

How are Alabama Municipalities Approaching Urban Tree Risk and Addressing Liability Concerns?

Managing for tree risk and public safety is an important component of municipal tree care programs. Urban trees provide a number of ecological, economic and social values; however, they can also pose risks and liability concerns when they fail. In Alabama increasing storm frequency and severity is enhancing the risks of tree failures, which hurricanes Sally and Zeta and countless tornados highlighted in 2020. Tree failures, most commonly seen during storms, can lead to injury and cause damage to public infrastructure and personal property. This can result in legal actions and negative implications for urban forest management. This study aims at describing how Alabama communities mitigate risks associated with increasing storm frequency and address liability concerns related to trees. The project employed a qualitative research process to elicit emergent themes. Interviews were conducted with participants directly associated with urban forest management in 22 Alabama communities of varying sizes. Among the findings, themes underscored concerns that municipal employees relied heavily on residents for identification of tree risk, but that the average citizen has major limitations in identifying tree issues. Additionally, cities felt too overwhelmed in day-to-day tree maintenance activities to plan for preventative actions that are proven to reduce hazards. Lastly, findings suggested how the responsibility for damage due to tree failure is often separated from the responsibility for tree maintenance itself, raising questions about the adaptive nature of tree maintenance when repercussions for poor risk management are not directly felt.



Arnold "Beau" Brodbeck

Beau Brodbeck is an Extension Specialist in Community Forestry & Arboriculture and an Affiliate Faculty in the School of Forestry and Wildlife Sciences at Auburn University. Over the past 20 years he has worked in various facets of forest and urban forest management. He began his career as a forestry consultant before working for Auburn University to manage Alabama's urban forest hurricane recovery program in the aftermath of Hurricanes Ivan and Katrina. In the past few years Beau's focus is on educational outreach developing programs and publications to serve the forestry and urban forestry communities in Alabama. His research has addressed human dimensions of urban forest management as well as migrant labor within the forest industry. He holds a Ph.D. in forestry from Auburn University and is an Alabama Registered Forester and ISA Certified Arborist. Brodbeck has served in various leadership positions, including chair of TREE Fund, president of the ISA Southern Chapter, treasurer of the Alabama Urban Forestry Association, and councilman of the Alabama Forestry Council.