



National Urban and Community Forestry Advisory Council Catastrophic Storms and Urban Forests Public Forum

Steve Scott, State Forester of Tennessee
Urban and Community Forestry Committee
National Association of State Foresters

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Introduction

- Mr. Chairman, members of the Council: Good afternoon. My name is Steve Scott, and I am the State Forester of Tennessee. I am here today on behalf of the Urban and Community Forestry Committee of the National Association of State Foresters.
- Healthy, sustainable trees and forested ecosystems are just as much a vital part of America's urban and community infrastructure today as trees were forty, fifty or even 100 years ago, when tree lined neighborhoods dominated the landscapes in cities and towns across America. Trees were then, as they are today, an essential element of public health and quality of life.
- I remember growing up in a small town in mid-state Kentucky where large stately maples, oaks, and poplars lined the neighborhood streets and surrounded our school yards and our back yards.
- And I distinctly remember one summer afternoon thunderstorm when a sudden bolt of lightning struck the large sugar maple tree in our backyard right next to the house, killing the maple and taking my tree house along with it. As kids we thoroughly enjoyed those living legends, and as adults, we now have a responsibility to protect and manage our urban forests for future generations.
- Most of you should be familiar with the benefits or values our urban forests provide:
 - they regulate temperature by providing shade and they reduce glare;
 - they serve as natural windbreaks and protect buildings and people from the cold and the heat;
 - they help to solve problems like air pollution and reduce storm water runoff;
 - and they provide privacy and increase property values.
- I think I can say with some degree of certainty that the vitality and health of a community is in many ways related to the health and care of its trees.
- Storms can disrupt that relationship in an instant, and wreck havoc on our urban and sub-urban forested infrastructures for many years.
- The damage and devastation that storms and other natural disasters have on human lives is well-recognized. Many people here know firsthand the deep impact left by Hurricane Katrina and other catastrophic storms.
- What is often overlooked after a terrible storm, and what is rarely considered beforehand is the impact of such disasters on the sustainability of the urban forest. Damage and loss of public and private trees during a storm event is equally important to the loss of other critical infrastructure systems such as power, roads, bridges, and communications. I say this with all sincerity because



tree canopy cover will sorely be missed, and at first people will not know how their urban forest can be replaced.

- Maintaining or restoring this green infrastructure – the trees and forests within and surrounding urban areas – is essential to the overall recovery of communities after a catastrophic event.
- Because of their environmental, economic and social importance, the care of trees and urban forestlands must be a priority in both emergency preparedness planning and disaster recovery.

Mitigation

- A tree is never more vulnerable than it is during a storm. Strong winds, lightning strikes, and the weight of ice on branches and leaves can all severely damage trees and threaten human safety.
- So, what might be done to mitigate impacts from all types of storms?
- First, selecting the proper species to plant, choosing an appropriate location for a tree, and providing proper limb pruning practices and tree maintenance can all have dramatic effects on the endurance of trees during a storm.
- Properly maintained trees will be more resilient to storms and will require less expense to clean up debris following a storm.
- Preparing trees for storms needs to be a cooperative effort between governmental agencies, utilities and arboricultural companies, and private citizens.
- So you might ask - Is there a federal role in pre-storm mitigation activities? I believe there is.
- Although limited funding is available through FEMA's Hazard Mitigation Grant Program (HMGP), which provides grants to states and local governments to implement long-term hazard mitigation measures, these funds only become available AFTER a major disaster declaration.
- I believe FEMA should allow States and sub-grantees to participate in the Pre-Disaster Mitigation Program (PDM) to implement the necessary preventive tree care practices which could significantly reduce the overall risks to populations and structures before the damage is done. Urban forest care and maintenance should be eligible for the pre-storm risk assessments and pre-storm grants or cost-sharing available through the PDM program.
- Mitigation saves money. Federal dollars spent on minimizing the potential impact of storms before they hit is a much better investment of federal dollars and will ease the burden of expensive debris clean-up after the fact.
- Communities that manage and care for their trees and urban forests on a routine basis tend to have less storm damage, and that means less financial burden during recovery. But not every community can afford the expense of pre-storm assessment and preventive tree care. FEMA should recognize the need for urban tree care and offer some financial assistance.
- Communities have a responsibility too. They need to know FEMA programs and processes before a storm strikes. Pre-storm preparations will pay off. It would be helpful if FEMA had a readily available reference as to what data a community needs to collect after a storm to qualify for the hazard mitigation grant program assistance.



- These same mitigation measures could apply to other non-storm threats like the Emerald Ash Borer where an entire community tree canopy cover is lost over a very short period of time. Governments at all levels are now spending billions removing dead trees after a single species of forest pest has run its course. Forest Health and forest sustainability requires continued monitoring, prevention and suppression measures to guard against all risks to the urban forest.

Recovery

- Ice storms, tornadoes or hurricanes cause widespread damage to trees that will result in a buildup of downed woody material that creates not only a severe fire hazard for the community, but also provides a home for potentially dangerous rodents and insect populations.
- When FEMA does provide hazard mitigation grants following a storm to prune trees, contractors should be required to follow nationally accepted pruning standards such as ANSI A300 codes.
- The amount of time it takes for a community to clean-up storm damage can vary widely. Unfortunately, the process of replanting and “re-greening” a community can take many years. There is a federal role through FEMA or USDA to provide grants to re-plant lost trees.
- In recognition of the fact that these catastrophes do not stop at any single boundary line, we need to be able to deal with response and recovery issues across the various jurisdictions and levels of government. New training methods may be needed such as disaster related urban tree assessments incorporating ICS principles.
- Local arborists, state forestry personnel and the U.S. Forest Service can all offer technical assistance to the process of response and recovery of the urban forest.
- State and local governments must be able to complete post-storm restoration efforts quickly.
- The Southern Group of State Foresters recently completed a Disaster Response Handbook. This handbook has a chapter on Urban Forest Damage Assessment with excellent links to other publications on damage assessment. You can review this handbook at the Southern Group website at www.southernforests.org.
- The Southern states foresters are also working cooperatively on a rapid storm damage assessment model as part of a regional investment project.

Social impact

- Planting trees not only aids in restoring a community’s urban tree canopy cover, it helps in the human healing process. For centuries, trees have served as memorials during times of mourning and recovery. They are a living tribute to renewal and regrowth, and they are absolutely essential to any community’s recovery after a catastrophic storm.
- Governments at all levels can lead the way by providing the necessary guidance to help coordinate community efforts.

Closing Remarks



We've seen what an F-5 tornado can do to a community and its trees, like Greensburg, KS.

We've seen what severe ice storms can do to trees across the state, like Missouri in 2007

We've seen what a Category 5 hurricane can do to both towns and rural forests, like Katrina.

Our states experience storms every year that impact someone's urban forest.

Our hope is that this Council can use its authorities and influence to raise the level of importance of pre-storm mitigation and preparation efforts and to cause FEMA to offer pre-disaster financial assistance to states and communities and disaster recovery financial assistance to restore the urban canopy cover as quickly as possible.

Thank you Mr. Chairman for the opportunity to speak before the Council today.