



Next Generation Community Wildfire Protection Plan

2022 Annual Community Report



ENVISION



FOREST HEALTH COUNCIL

Preparing for Wildfire Together

Heavy fuel loads in Chaffee County's forests combine with a warmer, drier climate and bigger wind events to create high risk of wildfire. The Envision Forest Health Council developed a 10-year plan in 2020 to decrease the risk of severe fire to community assets with up to 30,000 acres of targeted forest treatments by 2030.

Wildfire can be a good natural process by working like a broom to clean up forest fuels, but severe wildfires can burn so hot that soils are damaged, post-fire flooding is severe, and the fire is hard to suppress. Thinning trees, also known as forest treatments, is done to lower the chance of a severe wildfire. The community wildfire protection plan uses computer modeling to map the level of risk and identify the right areas to treat for the highest cost efficiency and community benefit. Implementation spans priority areas on roughly two-third public and one-third private lands.

In the third year implementing goals outlined in the wildfire plan, the community is making strides to not only complete forest treatments but also to prepare for an inevitable wildfire. A long road lies ahead as treatment rate, staff capacity and other actions continue to accelerate, and there are challenges to overcome.

Chaffee County is raising required funds — \$23 million to date — but at the same time, costs have escalated. Community engagement is growing and the encouraging momentum must continue. Local and regional partnerships are strong under the Forest Health Council, where leaders are making great progress, and are set up to address the big challenges.

More than 5,000 acres of forest have been thinned since 2020, while more projects enter the planning pipeline. The work helps protect not only homes but also water resources, wildlife habitat and infrastructure, and it improves firefighter safety in the event of a fire.

Treatments to date on private lands total 877 acres, a 35-fold increase in three years. Forestry staff and sawyer support have been added to accelerate planning and treatments on private property, where homeowners generally show strong willingness to participate. To be successful, these treatments must accelerate by another 500 acres per year, growth of about 50%. Building staff capacity to support this target

By The Numbers through the Envision Forest Health Council:

5,158

acres of public and private
forest land treated

54

partners on the
Forest Health Council

16,590

acres in the planning pipeline

1,098

private landowners taking action
to improve community
wildfire resiliency

\$23 million

for forest planning and
treatment projects raised

7

Firewise USA Sites in Chaffee County

is critical and will be a challenge, considering statewide competition for forestry staff and housing costs.

Treatments on public lands must accelerate by about 30% to achieve goals outlined in the plan. The number of acres treated each year since 2020 has held steady, but not all acres treated are located in priority areas as identified in the community plan as they focus on habitat enhancements. A ramp-up requires added staff capacity — difficult considering federal agency budget limitations — and the ability to treat more acres with prescribed burning. Low-intensity prescribed burns are more cost effective and an essential component to reduce wildfire risk. A strict regulatory environment and required public support for burn events present challenges to overcome.

Community members are getting prepared for wildfire. The number of Firewise USA designations more than doubled, and hundreds of citizens have taken action to create defensible space through Chaffee Chips. The county Land Use Code is updated, now requiring safer firefighter access, safer building materials and defensible space around new construction in the wildland-urban interface.

The Forest Health Council has expanded by adding more partners with new insights and vision. Upstream partners in Lake County completed a similar wildfire plan in 2022 and raised \$1.2 million.



Taking Action

More than 2,000 forested acres were thinned in 2022, bringing the total in three years to more than 5,000, including 877 acres of private property.

The Colorado State Forest Service (CSFS) expanded the size of its Salida-area field office in 2022 to accommodate the addition of three full-time staff members. These foresters plan and implement multi-property treatments with landowner approval, and they educate homeowners about how to prepare their own defensible space.

