

CONCURRENT SESSION 5 – WASTE MANAGEMENT

Identifying and Improving Disaster Waste & Debris Management Decisions

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Disaster Waste and Debris Management (DWDM) can place significant logistical, emotional, and financial burdens on communities, impeding response efforts and prolonging the time to recovery. Each step of the technical processes of DWDM (e.g., sorting, staging, transporting, treatment, disposal) involves decision points by varied social actors (e.g., families decide what to keep or throw away; waste haulers determine which route to take on a given day; municipalities sign contracts). However, the social dynamics surrounding these decisions are understudied and represent a gap in the literature. Analysis of social drivers and decision-making processes of DWDM is important because of the need to coordinate among multiple social actors, resolve social conflicts that may arise, and make sure that DWDM does not exacerbate environmental injustices. During an incident, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's on-scene coordinators (OSCs), response corps, and their federal, state, and local partners may encounter distinct decision-making cultures and organizational structures, as well as varying ideas about what "waste" and "debris" are and what associated risks might be. Being able to resolve these challenges requires insight into how and why DWDM decisions are made. The objective of this research is to gain a better understanding of the various DWDM decision points, actors, and social conflicts. By mapping these variables across disaster types, community types, and waste material types, we will 1) add to social science theory regarding decision-making in disasters and about waste; and 2) determine potential points of intervention to build capacity and improve DWDM outcomes. Here, we report findings from initial focus groups with emergency managers and waste professionals exploring what on-the-ground DWDM decisions are and strategies for overcoming impediments to decisions and action.
