



# Next Generation Community Wildfire Protection Plan

## 2020 Annual Community Report



Photo Credit Michael Kunkel



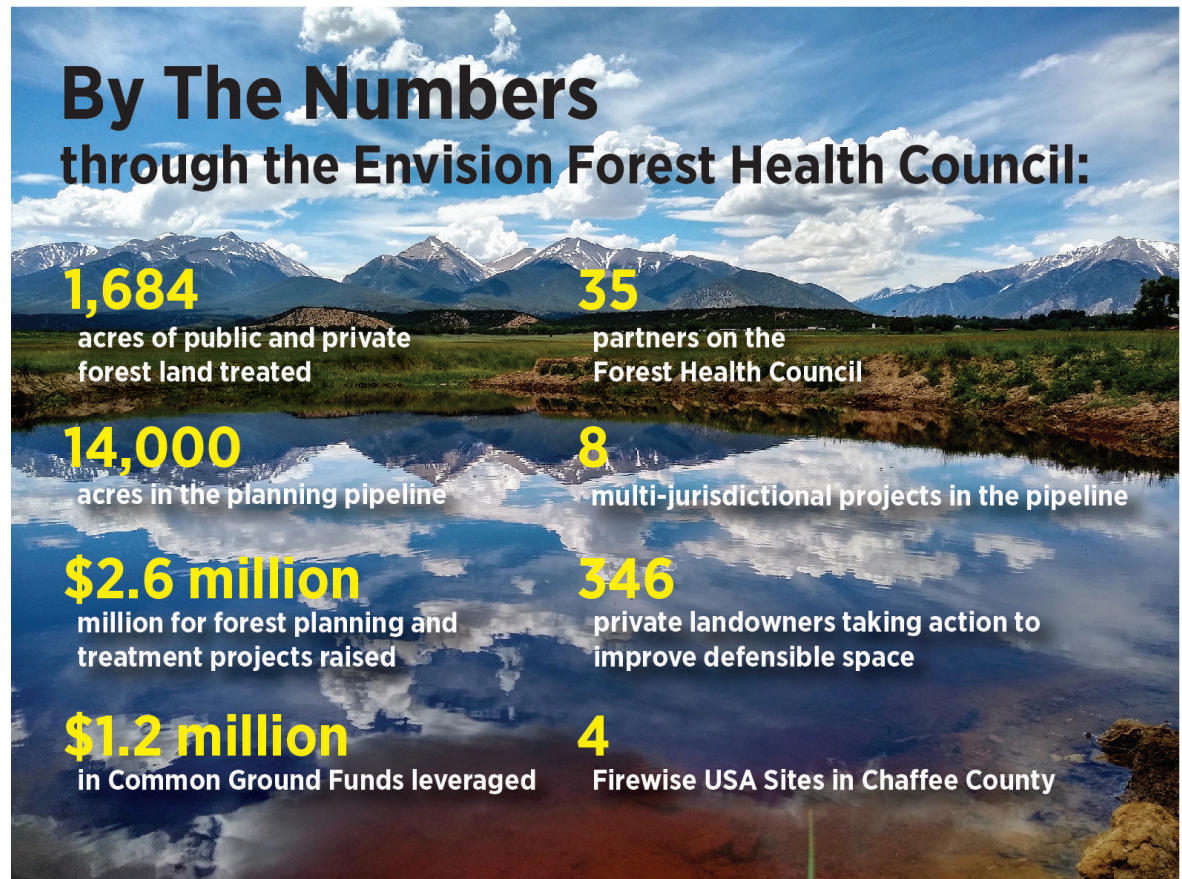
## Envisioning A Fire-Ready Future

Like many communities across the American West, Chaffee County faces the threat of high wildfire danger due to decades of fire suppression, drought and ensuing insect infestations that caused forests to decline into poor health. More frequent wildfires in recent years, including the 2019 Decker Fire, are more intense than before and the risk is a top community concern.

