Decentralized Water Systems for Rural Fire Protection: A Technical Approach to Equitable Infrastructure

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Mariana Buenaventura

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On my honor as a University student, I have neither given nor received unauthorized aid on this assignment as defined by the Honor Guidelines for Thesis-Related Assignments

Claire Culiver, Department of Materials Science & Engineering

Lindsay Ivey-Burden, Department of Civil Engineering

Rider W. Foley, Department of Engineering and Society

ABSTRACT

Fire suppression in rural and semi-urban areas often faces a significant barrier: a lack of accessible, high-flow water sources. Unlike urban fire departments, which rely on dense municipal hydrant networks, rural departments must improvise with static water sources, portable tanks, and long-distance tanker shuttles. These methods are vulnerable to environmental conditions and logistical setbacks. This report investigates decentralized water storage systems including cisterns, engineered draft points, and sealed tanks as a practical, scalable solution to improve fire response in underserved regions. Through firsthand training in Albemarle County's fire program and conversations with experienced fire professionals, I explored how these systems are used, where they fall short, and how they can be better integrated into long-term planning. Ultimately, I argue that decentralized water infrastructure isn't just a technical fix, it's a necessary shift toward more equitable emergency response systems.

INTRODUCTION

Rural firefighting operations are often limited not by training or equipment, but by access to reliable water. Many areas in Albemarle County and across Virginia still lack hydrant coverage, especially outside of town centers or past where water mains end. These gaps leave departments to rely on tanker shuttle operations, driving water from a fill site to the scene and cycling back repeatedly, which can be slow or even dangerous in fast-moving fire scenarios.

While decentralized water storage (like cisterns and clean tanks) is sometimes installed reactively after an incident, there is growing recognition that these systems could be planned and built in advance. This project aims to evaluate the design requirements, practical challenges, and broader implications of using decentralized water systems as a supplement or in some cases, substitute, for hydrant infrastructure in rural and semi-urban areas. My research combines technical analysis, field-based training, and interviews with seasoned firefighters to better understand how these systems work in real life and what's needed to make them more reliable and widely adopted.

RELATED WORKS

There's a long-standing recognition of the rural water supply problem in fire service literature. NFPA 1142 (2023) sets minimum standards for water supplies in areas without hydrants, including flow rates and access requirements for engineered draft points. FEMA's Safe Operation of Fire Tankers (2005) and the U.S. Fire Administration's Guide to Rural Fire Protection (2021) both highlight the operational risks and planning challenges that departments face when running tanker-based operations. The Virginia Department of Forestry provides additional support and resources for dry hydrants, but widespread implementation remains inconsistent.

What's often missing from these resources is an integrated, forward-thinking approach. Many guidelines assume that rural departments will continue relying on natural sources, even when those sources are unreliable, seasonal, or contaminated. This report builds on that knowledge by applying it to current local conditions in Albemarle County, integrating firsthand operational experience, and considering how these systems can be designed with long-term sustainability and safety in mind.

PROJECT DESIGN

This project used a mixed-methods approach that brought together real-world firefighter training, technical standards, and interviews with professionals in the field.

1) **Field Training:**

   a) As part of Albemarle County's fire service curriculum, I participated in hands-on courses including Basic Pump Operations, Hazardous Materials Awareness, and Rural Water Supply. These classes didn't just teach theory, they involved physically setting up dump tanks, drafting from ponds with suction sleeves, and pumping water between engines. In the rural water class, we worked as a team to simulate a full tanker shuttle operation, from the fill site to the fire scene, which involved coordinating multiple vehicles and maintaining consistent water flow. These experiences revealed just how delicate the balance is between supply and demand during a fire.

2) **Expert Interviews:**

   a) Throughout these training sessions, I spoke with a number of career and volunteer firefighters who had decades of experience in pump operations, tanker logistics, and fireground command. Conversations with lieutenants, captains, and a battalion chief were particularly useful in understanding what works and what doesn't when it comes to rural water access. These experts emphasized that having water nearby is everything. If a fire engine has to wait for tankers to arrive or drive miles to a fill site, the fire will often have the upper hand. They also pointed out that pre-installed cisterns can be a game-changer, but only if they are designed to NFPA standards and mapped properly for emergency access.

3) **Mapping Tools and Pre-Planning**

   a) Fire departments in our area use the First Due app and ECC (Emergency Communications Center) CAD systems to locate hydrants, drafting sites, and other key utilities in real time. Through volunteering at Seminole Trail Fire Department, I became familiar with how First Due helps crews identify where water is and how to get to it. However, I also learned that the data isn't always accurate - hydrants may be mislabeled, missing, or incomplete, especially in newer developments or rural zones. This insight reinforced the importance of building infrastructure that is not just physical, but digital and accessible in the heat of an emergency.

RESULTS

After combining training experience, conversations with subject matter experts, and research on infrastructure standards, several key findings emerged:

1) **Design Matters:**

   a) Cisterns need to hold enough water (usually 20,000–30,000 gallons) to support at least two full tanker shuttle rotations. They also need to have engineered draft points with clear signage, full-size vehicle access, and piping compatible with hard suction hoses. Draft points should ideally support 1,000 GPM sustained, as outlined in NFPA 1142 (2023).

2) **Location is Everything:**
    a) Cisterns or tanks should be placed where they fill the gap between hydrant lines and static sources. They're especially useful in unhydranted subdivisions, along main roads in semi-urban areas, or near known fire risks like large barns, schools, or older homes.
3) **Contamination Risks:**
    a) Hazmat training made it clear that drafting from natural sources like ponds or creeks carries major risks if those areas have been exposed to oil, pesticides, or fuel runoff. Clean-water tanks provide a sealed, consistent, and safe water source that eliminates this danger which is particularly important when the fire involves vehicles, industrial materials, or potential chemical exposure.
4) **Incremental Implementation Works:**
    a) As Star (1999) notes, infrastructure is often "built in increments." Many departments can't install hydrant networks overnight, but cisterns can be phased in based on call volume, distance from hydrants, and terrain access.

CONCLUSION

Decentralized water systems offer a practical and scalable way to improve fire protection in rural and semi-urban areas. They address the problem directly: there is not enough reliable water near where fires happen. When designed correctly, they reduce response times, improve firefighter safety, and prevent costly delays during structure fires. Importantly, they also represent an investment in equity - extending reliable emergency services to communities that are often overlooked in infrastructure planning. This technical approach, informed by real field experience, shows how infrastructure can be adapted to meet specific local needs while following national safety standards.

FUTURE WORK

Future work could involve developing a site-selection model using GIS tools and historical dispatch data to prioritize cistern installation. Engineering students or local governments could also collaborate on creating cistern designs that balance cost, NFPA compliance, and installation feasibility. Additionally, integrating decentralized water points into statewide ECC and First Due systems could improve data accuracy and make pre-plans more useful during fast-moving incidents.

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