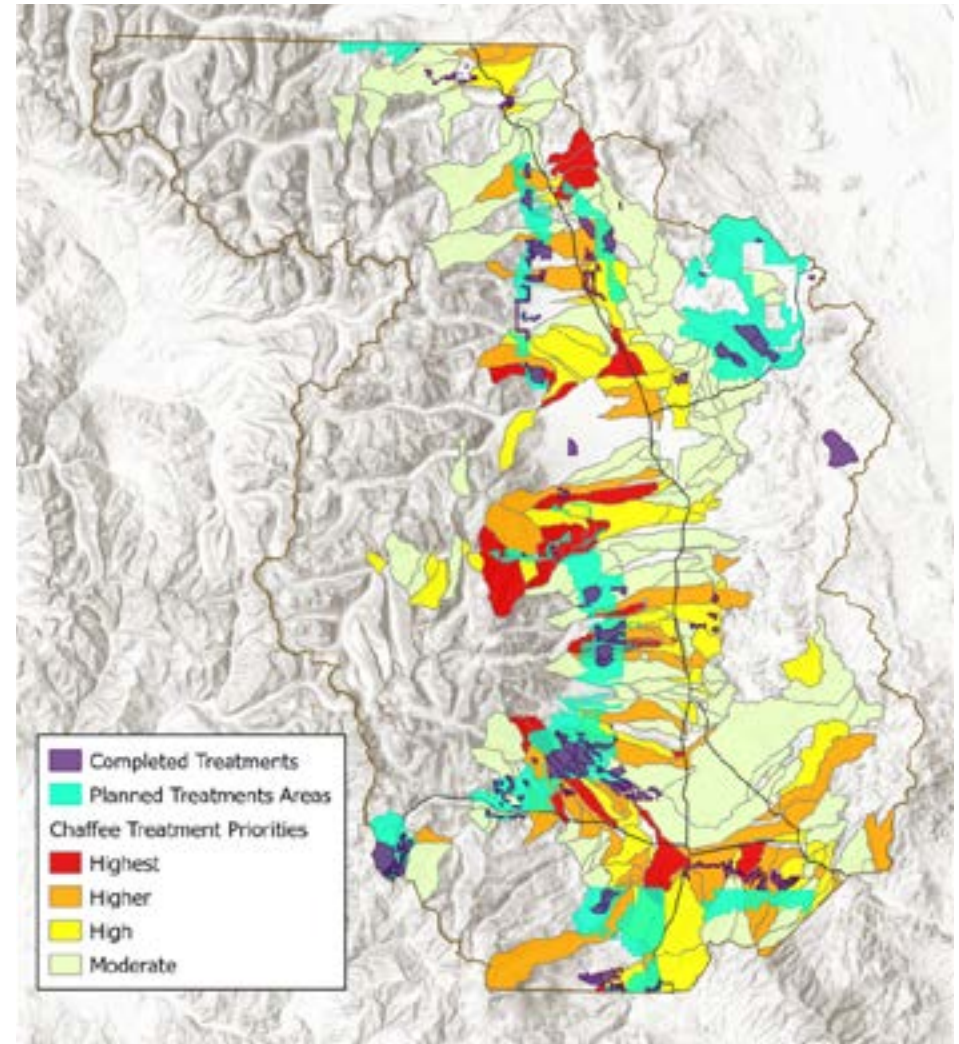
More than 200 homeowners helped move the needle toward these goals in 2022 by participating in the Chaffee Treats Forest Health & Wildfire Mitigation Program, which clusters homeowner mitigation so results are more effective in slowing wildfire spread, creating more favorable conditions to fight a fire, and protecting community assets such as water and infrastructure.

CSFS and Colorado Firecamp partnered with landowners in multiple wildland-urban interface neighborhoods to treat, from north to south: Game Trail, Younglife Camp, Trail West, Three Elk, Lost Creek Ranch, St. Elmo and Alpine, Mesa Antero, Mesa Antero Estates, City of Salida, Hutchinson Ranch and nearby owners on the Little Ark River, The Canyons, Piñon Ridge Estates, Poncha Pass, North Fork above Maysville, Shavano Creek and Little Cochetopa west of Poncha Springs.

For example, more than 45 landowners in the Game Trail and Trail West subdivisions northwest of Buena Vista agreed to treatments in 2022 that minimize the spread of a potential wildfire in North Cottonwood Creek, the source for the town's drinking water supply. Trees are thinned by hand using chainsaws to create a fuel break in the North Cottonwood Creek drainage. Sawyers cut cords of firewood for the neighbors and either piled the remaining slash to be burned on-site or hauled it away to chip for mulch.

Treatments are completed by Colorado Firecamp in partnership with Southwest Conservation Corps' sawyers and other students of the Maysville-based wildland firefighting school. Crew time and student training is paid for by the Colorado Strategic Wildfire Action Program.

"We're on track to treat more than a hundred acres to help protect the homes and the watershed," said Kent Maxwell, Colorado Firecamp's fire &



Chaffee County's Treatment Priority Areas (red, orange and yellow) are based on computer modeling that identifies the right areas to treat to reduce fire's potential impacts to important community assets and improves firefighter safety. 5K+ acres have been thinned from Poncha Pass to Granite (included in purple) and 16K additional acres are planned (teal).

forestry coordinator. “Just as important, we’re helping to build community and developing our workforce to complete future projects.”

