

## Protecting a Community with Rural Development and Recovery Act

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Fort Smith, Montana

**When a fire broke out** in the little community of Fort Smith, Montana in August of 2006, it dealt what could have been a knockout blow to the town. The 122 residents of this tiny fishing destination located within the Crow Indian Reservation play host to thousands of visitors every year. They come in droves to enjoy the nearby Yellowtail Dam and its recreational opportunities as well as the blue-ribbon trout fishing in the Bighorn River.

But in the early morning hours of that August day, a fire broke out that not only destroyed the lone grocery and gas station, a fishing shop, and part of a fishing lodge – but

claimed the lives of three visitors staying in the lodge. Fort Smith volunteer firefighters and other area responders fought the fire as best they could, but the incredibly hot conflagration had several flare-ups that left the area in rubble. And while no official cause was ever determined, the lack of fire hydrants and sufficient water pressure hindered the ability of those brave men and women to combat the devastating inferno.

The tragic loss of life, of businesses, of property, and the need now to make a ninety mile round-trip for gas or groceries was a staggering blow to the residents of Fort Smith. In other towns and other times, events like these can turn small communities into ghost towns.

There is an inherent resiliency one finds in rural communities, and Fort Smith gathered up their resolve and began the rebuilding process. By Christmas the Yellowtail Market had rebuilt and was serving the community with groceries and gasoline, the Big Horn Trout Shop and Lodge followed suit soon after.

Now recovered from the physical scars of the fire, the community of Fort Smith set forth to reduce the chances it would happen again, and their aging water system was priority number one. Originally constructed as part of a temporary housing project for the builders of the Yellowtail Dam, the Fort Smith water system lacked pressure, quality, and quantity to serve the influx of tourists every year much less the town's year-round residents. The deteriorating infrastructure had moved the community out of compliance with state regulations on water quality, not to mention the grossly inadequate firefighting capacity.

With the passage of the Recovery Act in 2009, the Fort Smith Water & Sewer District was well positioned to take advantage of the funding available, and worked with USDA Rural Development to leverage state water grants and a loan and grant combination from Rural Development's Water and Environmental Program to rehabilitate the community water system.

The funds provided by the Recovery Act and USDA Rural Development will be used to replace and upgrade the water delivery throughout the town, as well as install water meters, a new water tower for sufficient pressure, a chlorination system, and fire hydrants. Work on the system could begin as soon as this fall.

Water District Board Member Dennis Fischer said there was no way this would have happened without the support of Montana's Congressional Delegation and the funding provided by USDA Rural Development through the Recovery Act. "[Without this support] the community would probably have not seen those improvements for eight, ten, twelve years down the road."

While it's impossible and unrealistic to say a fire would never happen again – the investment in Fort Smith's water system by USDA Rural Development and others, gives this community the resources necessary to effectively fight it if it does.