

SEDONA RURAL HEAT LISTENING SESSION REPORT



THE UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA
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**Southwest Center on
Resilience for Climate
& Health**

Key Takeaways from Listening Sessions

Communities in northern Arizona are seeing an increased need for heat response and emergency services due to longer heat seasons and increased climate risks such as wildfires and vector-borne diseases.

Communities need clear and actionable messaging for vulnerable communities, schools and tourists that emphasizes the unique heat risks at high elevation.

Rural and remote communities need resources and partnerships to overcome unique barriers such as transportation and housing upgrades.

Heat relief efforts in rural communities in northern Arizona will look different than those in urban central and southern Arizona communities because of the barriers that communities face and the unique characteristics of heat at high elevation.

Creating pathways for community connection and programs focused on local residents is essential in heat response planning.

Session Overview

*The session was conducted by the **Southwest Center on Resilience for Climate and Health (SCORCH)**, in collaboration with the **Arizona Center for Rural Health**, and the **Arizona Department of Health Services (ADHS)**. The Sedona Rural Heat Listening Session took place on October 7, 2025, at the Sedona Library with 17 participants and 4 representatives from the SCORCH team. Participants were divided into three tables for discussion, each with a SCORCH staff member serving as both facilitator and note-taker. Participating agencies included Community Health Center, Education, Health Department, Hospital, Library, Local Non-profit, Others.*



Opportunities

Participants identified several opportunities to strengthen heat preparedness and response:

Policy	Infrastructure
▶ Use tools such as Smart911 to identify and direct resources to communities at highest risk	▶ The ‘traditional’ cooling center model isn’t effective in rural and remote areas; need to rethink cooling strategies based on the unique needs and barriers of northern AZ communities. ▶ Resources for transportation, housing upgrades, and utility support are needed to improve heat resilience.
Communication	Community Preparedness
▶ Northern Arizona communities need campaigns to raise awareness and encourage people to sign up for heat alerts. The campaigns should use multiple communication modalities (e.g. social media, email, TV, radio, newspaper). ▶ Tailor messages and responses to heat issues experienced in northern Arizona communities. Campaigns can’t be based on information from other parts of Arizona.	▶ It’s vital to create spaces for collaboration and partnership among agencies working in heat relief in northern counties. Impacts of Extreme Heat

Impacts of Extreme Heat

Listening session participants report seeing significant changes in the last few decades, highlighting the diverse climate impacts from heat in their northern Arizona communities. They noted that heat has only become a systemic issue in the last few decades; several participants remember mild summers from their childhood. The increased heat is accompanied by other climate issues, including decreased rainfall and a longer fire season. The longer heat season also brings environmental challenges, including an increase in vector-borne diseases such as West Nile virus and hantavirus.

"In Prescott during summer we'd be wearing winter jacket, no AC during summer, now you don't see happening—it is getting hotter."

The slow but steady increase in heat has strained the ability of northern Arizona communities to adapt to changes. Participants noted that many residents in rural areas have a sense of complacency with extreme heat; they ‘shake it off, underestimate the impacts of heat, and may be less likely to seek help. Housing is also a key to heat risk; many houses don’t have air conditioning or updated insulation, and the high cost of housing in many communities makes it difficult to upgrade homes for heat resilience. During the hottest months when fire risk is high, the utility company shuts off the power to prevent wildfires, eliminating AC and refrigeration from the houses that do have them.



The communities that are most impacted by extreme heat in northern Arizona include unhoused individuals, people who use drugs or alcohol, older adults, infants and tourists. People under the influence of drugs or alcohol may not recognize the impacts of heat. Tourists may underestimate the heat, especially at higher elevations, and fail to adequately prepare or drink enough water.

“People at higher elevations don’t expect the heat, it catches them off guard.”

The geography and rural nature of the northern Arizona counties also make heat response difficult. Many services are coordinated from central locations, but the counties are so large and diverse that these services do not reach all parts of the county. Transportation, communication, and service coordination are also challenging across such wide distances.

Infrastructure and policy issues complicate the ability of communities to adapt to changing conditions. Older homes aren’t set up to handle heat. Schools may lack the funding to upgrade buildings and buses for heat relief. Gaps in workplace protections create a patchwork of heat recommendations for outdoor workers that aren’t enforceable.

“Field trips and buses become unsafe, old infrastructure and limited funding make it hard to adapt.”

Listening session participants noted that the heat issues they see in their northern Arizona communities are different from those in much of the rest of the state. These differences require innovative and unique responses to address extreme heat.

“Way different than Phoenix, different kind of heat because of the elevation; you will get sunburnt, but you won’t feel yourself getting really hot whereas when you get out of the car in Phoenix it’s an overwhelming feeling of heat.”