The community accomplished the large task of updating the Chaffee County Community Wildfire Protection Plan under the facilitation of Envision Chaffee County — a 10-year plan signed in February 2020 that indicates a top need for strengthening partnerships among those most closely tied to fire resilience and forest health.

The Envision Forest Health Council formed in 2020 to address those leadership needs and successfully implement the plan. Council membership grew in 2020 to 35 individuals and 19 organizations and groups. New members represent local and regional power providers, state and national conservation organizations and the Lake County community, which is upstream of Chaffee County in the Upper Arkansas watershed. Together, the Forest Health Council planned and began to execute the portfolio of programs and projects described below, raising nearly \$2.6 million to fund the work.

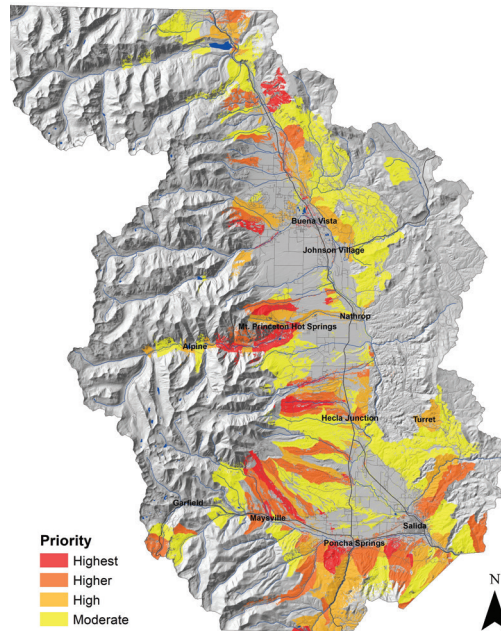
The community is on-track to achieve long-term goals outlined in the wildfire plan. Initial projects include two strategic fuel breaks designed to protect thousands of citizens and homes, and a combined 14,000 acres of forest treatments on both public and



private lands that improve fire resiliency, forest health and wildlife habitat. New programs are helping hundreds of private landowners create defensible space in the county's wildland-urban interface.

The Community Wildfire Protection Plan (CWPP) uses the most current information and computer modeling technology to explain the risk posed by wildfire, prioritize action to decrease that risk, and set a course to improve forest health. It also engages the community to address one of our most serious and concerning challenges. This report is the first annual update summarizing progress toward the goals.

To develop the CWPP, Colorado Forest Restoration Institute at Colorado State University quantified and mapped risk to community priorities and added an assessment of burn probability, or where fire is most likely to happen, and fire behavior, or how intense fire is likely to be if it occurs. The exercise showed where the community's valued assets are at the highest risk from wildfire.



In an innovative addition to wildfire planning, the cost of forest treatments was factored in, resulting in the CWPP Treatment Priority Area map, which identifies areas where the risk can be addressed for the highest cost efficiency and community benefit (shown above). The CWPP guides us by mapping where to treat 5% of the total landscape for up to 50% reduction in risk to our most important assets. The goal established by the Forest Health Council in 2020 is to treat 30,000 acres by 2030 to reduce the risk by half in a decade. Options include thinning trees, prescribed fire, thinning to clean up slash, and mastication, a patch-clearing method used in the piñon-juniper forest. All requires a magnitude-order increase in funding, treatment and action.

## Leveraging public funds

Chaffee County voters in 2018 approved a 0.25% sales tax to generate funds that improve forest health and reduce wildfire danger, support agricultural sustainability, and help manage the impacts of fast-paced recreation growth. The Chaffee Common Ground Fund administered by a citizens advisory committee is committed

to leveraging approximately \$1.2 million in annual revenues to the highest extent.

The seed funds supported by county voters are important because the cost to treat 30,000 acres by 2030 at a rough estimate of \$1,500 per acre is \$45 million.

In 2020, Common Ground investments of \$893,740 over two years for wildfire mitigation and forest restoration projects were leveraged with \$736,000 in matching cash contributions from local, federal and private sources. Planning efforts and programs that helped draw this funding to Chaffee County are supported by a three-year Common Ground grant of \$258,330 awarded in 2019.

