



CASE STUDY

The Galena Ball Field

GALENA, ALASKA FLOOD RECOVERY

Learning Objective: Discuss the benefits of a non-traditional recovery project in a rural, remote location and analyze how this community-building project contributed to overall resilience for the Galena community.

Keywords: Recovery, Flood, Local Government, Tribal Government, Rural Community, Psychological and Emotional Recovery, Natural and Cultural Resources, Philanthropy, Public Assistance, Identifying and Leveraging Resources

PART ONE

Background

During the spring break up¹ in May of 2013, flood waters carrying massive ice chunks from the Yukon River inundated nearly 90% of the homes, businesses, and government facilities in the small town of Galena, Alaska. House-sized chunks of ice mowed down the native birch trees and ripped homes off of pilings. Most areas received between seven and nine feet of water. The event forced nearly all of the 472 residents to evacuate by air to Fairbanks and Anchorage as waters quickly rose and local roads became impassable.

Located roughly 270 miles due west of Fairbanks in interior Alaska, Galena is a regional education and transportation hub on the banks of the Yukon River. Its airstrip was built as a base during World War II and serves as the main method of getting in and out of Galena. Since Galena's establishment in 1918 on an Alaskan Native fishing site, the city has dealt with multiple destructive flooding events, a common issue for communities situated along the Yukon River.



Figure 1. An aerial view of Galena immediately after the flooding event.



Figure 2. The fence running along the Galena ball field sits ruined after the floodwaters receded.

The Galena baseball field was heavily damaged in the flood. The field served as an important outdoor recreation site for kids and families and was important to the overall well-being of the community. During the recovery process, Galena residents placed a strong community value on outdoor recreational opportunities and facilities, including trails and parks that would support culture and traditional ways of life. One of their top projects was to enhance the baseball field to make a more welcoming and family-friendly community gathering place.

The Galena ball field is located at the southeastern corner of the local airstrip. Before the flooding, the area contained a smoothed-out baseball diamond that was used for games, tournaments, and other community gatherings such as cookouts. The ball field was completely destroyed by the flooding. The field became waterlogged and all minor structures were washed away, including the bleachers and fencing surrounding the field.

¹ The period of time in spring when the ice on the river physically breaks and the surface becomes free flowing again. Seasonal snow melt adds to the Yukon River's water level, and shifting pieces of ice pile up to create ice jams that break unpredictably.

Baseball is an important pastime in Galena and the entire interior Alaska region. Many community members play baseball from a young age through adulthood, often participating in recreational leagues and pick-up games every summer. The loss of the Galena ball field also meant the loss of the annual baseball and softball tournaments, which were the backbone of cultural engagement and social interactions between the Galena community and surrounding communities up and down the river. Other tribes and communities travel to Galena from various remote locations around central Alaska for these annual social gatherings.

Given Galena's geographic isolation and the prominence of baseball as a social tradition among residents, restoring the ball field quickly became a top priority for local leadership. Restoring recreational facilities are not typically priority projects during recovery, so the Galena City Manager knew she would have to carefully advocate its importance to federal and state programs that could help fund the repairs.

“It’s a small project, but it’s probably got the most support and enthusiasm of any of the projects.” – Jon Korta, Mayor, City of Galena

Source: “Galena Making Progress in Flood Recovery,” Fairbanks Daily News-Miner, June 13, 2014

Challenges

The land on which the ball field sits was owned by the Alaska Department of Transportation and Public Facilities (Alaska DOT), and for safety reasons required review before restoring the ball field because of its proximity to the Galena airstrip. Alaska DOT officials agreed to the ball field restoration project and issued an exemption to the City of Galena for the construction effort.

The recovery effort also required an expedited rebuilding process due to snow and freezing temperatures that typically begin in late September, and involved significant logistical challenges. With no road or rail system connecting Galena to other communities in Alaska, people and goods – including emergency supplies and building materials – must be brought in via barge or plane. Hundreds of contractors and volunteers arrived by air requiring temporary lodging and feeding.

Timelines were highly dependent on weather conditions, supply availability, and higher prices, which impacted the timely arrival of critical personnel and materials recovery projects were depending on.

