Assign one primary contact and one backup to manage incoming information, partner questions, and internal coordination.

☐ **Align all public messaging with official guidance.**

Re-share only confirmed information on closures, evacuations, access restrictions, travel conditions, and public safety. Do not speculate or issue conflicting guidance.

☐ **Help communicate safe recreation behavior.**

Reinforce that this is not the time for unofficial cleanup, trail work, backcountry travel, or volunteer response unless requested by the responsible authorities.

☐ **Activate a small recreation coordination group.**

Convene key partners for quick information-sharing.

☐ **Identify the single source of truth.**

Confirm where partners and the public should go for the most current information. If a recreation-specific information hub is needed, prepare it in coordination with lead agencies.

☐ **Start a simple incident log.**

Track known closures, partner needs, emerging recreation concerns, business questions, and major decisions so your office has a clear record as the situation evolves.

☐ **Prepare a lightweight damage and disruption intake process.**

Get ready to collect information on damaged recreation assets, access issues, and business impacts, but do not launch a burdensome reporting process until the response phase has stabilized.

☐ **Use intermediaries to gather early impact signals.**

Ask stakeholders to help identify likely trouble spots for businesses, events, and high-use recreation areas.

☐ **Prepare leadership for the recovery phase.**

Brief agency leadership and other decision-makers that recreation impacts will soon need attention, especially closures, damaged infrastructure, gateway-community business losses, and likely funding needs.

Contact Tree Template

(Prioritization can vary)

State Recreation Lead:

Name / title / mobile / email

Public Safety / SAR Contact:

Name / title / mobile / email

Backup Lead:

Name / title / mobile / email

Tourism Contact:

Name / title / mobile / email

Emergency Management Liaison:

Name / title / mobile / email

Economic Development /

Small Business Contact:

Name / title / mobile / email

Agency Leadership:

Name / title / mobile / email

Federal Land Manager Contacts:

Agency / region / name / mobile /
email

Parks / Natural Resources Lead:

Name / title / mobile / email

County / Gateway Community

Contacts:

County or town / name / title /
mobile / email

Transportation Contact:

Name / title / mobile / email

Public Health Contact:

Name / title / mobile / email

Stewardship / User Group

Contacts:

Organization / name / mobile /
email

Communications Lead:

Name / title / mobile / email

Business Network Contacts:

Organization / name / mobile /
email

CONFLUENCE OF STATES

CONTACT INFORMATION



Arizona

[E-mail](#) | [Website](#)

Arkansas

[E-mail](#) | [Website](#)

Colorado

[E-mail](#) | [Website](#)

Connecticut

[E-mail](#) | [Website](#)

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