With an estimated 4 million visitors a year, Chaffee County hosts many tourists who come to enjoy the forests. Rapid growth in outdoor recreation creates community concern related to forest health and wildfire risk associated with growing and sometimes irresponsible human use of public lands.

In 2020, Common Ground invested in the Chaffee Recreation Plan, for the delivery in 2021 of a strategic plan by the Chaffee Recreation Council to manage outdoor recreation growth and support goals developed by the Envision Recreation in Balance program. The large-scale community planning effort includes objectives that address wildfire risk and forest health. Planning also engages the Forest Health Council to enhance the most important habitat areas through collaborative wildfire risk reduction.



## Forming new partnerships

The Upper Arkansas River Basin in 2019 was chosen as a Rocky Mountain Restoration Initiative priority landscape because of the community-driven wildfire protection plan and direct financial



support by residents and visitors through the Common Ground tax measure.

RMRI's mission is to increase the resilience of forests, wildlife habitats, communities, recreation opportunities, and water resources across all lands in the Rocky Mountains. The diverse Colorado collaborative does this by strategically investing in a few larger landscapes rather than making slow progress in multiple small places. RMRI partners are initially focusing on three large landscapes: Southwest Colorado, Upper Arkansas and the Upper South Platte priority landscapes. Co-convened by the National Wild Turkey Federation and the U.S. Forest Service, RMRI represents a shared stewardship approach to the public health and safety problems posed by population growth and development in wildland-urban interface areas just as wildfires are becoming larger and more difficult to control.

RMRI connects resources to its chosen priority areas, where results can reach a scale comparable to the needs on the ground. The Upper Arkansas focus area includes Lake County and in 2020, six leaders from the Leadville area joined the Forest Health Council and the Chaffee Recreation Council, enabling the county's work to extend further into the headwaters of the watershed. This watershed delivers water to agriculture lands and is the critical supply source for local towns and one million people living downstream. The same water also provides 102 miles of Gold Medal trout waters and recreation on the most rafted river in America.

The Forest Health Council also partnered with the American Forest Foundation in early 2021, which is providing significant funds to support the advancement of forest treatments on private lands in Chaffee County. The foundation's mission is to deliver meaningful conservation impact through the empowerment of forest landowners.





## Taking Action

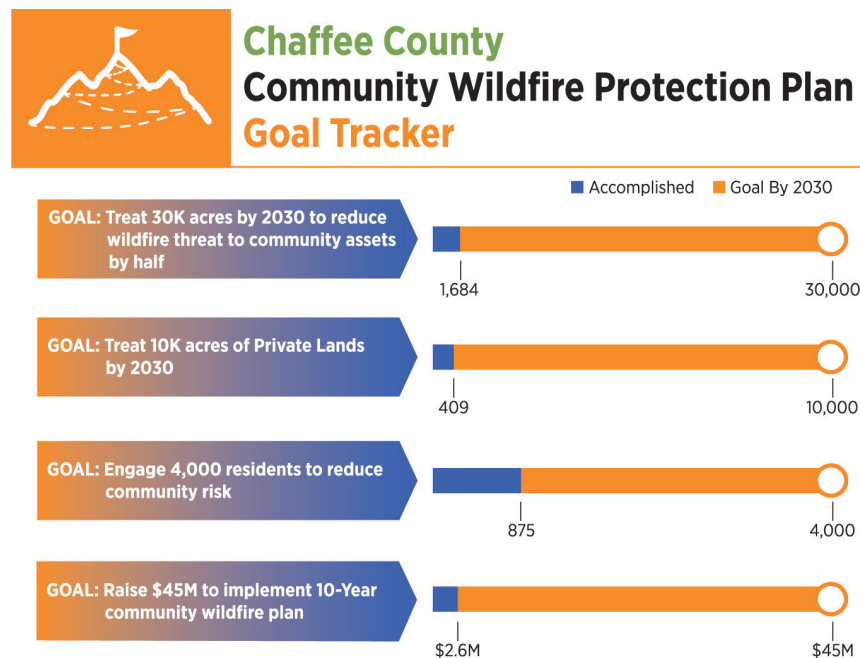
The Forest Health Council's 10-year goal is to treat 30,000 acres of forest by 2030 to cut the risk that wildfire poses to community assets in half. Using the CWPP Treatment Priority Area map, the Council in 2020 planned and funded two community fuel breaks that protect citizens from wildfire threats while improving forest health and wildlife habitat on 11,000 acres of forest. Multiple programs developed in 2020 support this multi-jurisdictional work while advancing private landowner participation that is necessary to fully implement the plan.

