

Apache County Supervisor, R. John Lee Leads County in Post-Wallow Efforts

St. Johns, Arizona-Chairman R. John Lee is leading a team of dedicated professionals addressing the aftermath of the Wallow Fire. In addition to efforts in streamlining and expediting the salvage logging process, the County is also fighting against the ravages of nature and the post-fire flooding, debris flow, and mudslides that are expected.

“We never doubted the dedication and skill of our firefighting teams.” Said Lee, “but we also knew from recent experience in similar wildfires throughout the southwest that the post-fire impacts would be just as significant.”

“While the Forest Service was doing its best to predict the types of runoff we’d anticipate, we had engineering teams working with a multitude of state and federal agencies and their experts to identify the types of flows we could expect, sketch quick plans for how we could protect the assets, and to prioritize, knowing we’d have at most weeks to prepare for the ongoing monsoon,” said County Engineer, Ferrin Crosby. “We had to quickly assess where our limited resources could do the most good.”

“The County approached the problem early by addressing it from different angles” said County Manager, Delwin Wengert.

Education-In June, with the fire still burning, County and community officials began outreach to the residents on the importance of purchasing flood insurance.

Advance Warning-Through partnerships with the U.S. Geological Survey, rainfall and stream gages were installed and linked with existing precipitation and runoff gages to form an advance warning upstream of the populated areas.

Emergency Measures-county staff began the process of planning and designing emergency flood protection, channels, diversion, and clearing even before the fire was 100% contained. As soon as Natural Resources Conservation Service Exigency funds became available to Arizona, the County immediately responded by coordinating over 25 public works projects designed to protect neighborhoods.

Mitigation-Apache County has been assertive in its pursuit of federal financial assistance toward flood control. Last year, the Town of Eagar, using County Flood Control funds to perform a detailed analysis and comprehensive study, was the only community from Arizona competing to be selected nationwide for a FEMA Pre-Disaster Mitigation grant. Mitigation (long-term, permanent solutions) will begin in the Town of Eagar within months, shortly after the end of the monsoon season.

Economic Restoration- The County is working closely with federal policy makers to ensure that salvage efforts can move forward before its too late. “Legislation introduced by Senator Kyl specifically aimed at the Wallow Fire is designed to help the Forest Service streamline the review and compliance process, thereby allowing local businesses and communities to move quickly, before the timber loses its economic value,” said Lee.

The fire, and the massive scope of the measures to address the post-fire flooding, wasn't the only battle the County had to fight. A record number of natural catastrophes throughout the county, and the economic downturn, left federal coffers dry. Lee and Mayors of Springerville and Eagar met with both Secretary of Agriculture, Vilsack and Secretary of Interior, Salazar to discuss assistance from Washington. Apache County's efforts resulted in funding being made available across all of Arizona.

“Although our efforts were naturally focused on our County,” said Lee, “we're pleased if our work in pushing through funding also helped other areas of the state finding themselves in similar circumstances.”

“We told them we weren't asking for a handout, but a hand up. We needed the help, and we needed it **now**” said Lee. “Without the help of Senator Kyl, Congressman Gosar and others, I don't think we'd have access to the types of resources we have today. They helped us get funding for the federal agencies who couldn't offer anything more than technical assistance.”

“The County team has enjoyed a wonderful working relationship, with emergency response, advanced planning, and implementation working in lock-step,” comments Chief Deputy Brannon Eagar, “We may joke among ourselves over who's lost the most sleep trying to stay on top of the problems. But, there isn't a single person on this team who isn't reminded of the tragic loss of life that has occurred in other post-fire floods, and that's what keeps us moving.”

“Our crews know these aren't just public works projects,” said County Foreman Lester Slaton. “We know we're fighting to protect the homes of our friends, family and neighbors.

Teamwork Through Leadership-Supervisor Lee knows how to lead, and when to empower his team on the ground.

“We wanted to let them take the bull by the horn,” said Lee, “support them, let them take ownership of the problem, and let them get in and get the job done. Our

culture allows for anyone that sees a problem or obstacle ahead to get after it. We don't put our folks in compartments, but encourage them to think out of the box to solve the problem.”

That sentiment of taking ownership is pervasive throughout the entire team—from the policy makers to the people in the field. County and Eagar public works crews worked 12-hour days, including weekends, to tackle the daunting task of installing the first 14 public works projects in an unprecedented 10 days. Not only did they finish the work early, but they added 3 additional major projects within the first exigency grant window. Over 30 major public works projects have been completed or underway.

“I would like to extend my gratitude to everyone that dedicated their time and experience to this catastrophe”, stated Supervisor R. John Lee.