At the same time, Galena families who rely on subsistence food also had to make time for fishing and hunting to build up their winter food stocks. To accommodate the community's priorities, Galena leadership requested that the federal Interagency Recovery Coordination (IRC) partners delay local engagement until after moose hunting season.

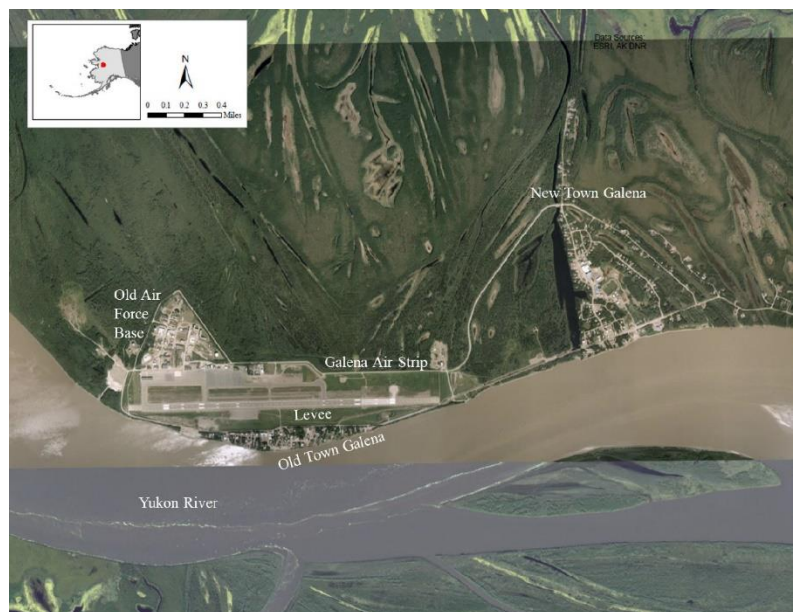


Figure 3. Map of Galena, Alaska. Source: ESRI, AK DNR data; produced by FEMA Region X.

PART TWO

Actions

The primary source of funding for direct repairs of the ball field came from the FEMA Public Assistance (PA) Program. PA funds were used to repair the existing ball field, primarily by re-grading the ballfield surface so it could be used safely for future baseball and softball events.

Additional funding came in the form of a \$25,000 grant from the Rasmuson Foundation, an organization focused specifically on improving the quality of life of Alaskans. The Denali Commission, an independent federal agency created by Congress to improve living conditions throughout Alaska, was instrumental in connecting Galena leadership with the funding opportunity at the Rasmuson Foundation.

Though the Rasmuson Foundation typically would not fund this type of project, the significant damage caused by the flood, combined with the importance of the ball field to the Galena community, convinced the foundation that this project should be a high priority. The grant money was used to add bleachers, picnic tables, a small gazebo and picnic pavilion, and a playground to the ball field site.

Results

The loss of the ball field meant the loss of a main source of recreation and fun in the community. Given the prevalence of baseball among the Galena community, the absence of the ball field resulted in a significant drop in morale among community members throughout the rebuilding effort. The restoration and improvement of the ball field was essential to restore morale and bring the community together to successfully recover from the flood's impacts. Recreation is also an important long-term strategy that can help survivors overcome disaster-related stress.

Since its restoration, the ball field has hosted several baseball and softball tournaments for the school, the community, and the local baseball league. In addition, the facility improvements, including the picnic pavilion, playground, and gazebo, have transformed the ball field into a larger and more versatile community gathering space. The community recently held a fundraiser at the baseball field to assist a local family with unexpected medical expenses.

Lessons Learned

The ball field restoration project was of great importance to Galena residents because of its ability to facilitate community gatherings and recreational opportunities. Resiliency and post-disaster recovery depend heavily on a sense of community and feelings of health and safety. The ball field project was an important step in restoring that sense of community within the town of Galena. Other rural communities facing significant recovery challenges may look to the Galena ball field project as an example of a non-traditional recovery initiative that greatly contributed to the long-term resiliency of the disaster-affected community.

Additional Resources

- [Rasmuson Foundation](#)
- [Training Manual for Mental Health and Human Service Workers in Major Disasters](#)
- [Public Assistance Fact Sheet](#)

Key Partners

- Galena Leadership
- FEMA
- State Leadership
- Denali Commission
- Rasmuson Foundation



Figure 4. The finished picnic pavilion at the ball field site.