### Methodist Front Forest & Watershed Health Restoration Project

The Methodist Front project creates a 10-mile-long area of fuel breaks to protect the southern flank of the Salida and Poncha Springs communities of 7,000 people. Roughly 8,200 acres of forest treatments were collaboratively planned in 2020 by the Forest Health Council on city, state, federal and privately owned lands to create the fuel breaks and connect them to the 2019 Decker Fire burn area and extend protective measures up to Poncha Pass.

Work on the fuel break started in early 2021 with 124 acres of tree thinning and mastication on the historic Hutchinson Ranch near Salida. Landowner Art Hutchinson said he was pleased to agree to the work, which will protect the historic property and homes surrounding the ranch while providing better wildlife forage and overall forest health.

The CSFS will connect treatments on nearly 500 acres of city, state and privately owned lands to complete the fuel break by the end of 2022. Roughly 800 acres of treatments were completed by the U.S. Forest Service in 2020 that will eventually connect the fuel break to the Poncha Pass area to the west and the Decker Fire burn area to the east.



Methodist Front protects municipal water supplies and the Gold Medal Trout Waters of the Arkansas River by reducing the likely intensity of a wildfire in the forests above the South Arkansas River. The watershed includes two important irrigation ditches that serve wetlands and agricultural operations in the valley and beyond. The work also protects power lines and communications sites located in the Methodist foothills and on Poncha Pass.

Because the Upper Arkansas region was selected by RMRI as a focus area, Chaffee County became eligible for RESTORE Colorado grant funding. Fifty-seven applications were submitted in 2020, and Chaffee County was among 11 awarded grants totaling \$2.7 million. The National Fish and Wildlife Foundation (NFWF) program partners are Great Outdoors Colorado, Gates Family Foundation, Colorado Department of Natural Resources, Colorado Parks and Wildlife, U.S. Forest Service, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and Bureau of Land Management.



## Private Lands

### Wildfire knows no ownership boundaries

The Forest Health Council's goal to treat 30,000 acres by 2030 encompasses 65% federal, 30% private and 5% state lands. Treating 10,000 acres of private property in a decade is a challenging goal, requiring accelerated action by landowners.



Feedback from the Chaffee Wildfire Survey and public outreach meetings suggests that information about how to mitigate private forested property and physical help to remove vegetation could increase execution among landowners. To harness this potential, Chaffee Chips was created in 2020 to empower landowners to create defensible space around their homes by coordinating neighborhood slash removal and chipping services.

Four Chaffee Chips service events were held in 2020 in locations identified as high priority treatment areas by the CWPP. Nearly 200 landowners created 500 piles of wood slash that were chipped or hauled to the landfill by program service providers — mainly Chaffee County Fire Protection District firefighters. Slash was chipped by a large tub grinder at the landfill and used in operations at the facility or sold for \$20 per pick-up truckload. The program is free for participating landowners and funded by Common Ground and a Colorado State Forest Service (CSFS) Forest Restoration and Wildfire Risk Mitigation grant. Chaffee Chips continues in 2021 with additional service events in new geographic locations.



