

COOPERATIVE FIRE PROTECTION IN COLORADO*



Jim Hubbard

By the close of the 2000 fire season, 3,569 wildland fires had burned more than 167,000 acres (65,000 ha) in Colorado and destroyed more than 74 homes and other structures. A century of fire suppression, combined with changing land management practices, has left many of Colorado's forests unnaturally dense and highly susceptible to fire damage. Meanwhile, the State's record-setting population growth has driven many urbanites to the forested foothills in search of privacy in beautiful landscapes—the same landscapes that are at the highest risk from wildland fire.

The primary objective of the Colorado State Forest Service (CSFS) is to protect lives and property from fires in the wildland–urban interface (W–UI). The agency realizes that the W–UI fire problem will only worsen if left alone. We also realize that we can't solve the problem alone. With this in mind, the agency is intensifying efforts to form new and innovative partnerships that result in positive action on the ground.

Reducing Hazardous Fuels

Three things are needed to enable a fire to spread: heat, oxygen, and fuels. We have the ability to affect only one of these—the amount of fuels. Our main tools to reduce

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vegetative fuels are the thinning and removal of dense trees and the controlled use of low-intensity fire.

CSFS regularly provides both technical and financial assistance to private landowners who want to reduce the fuels around their homes and property. We also work with county, State, and other non-Federal land managers to reduce risks from catastrophic fire—fire that can threaten the valuable natural resources that we are working to sustain.

The most effective way to improve the survivability of a subdivision or a watershed is to reduce hazardous materials on a landscape scale involving multiple ownerships. That way, no matter where fire starts or which direction it burns, it will not have enough fuel to reach into the forest crowns, to become hot enough to damage forest soil, or to become so intense that firefighters cannot safely protect homes and structures.

CSFS is working with our partners to identify areas in the State where many priorities collide—places where there is community support for actively reducing fuels, where many landowners in a watershed are willing to implement fuels

reduction on their land, and where there is an opportunity to improve water quality or wildlife habitat in addition to reducing the risks from catastrophic fire.

The Upper South Platte Project, for example, involves State agencies, the Denver Water Board, private landowners, and the USDA Forest Service in working collectively to improve the ability of their lands to resist catastrophic fire—and to thereby protect part of Denver's valuable municipal watershed.

CSFS also participates in the Four Corners Sustainable Forests Partnership. This is a four-State effort to creatively address the challenge of what to do with the variety of vegetative materials removed during fuel reduction projects and how to involve local communities in finding and implementing solutions.

Improving Local Firefighting Capacity

In addition to working on the land, CSFS addresses the W–UI challenge by helping local and volunteer fire departments improve their training and equipment. Local departments are crucial to successful fire response in Colorado because they provide initial attack on 90 percent

of our wildland fires and actually contain most fire starts within 10 acres (4 ha).

Fighting fire in the W–UI poses a unique challenge to response personnel because it demands both structural and wildland firefighting skills. With assistance from our Federal partners, CSFS works to help local fire departments meet the challenge by offering financial assistance to purchase personal protective equipment and by providing training through two annual fire academies as well as on-the-ground opportunities. At our fire equipment shop, CSFS employees also turn excess military vehicles into effective fire engines for loan to local resources.

Opportunity Through Education

Firefighters aren't the only ones who need "continuing education" on wildland fire. CSFS employees spend time providing information and training to homeowners in the W–UI, urban residents, schoolchildren, and others whose improved knowledge of wildland fire will improve our collective ability to make informed decisions.

Homeowners in the W–UI, for example, must understand that it is their responsibility to make their homes and properties more resistant to fire. Carving out defensible space around structures, using fire-resistant construction materials, enclosing decks, and locating firewood and propane tanks uphill and away from structures—these are things that private citizens can do to improve their personal safety. Colorado's Firewise program was developed with this in mind and is being presented to forest owners around the State.

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In addition, CSFS staff participated in several Cooperative Wildland Fire Prevention/Education Teams that were dispatched in the wake of the 2000 fire season to help local residents understand the causes and effects of wildland fire and how they could act to prevent adverse impacts in the future.

Safety in Numbers

Whether we are trying to improve the survivability of a subdivision in the W–UI or to make a watershed more resistant to catastrophic fire, we must act in cooperation with

those around us if we are to succeed. The old adage "United we stand, divided we fall" perhaps has never been more applicable than to our current situation.

Without a united effort, we will face continued seasons of large wildland fires, threatening more and more homes and, most importantly, placing public and firefighter lives at risk. We must work together to protect ourselves, our communities, and the tremendous natural resources that make Colorado such a wonderful place to live. ■



Smoke billowing from the Bobcat Fire behind a home in the wildland-urban interface near Fort Collins, CO, on June 15, 2000. Photo: J. Keith Schnare, USDA Forest Service, Intermountain Region, Ogden, UT, 2000.