

The Front Range Fuels Treatment Partnership

Roundtable Fire Facts



Most days, somewhere in the United States, a wildland fire is burning. About half the wildfires in Colorado are lightning-caused...the rest have some human connection.

In 2002, Colorado saw the worst wildfire season in its history with 3,072 wildfires burning more than 600,000 acres — the most acreage in the nation following Alaska and Oregon. Nearly 400 houses and 624 outbuildings were lost. Insurance claims reached \$79.3 million, and firefighting and emergency rehabilitation efforts exceeded \$200 million.

The five-year average for number of acres burned by this time of year is 25,772 acres. As of May 15, 2006, 38,154 fires already have burned 2,334,742 acres nationally. In Colorado, wildland fires have burned 52,927 acres since January 1.

The costs for fighting fires in 2005 are not yet available, but in 2004, over \$1.3 billion dollars were spent nationally suppressing wildfires.

Experts expect fire potential to be significantly higher than normal across most of the Southwest in 2006. In Colorado, drought conditions are expected to persist or intensify, and a more active than normal fire season is predicted for the Front Range. Approximately 81 percent of the population of Colorado lives along the Front Range.

According to the Colorado Division of Emergency Management, trying to stop a raging wildfire — even with the array of available technological and personnel resources — is like trying to stop a tornado. In this tornado's path are an estimated 1 million acres in need of fire risk mitigation and/or restoration on the Front Range.

In the absence of fully understanding the nature of wildland fire, people develop perceptions, and an aggressive marketing campaign spearheaded by Smokey Bear helped shape their perceptions. His well-intended message of "Only you can prevent forest fires" influenced generations. These perceptions — often misperceptions — become ingrained into society to form "public opinion." That public opinion influences laws and policies related to wildland fire management.

Along the Front Range of Colorado, land managers and owners, whether federal, state, local, tribal, non-government, or private, must face the dilemma of whether "to burn or not to burn" in the context of public opinion, laws, and policies. To keep forests healthy and less susceptible to catastrophic wildfires, regularly prescribed fires or other fuels reduction methods must be utilized. But when managers do burn, there are numerous issues, not the least of which is that publics may be uninformed or misinformed about the benefits of implementing well-planned and effective prescribed fires.

As Roundtable members worked to describe their vision for the Front Range, they discovered that perceptions continue to drive the decision making, planning, and implementation of fire and fuels management. The information generated by the Roundtable will help Front Range residents understand the need for increasing funding for treatments, reducing the cost of treatments, and ensuring that local leadership and planning guide risk reduction and restoration efforts.

Theme One — Increase funding for forest treatments

- The Roundtable estimates there is a need to treat 1.5 million acres of forested land, 60 percent of which is privately owned.
- Treatment costs could exceed \$15 million annually over a 40-year period.
- While sustained federal funding is critical, these funds likely will not be sufficient to address the long term need.

Theme two — Reduce the cost of forest treatments

- It costs approximately \$400 per acre to treat hazardous fuels using thinning or harvesting.
- Costs for using prescribed fire are 75 percent less than other hazardous fuels treatments.

- Approximately 90 percent of the wood used in Colorado comes from somewhere else.
- Using products from fuels treatment for bioheating could subsidize up to 40 percent of forest treatments.
- Treating areas that are 200 - 300 acres in size at one time can result in cost savings at all stages of treatments.

Theme three — Ensure local leadership and planning

- On the Front Range, the number of people, homes, and related infrastructure could double over the next 20 years.
- Plans are best developed in collaboration at a local level with active participation by communities.
- Protecting communities from severe risks and restoring Front Range forests requires a long-term sustained effort.

Key Roundtable contacts:

- Lisa Dale, Western Forestry Leadership Coalition, 303.445.4363; lisa.dale@colostate.edu
- Peter Fogg, American Planning Association, Colorado Chapter, 303.441.3930, ext. 2608; pfogg@co.boulder.co.us
- Tom Fry, The Wilderness Society & Southern Rockies Conservation Alliance, 303.650.5818, ext. 110; tom_fry@tws.org
- Merrill Kaufmann, Rocky Mountain Research Station (Emeritus), 970.282.0163; mkaufmann@fs.fed.us
- Paige Lewis, Colorado State Forest Service, 303.623.5635, ext. 115, plewis@lamar.colostate.edu
- Patricia Limerick, Center of the American West, 303.817.9216; patricia.limerick@colorado.edu
- Brian McPeck, The Nature Conservancy, 303.444.2950, bmcpeek@tnc.org

Key Front Range Fuels Treatment Partnership contacts:

- John Bustos, USDA Forest Service, 970.295.6674, jbustos@fs.fed.us
- Mike Foley, USDA Forest Service, 970.295.6635, mfoley@fs.fed.us
- Dave Hessel, Colorado State Forest Service, 303.635.1597, dhessel@lamar.colostate.edu
- Katherine Timm, Colorado State Forest Service, 970.295.6892, katherine.timm@colostate.edu