To address the CWPP goal of developing a pipeline of projects that connect private and public land treatments, CSFS partnered with local entities in 2020 to develop the Chaffee Treats Forest Health & Wildfire Mitigation Program. CSFS is the key organization providing education and developing treatment projects on private lands.

Chaffee Treats additional partners include Colorado Firecamp, Natural Resources Conservation Service, National Forest Foundation and American Forest Foundation. The program secured agreements from 161 landowners in 2020 to pursue more than 2,500 acres of private forest land treatments in years to come. Using the CWPP Treatment Priority areas, the program strategically targets lands where treatments will significantly advance CWPP goals.

In early 2021, the American Forest Foundation provided nearly \$200,000 in funding to advance the agreements through new services that allow larger landowners to create individual forest management plans — a first step toward on-the-ground treatments. The grant delivers additional professional foresters to the CSFS Salida Field Office and Colorado Firecamp, a non-profit organization located in Maysville that connects its wildland firefighting student classwork to meaningful forest work in Chaffee County.

The National Forest Foundation is developing the Upper Ark Forest Fund, to bundle future projects and funding together across jurisdictions.





The Methodist Front proposal was competitive for RESTORE funding because of the CWPP's treatment prioritization and the project's combination of fuels mitigation and wildlife habitat enhancement, according to NFWF Rocky Mountain Regional Office Director Chris West. The grant was matched by Chaffee Common Ground investments and a combined \$50,000 from the municipalities of Salida and Poncha Springs.

The second project planned in 2020 by the Forest Health Council and funded by Common Ground is the **Coyote Valley Road Community Fuel Break**, located south of the Mesa Antero subdivision west of Hecla Junction. The 2-mile-long, 400-foot-wide fuel break slated for completion in 2021 will improve firefighting capabilities in the event of a wildfire in the Collegiate Peaks Wilderness, improve egress for residents and visitors, and protect structures in the surrounding area. It ties into mitigation work by the U.S. Forest Service on more than 6,000 acres to the west.

The Methodist Front and Coyote Valley Road projects both benefit wildlife because thinning the dense forest over-story improves habitat by allowing sunlight to reach the ground so that new shrubs and grasses grow, thereby providing better cover and forage for wildlife.

### Additional forest treatments

The Bureau of Land Management burned 2,600 slash piles during the 2020-21 winter, completing 335 acres of long-running fuels reduction projects near Mount Harvard Estates and the base of Mount Shavano. Piñon pine, juniper and grasses were mitigated to reduce wildfire risk to nearby homes at Mount Harvard Estates while improving mule deer habitat.

In a letter to local media, residents Alan Robinson and Bob Box thanked the agency and described how the process resulted in a strong sense of community commitment, demonstrated by ongoing

annual cutting and removal or chipping workdays that include neighbors reaching out to non-resident owners or others who could not do the work.

The Mount Shavano project mitigated public lands where piñon pine had become overgrown underneath ponderosa pine stands, creating "ladder fuels" that can spread a ground fire into tall trees and lead to dangerous crown fires. The BLM plans to treat an additional 100 acres in the summer of 2021, by beginning to remove and pile trees in this area. Burning of an estimated 1,500 piles is targeted for 2023.

### Protecting water and recreation resources

The Arkansas River Watershed Collaborative (ARWC) and the U.S. Forest Service partnered in 2020 to protect the Arkansas River headwaters near Monarch Pass. The project brings an innovative approach to removing beetle kill on steep slopes, using specialized





equipment that minimizes the environmental impact to soil and live trees while reducing forest treatment costs in comparison to helicopter logging.

Nearly 200 acres were treated this year with equipment that fells the trees on up to 60 degree slopes, removes their branches, and cuts them into logs before they are transported and loaded onto trucks. Funding partners secured by ARWC include the Colorado Water Conservation Board, the Upper Arkansas Water Conservancy District, Pueblo Board of Waterworks, Colorado Springs Utilities, Aurora Water, Trout Unlimited, Chaffee County, City of Salida and Town of Poncha Springs, as well as the U.S. Forest Service, project partner and largest single funder.

