Policy Brief
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Disaster Risk Reduction in Colorado

Executive Summary

Building community resilience, and reducing disaster risk has the opportunity to save thousands of lives globally, as well as prevent major economic losses [1]. Techniques must be adapted for the unique disasters that impact each geography and region of focus. In Colorado, these efforts must be tailored to the state's unique mix of urban centers, rural mountain regions, and diverse natural hazards. Disaster events are expected to occur at increasing rates and intensity over time, as seen in recent fires and floods [2]. Currently the Colorado Resiliency Framework, created under the Colorado Resiliency Office in 2015, leads the state's approach for disaster risk reduction [3]. The state of Colorado should enhance its efforts in three major ways:

- Ensure annual framework updates and expand public awareness
- Diversify and stabilize funding sources for resilience initiatives
- Strengthen coordination between local and state agencies

Introduction

Colorado faces increasing risks from natural disasters as climatic changes occur, threatening both its people and its economy. Over the past two decades, the state has experienced more frequent and severe wildfires, floods, and winter storms across both the Front Range and rural mountain ecosystems [3]. The result of these events endanger lives, hurt ecosystems, and have billions of dollars in economic impacts. Recognizing these growing threats, Colorado established the Colorado Resiliency Office and the Colorado Resiliency Framework in 2015 to guide coordinated action across state and local levels [3]. Strengthening this framework and translating it into tangible, community-level outcomes is essential for ensuring that Colorado's communities are prepared to anticipate, withstand, and recover from future disasters.
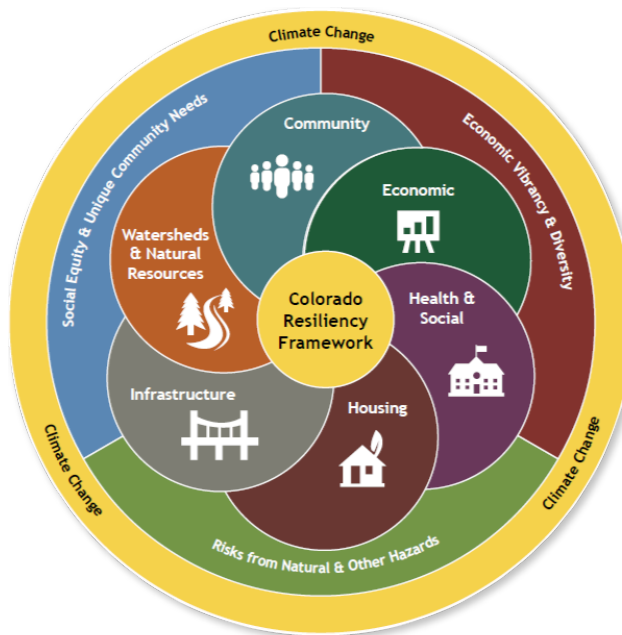
Overview

Disaster risk reduction in Colorado must be regionally specific to address hazards most relevant to each community. Following fires and floods of 2012 and 2013, in 2015 numerous stakeholders came together to create the original Colorado Resiliency Framework [3]. Under the Colorado Department of Local Affairs, the working group produces annual reports on emerging priorities and ongoing work within the overarching framework [3]. The framework takes a holistic approach to address issues which impact the state in a variety of different areas, but still under the overarching impacts of anthropogenic climate change.

One major focus area for the Colorado Resiliency Working Group is wildfires, as their impacts on natural ecosystems, individuals, and structures have continually grown over time. With all twenty of the largest fires in state history occurring within the past two decades, the increasing severity of wildfire impacts is undeniable [4]. As rivers traverse the state, flooding does as well, especially so in the geographic location of nearly 90% of the state's population, the Front Range [5]. As climate change increases the frequency and intensity of flooding events, this is another critical area of focus for the Colorado Resiliency Framework [3]. Winter storms cause another additional hazard, with nearly two million structures being threatened, and an increasing number of expected deaths due to transportation related fatalities, and structural collapse [3].

Together, these hazards represent a growing challenge for the state's safety, infrastructure, and economy.

Examination of the Findings

Despite the promise of the Colorado Resiliency Framework, implementation remains uneven. Although the framework highlights city or county local-level initiatives, much of these efforts are embedded within general sustainable development or climate action plans [3]. As a result, local initiatives lack the guidance, details, and funding necessary to translate these efforts to the state scale. The framework concludes with several broad strategies, but many lack detailed guidance for local implementation. However, the broad scope of the framework decreases their ability for actual impact on local communities, as it does not include specific guidance for local implementation. As ten years have passed since the founding of the office and working group, and five since the last full report, further action should have as well. Cited progress since 2024 emphasizes local action which is occurring, but still seemingly distinctively separate from the overarching resilience framework [3]. The state of Colorado needs tangible change to decrease overall disaster risk. Consultation with local communities must be furthered, collaboration of efforts must happen throughout the local and state levels, and finally further funding efforts for resilience at all scales also must be secured.

In terms of recommended policy, further assessment by county should first occur to analyze which areas should be prioritized to decrease certain areas of risk.To advance resilience statewide, Colorado must translate its framework into a coordinated, locally responsive system that uses the latest risk projection to guide investment, emergency planning, and preparedness in the face of disaster.

Conclusion

Colorado can strengthen its disaster risk reduction efforts by turning broad planning into coordinated, measurable action. While the Colorado Resiliency Framework provides a strong foundation, greater collaboration between state and local agencies, more consistent updates, and diversified funding are needed to ensure progress. By focusing on locally informed, well-funded, and adaptable strategies, Colorado can better protect its communities and infrastructure from the growing risks posed by climate change.

References

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