Heat Relief Efforts

Participants noted the many ways that local communities are responding to increased heat risk.

Cooling Centers

Participants noted that the prevalent cooling center model doesn’t work as well in rural communities in northern Arizona. They noted that lack of transportation, awareness, and limited hours make it difficult for people to access cooling centers even when they are available. People may be reluctant to leave pets behind when they are not allowed in a cooling center.

“Weekends are tough, no one wants to volunteer.”

Places like public libraries and hospitals become official and de facto cooling centers when other options aren’t available. For example, unhoused individuals often use the library as a cooling center, and the libraries do what they can to accommodate this usage. However, other community members may start to avoid those locations. Participants noted that businesses have been reluctant to sign up as a cooling center because of the perception that it will attract unhoused people and make the location undesirable.

“Cooling centers help, but not everyone feels safe going, especially families or people with pets.”



In Coconino County, participants noted that they have agreements set up for cooling centers, but there have not been any local heat emergencies, so they have not opened.

Participants noted an opportunity to work with senior centers, hospitals, community centers, malls, and schools as cooling centers.

Heat Messaging

Participants discussed a lack of a formal or consistent system for heat alerts. Many community members use social media for heat alerts, and older adults tend to rely on their television for information. The schools get weekly heat reports. However, they noted a lack of consistency and awareness of messaging.

Data

Several participants discussed a desire for more data regarding how to identify and provide support to specific individuals in their community. It would be helpful to know where people are and what they need to streamline communication and support. Other participants noted that they don't need more data; they need more coordination and planning for effective heat response.

Partnerships and Collaboration

Participants noted existing partnerships to support heat response but discussed that the resources were limited and could be difficult to access. For example, Coconino County has Coconino Connect, an online platform where residents can request support and get connected with agencies that can provide them with the services they need. Other resources such as rental and utility assistance can be difficult to access or rely on unpredictable funding. There are nonprofits that provide utility, food, and emergency support, but it is difficult to reach the entire county.



Community Resilience and Looking Ahead

Partnerships for heat response

Participants discussed the need for resources and partnerships to upgrade housing for heat resilience and find/access data on who needs support. An example was to work with the local utility to look at electricity use and create more resources for utility assistance and support. They also noted the need to ensure that there is funding for home improvement, emergency utility relief and resilience programs, and that they are easy to access. The participants also discussed working with less traditional partners, such as shopping malls, to create cooling centers and amplify other heat relief efforts.

Campaigns to encourage vulnerable residents to sign up for heat alerts could help to identify areas where resources are most needed and connect those residents to important information. Participants discussed using tools such as Smart911 to identify and provide resources for vulnerable community members during emergencies.

Participants noted a need for improved coordination between agencies, especially for the most geographically remote areas in northern Arizona. They expressed an interest in continuing to meet to discuss and coordinate efforts between agencies.

“Bringing people together for conversation helps build support and commitment.”

Messaging and Communication

Participants discussed the need for clear, actionable messaging for residents and tourists. The school partners discussed the need for consistent and clear messaging around heat safety and hydration for students, field trips and sports.

“Hot kids are not learning.”

Several participants discussed the need for messaging for tourists and new residents that emphasizes the dangers of heat at high altitude and the need for hydration. Ensuring that there is clear signage on trails and in tourist locations to improve heat preparedness.

Participants discussed the importance of tailoring messages for northern Arizona communities. They noted that heat is different, and the signs may be more subtle than in other parts of the state. There is a need to focus on hydration and discuss the risks of heat and exertion at high altitude when you may be exposed to the sun without sweating.

Community Connection

Listening session participants discussed the need to focus on residents and community resources for heat response. They mentioned a ‘check your neighbor’ campaign as a potential strategy for engaging with communities and promoting heat resilience and response, especially in rural and remote areas.

“We need to connect people directly to resources, grants, transportation, and education programs.”

Participants discussed that an alternative to the cooling center model may be needed in rural and remote communities. Barriers such as transportation and lack of space require communities in northern Arizona to be more creative about heat relief efforts.



“Cooling centers work in urban areas, but rural communities face different barriers.”

Participants also noted that, while it’s important to provide resources and information for tourists, they feel that local emergency response tends to focus more on tourists than residents. They discussed the need for resources focused on locals and residents to ensure that they can access the services and support they need.

Conclusion

Participants came to this session with a shared recognition that extreme heat is becoming an increasing concern across northern Arizona, but that the challenges and solutions look different than they do in other parts of the state. Throughout the discussion, participants emphasized the importance of strengthening partnerships, improving locally relevant messaging, and developing heat response strategies that reflect the unique needs of rural and remote communities. There was also a strong interest in continuing these conversations to build stronger coordination and connect residents with the resources they need. As one participant shared:

“Bringing people together for conversation helps build support and commitment.”