### **Power supply safety**

All of the electric companies with service areas in Chaffee County are working to reduce the threat of wildfire. Efforts include reviewing vegetation management strategies, checking and upgrading lines, and cutting trees in power line rights-of-way. Sangre de Cristo Electric Association added a temporary rate rider in January 2021 to accelerate this process.

### **Additional landowner action**

Chaffee Chips in 2020 spurred new interest among homeowners to become Firewise USA sites. This concept incorporates best practices regarding structural ignitability and defensible space and guides communities through a series of steps intended to reduce their vulnerabilities to wildfire, such as landscaping and fuel reduction, home construction and design, and neighborhood planning. One additional Firewise USA site was designated in 2020, bringing the total number in Chaffee County to four — Maysville, Alpine, St. Elmo and the new location at Piñon Ridge Estates.

The county CWPP serves as an umbrella document for smaller-area plans that cover subdivisions. The Game Trail Resident and Forestry Committee actively worked toward updating the subdivision's 12-year-old plan in 2020. The following additional communities have CWPPs, and given the age of these documents and new information available, they should be updated: Alpine-St. Elmo (2009), Maysville-North Fork CWPP (2008), Mount Harvard Estates (2009), Poncha Springs (2009), and Trail West Association CWPP (2012).





# Community Wildfire Preparation

In addition to programs and projects that accelerate forest treatment acreage, the CWPP outlines goals related to community wildfire preparation, such as safe and effective wildfire response and preparedness for evacuation events, post-fire recovery, and flood and sediment management.

## Hazard mitigation planning

The Chaffee County Office of Emergency Management (OEM) began an update of the county's Multi-Jurisdictional Hazard Mitigation Plan in 2020, by establishing a joint effort of local governments for pre-disaster planning on multiple natural hazard topics and incident types that include wildfires and floods. The plan is integral to the CWPP and its community preparation and protection goals.

Hazard mitigation helps reduce or eliminate long-term risks by planning before a disaster strikes. The updated plan, which must be approved by FEMA and the State of Colorado, also ensures that the community remains eligible for federal and state grant funding. A community survey was administered in early 2021 to gauge community members' perceptions of dangers, natural hazard significance and impacts, and specific issues of concern. Wildfire was shown as the hazard that community members worry about the most. The Multi-Jurisdictional Hazard Mitigation Plan update is anticipated for public review in the late spring of 2021.

## Evacuation planning

The Office of Emergency Management (OEM) in 2020 worked to improve the county's alert warning system as outlined in the Chaffee County Emergency Operation Plan. FEMA's Integrated Public Alert & Warning System (IPAWS) went online in June, enabling county authorities to send emergency alerts to mobile phones connected to local cell towers.

Through the Envision Healthy Landscapes communications program established by the CWPP and additional outreach efforts, residents

were encouraged in 2020 to sign up for Chaffee County Emergency Alerts, also known as reverse-911, by opting into the Everbridge service to receive emergency information through multiple channels such as email and text messaging. Community participation in the service increased in 2020 by 7% as 683 additional residents signed up.

The OEM in late 2020 began a project to identify evacuation zones to enable systematic pre-evacuation and evacuation notices by geographic area, such as by neighborhoods or subdivisions. This work continues and will include the identification of areas of refuge in each zone and potential emergency helicopter landing spots for air transport.

OEM also promoted Ready.gov and its evacuation preparation checklists to residents who inquired about creating personal and family plans. More work needs to be accomplished in this area, according to OEM Director Richard Atkins, as many residents left without medications or pets during the 2019 Decker Fire evacuation, or did not have a plan to reconnect with family members who were not at home.

## Flood recovery

The Decker Fire Recovery Team headed by the OEM studied responses to the Decker Fire and identified that, in addition to the alert and warning plan improvements and better evacuation coordination, the county needs to address its shelter plan and volunteer/donation management.



In 2020, the flood recovery team held a wildfire and flood preparedness event attended by more than 100 people at the Chaffee County Fairgrounds, to help educate residents about potential flooding from the fire. The group also received grant funding for emergency watershed protection work that improved six Methodist Mountain-area homes to prevent future post-fire flooding damage.

## Regulatory environment

The Chaffee County Planning Commission approved an update to the 20-year-old Chaffee County Comprehensive Plan in 2020. The plan incorporates CWPP implementation as a countywide planning goal and further recommends a complete update to the Land Use Code. The CWPP's prioritization of new wildfire regulations that support community fire resilience are expected to be addressed during the code update, which as of this writing is about to begin.

## Collaborative Communications

In 2020, an outreach program called Envision Healthy Landscapes was developed to increase public awareness of wildfire risk and support for forest treatments. Activities promote citizen preparation and help the community celebrate success. The program also coordinates communications for the Forest Health Council, focusing on efforts to achieve the goals outlined in the CWPP.

Employing Envision Chaffee County's established tools and approaches to engage the community, the program worked in 2020 toward the goal of reaching 4,000 residents — or 20% of the population — with a consistent message about the county's community wildfire plan and its implementation. Through traditional media such as a special, 12-page insert in local newspapers, as well as a strong social media presence, the program surpassed this goal in the first year.

## Outdoor Recreation Intersects Wildfire Risk in New Growth Planning Effort

While lightning statistically causes the most forest fires, rapid growth in recreation use exacerbates the threat. In the Chaffee Wildfire Survey, citizens identified visitors as the second-biggest perceived threat to forest health, just after insects/fire, citing unattended and illegal campfires during fire bans as well as the overuse of roads and trails that can damage forest health.

The 23-member Chaffee Recreation Council formed in 2020 to develop an all-lands recreation management plan by mid-2021, with the goal of sustaining healthy natural resources while maintaining exceptional multi-use outdoor experiences and the economic benefits of recreation. The community-led recreation plan will address forest health and associated wildfire threat, declines in wildlife populations, and additional negative impacts caused by rapid growth in human enjoyment of public lands. Public input for the plan is achieved through the Envision Recreation in Balance program, which as of this writing has engaged 90 people from more than 40 organizations plus private citizens through the Recreation Task Force.

A survey of residents and visitors conducted in 2020 by the Chaffee Recreation Council identified pressing concerns about the negative impacts of the county's recreation growth: 80% of residents and half of visitors say local forest and wildlife health have degraded over time, citing "overuse" and "irresponsible use" as the top reasons, and 63% of residents say recreation growth is not being managed sustainably.

The survey taken by nearly 4,000 people from 41 states also found that 95% of respondents feel that protecting healthy forests, waters and wildlife is important, and that 75% to 95% support limiting recreation development in areas most critical to wildlife; closing inappropriate campsites; prohibiting fires near timberline; requiring fire pans in vehicle-access campsites; and additional enforcement.

The Chaffee Recreation Council, working with agency wildlife biologists, developed a set of maps that show where critical wildlife habitat intersects with intense recreation use across the county. This map set created by the Colorado Forest Restoration Institute at CSU is modeled after Chaffee County's CWPP and provides a valuable tool for future management and decision-making under the recreation plan.

A recreation objective is to stabilize documented declines in key wildlife populations in Chaffee County. The recreation and wildfire plans together will help identify lands to focus treatments that enhance wildlife habitat.



The newspaper piece, a partnership with Arkansas Valley Publishing, was distributed to 16,000 subscribers across the region. Extra copies were printed and distributed at newsstands during the year and on news websites. It contained a dozen stories on topics such as the CWPP's goals, the Forest Health Council's role leading the plan's implementation, and education about evacuation preparation, wildfire smoke and human health, and creating defensible space around your home.

Online, Envision Healthy Landscapes achieved at least 10,000 impressions in 2020 through an active website and accompanying social media pages. Live streaming on Facebook was added to virtual meetings in 2020 to gain more public access to Envision Healthy Landscapes' information and outreach during the pandemic.

### Chalk Creek Canyon engagement

CSFS and the Wildfire Research Team at the Rocky Mountain Research Station in Fort Collins surveyed residents of Chalk Creek Canyon, from Mount Princeton Hot Springs to St. Elmo, to develop deeper understanding of the barriers to private land treatment in a smaller community. The tool investigates residents' knowledge and perception of wildfire and how constraints and incentives affect participation in risk reduction. The canyon is a top treatment priority



area with one way in and out, presenting high evacuation challenges for both residents and visitors.

Survey responses were analyzed and presented to participating canyon residents in 2020. The detailed survey completed by roughly half of the landowners found a mismatch in perceptions about risk. Residents rated risk much lower than forestry professionals conducting assessments for the program. For example, only 6% of residents rated their risk "Very High" or "Extreme," whereas assessments rated nearly half — or 48% — of the homes at that level of risk.

Outreach in 2020 shared survey data as well as solutions to barriers cited by the homeowners, such as "It's physically difficult," "It takes time," and "It will change the way my property looks." The flyer also incorporates information about how to reduce risk, how to prepare to evacuate, and resources for additional information and help.

### Toward a fire-ready future

Chaffee County's natural resources support the community's quality of life. They are the destination and inspiration among millions of visitors. They host 100-plus miles of Gold Medal fishing and hundreds of thousands of boaters. They provide water to agriculture lands and millions of people downstream.

Through the process of updating the wildfire plan, citizens prioritized the things they value that are at risk from severe forest fires including life, water, infrastructure, homes, wildlife, views and recreation. There is much work to do yet in its first year, the Envision Forest Health Council and the community have set the stage for a better future through a leading-edge fire resiliency plan that will improve forest health and protect resources that millions rely on.

## 2020 Envision Forest Health Council

- Arkansas Headwaters Recreation Area Park Manager Tom Waters
- Arkansas River Watershed Collaborative Lead Forester Andy Lerch
- Buena Vista Fire Department
- BLM-Rocky Mountain District Manager Cathy Cook, Field Manager Keith Berger, Fire Mitigation Specialist Ed Skerjanec, Fire Management Officer Ty Webb, and John Markalunas, Assistant Fire Management Officer for the Front Range Fire Management Unit
- Chaffee County Commissioners Greg Felt and Keith Baker
- Chaffee County Office of Emergency Management Director Richard Atkins
- Chaffee County Fire Protection District Chief Robert Bertram and Battalion Chief Kent Maxwell
- Colorado Parks and Wildlife Area Wildlife Manager Jim Aragon
- Colorado Springs Utilities: Watershed Planning Supervisor Mark Shea and Forest Program Managers Eric Howell and Jeremy Taylor
- Colorado State Forest Service: Southwest Area Manager Damon Lange, Supervisory Forester Adam Moore, Supervisory Forester Sam Pankratz and Forester J.T. Shaver
- Envision Chaffee County Co-Lead Cindy Williams and Project Coordinator Kim Marquis
- Leadville Fire Protection District Fire Chief Daniel Dailey and Captains John Ortiz and Dave McCann
- National Forest Foundation Vice President Marcus Selig
- Natural Resources Conservation Service District Conservationist Joni Burr
- Mesa Antero Water Association President Rick Hum
- Sangre de Cristo Electric Association: Chief Executive Officer Paul Erickson, Chief Operating Officer Byron Stilley
- USFS: Salida District Ranger Jim Pitts / Interim District Ranger Amy Titterington, Fire Management Officer Chris Naccarato, Mountain Zone Fuels Specialist Andrew White, and Leadville District Ranger Patrick Mercer
- Xcel Energy: Community and Local Gov't. Affairs Manager Ashley Valdez, Vegetation Management Manager Brent Bolzenious
- Tri-State Generation & Transmission Assoc.: Planning Manager Karl Meyers, Transmission Maintenance Manager Doug Dean

### Contact Us

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