To fully implement the plan, these types of annual treatments must continue to accelerate in acreage by about 50%. Homeowners must remain willing to treat their lands as Forest Health Council partners work to build staff capacity to support this challenging target to treating 10,000 acres of private lands by 2023.

Federal lands

About 1,000 acres of federal public lands were treated in 2022, including 250 in the Methodist Front community fuel break, where the U.S. Forest Service treated 169 acres on Cleveland Mountain and the Bureau of Land Management treated a combined 89 acres near County Road 110 and on Poncha Pass. A project managed by the National Forest Foundation near Railroad Bridge north of Buena Vista completed 249 acres of treatments in 2022 on National Forest lands.

Rx fire

The Forest Service also completed a prescribed burn near Trout Creek Pass in the fall of 2022. The treatment is not a community wildfire plan priority but enhances wildlife habitat and an existing fuel break. The agency is working to increase the pace of controlled burning events when conditions allow, because low-intensity burning is much more cost efficient and effective than thinning alone.

The 2022 burn follows one on the Shavano Front in 2021, which reduced heavy fuel loads on about 1,000 priority acres. Agency burn plans are approved for Trout Creek and Shavano, as well as Threemile Creek, Poncha Loop near the top of Poncha Pass, and Herring Park.

Utilities

Electric service providers continue to address wildfire threat in their service areas by removing hazard trees that can fall on electric lines and equipment, strengthening power systems by replacing poles, and upgrading transmission lines. The majority of the county is serviced by Sangre de Cristo Electric Association, which spent \$747,000 in 2021 on wildfire mitigation in Chaffee County. The utility, with a five-county service area, focused mitigation work in surrounding counties in 2022 but plans additional Chaffee County treatment in 2023.



Getting Ready For A Wildfire

The community wildfire plan outlines goals related to effective response and evacuation. Community preparedness includes family evacuation plans, decreasing risk to private lands and structures, and promoting realistic expectations for forest and fire management.

Chaffee Chips

Chaffee Chips continues to help community members create defensible space by coordinating neighborhood slash removal and chipping services. By creating defensible space, homeowners make their own homes and their neighbors safer. In three years, more than 400 landowners have spent 5,500 hours building 1,400 slash piles that were removed from wildland-urban interface neighborhoods. The Chaffee Chips service aligns with large fire mitigation projects such as roadside thinning and fuel breaks. Partners are Chaffee County Fire Protection District, Colorado State Forest Service and Envision Chaffee County. Seven events are set to take place in 2023. Visit the Chaffee Chips info page for details <https://envisionchaffeecounty.org/chaffee-chips/>

Firewise USA

Chateau Chapparral and Mesa Antero achieved Firewise USA designations in 2022, bringing the total number to seven communities. Program recognition reduces wildfire risk in a large area such as a subdivision, protecting homes and their natural surroundings. Previously existing sites are Alpine, Game Trail, Maysville, Piñon Ridge Estates and St. Elmo. Contact info@envisionchaffeecounty.org to receive direction about how your neighborhood can get started.



Regulatory environment

The community wildfire plan identified a need for updates to the regulatory environment, which was achieved in 2022 through county building and land use code (LUC) changes that now require safer access for firefighters and fire-resistant residential development, including defensible space.

Professional support

In 2022, Chaffee County Fire Protection District created a new mitigation coordinator position to help residents get ready for a wildfire. Funding is provided by a three-year Chaffee Common Ground grant to the fire department. The new staffer educates landowners about defensible space and manages the department's commitment to Chaffee Chips. GIS mapping of access points, water resources and other key features will support first responders from around the nation in the event of a large wildfire. Job duties also include burn permits and required site inspections for this activity on private property.

Funding A Fire Ready Future

When the community wildfire plan was signed, the estimated cost for treatments and support staff was roughly \$45 million. Today, those costs have inflated. Continuing to raise funds at the current pace will be critical to deliver risk reduction goals as outlined in the plan. To date, \$23 million has been raised among more than two dozen diverse sources.

Federal sources

The major national-level investor is the U.S. Dept. of Agriculture Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), which contributed the majority of \$7.6 million in federal funds raised since 2020, including \$5.7 million from its Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP). These awards, plus spending by the U.S. Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management, combine to deliver more than half (52%) of the total funds raised.

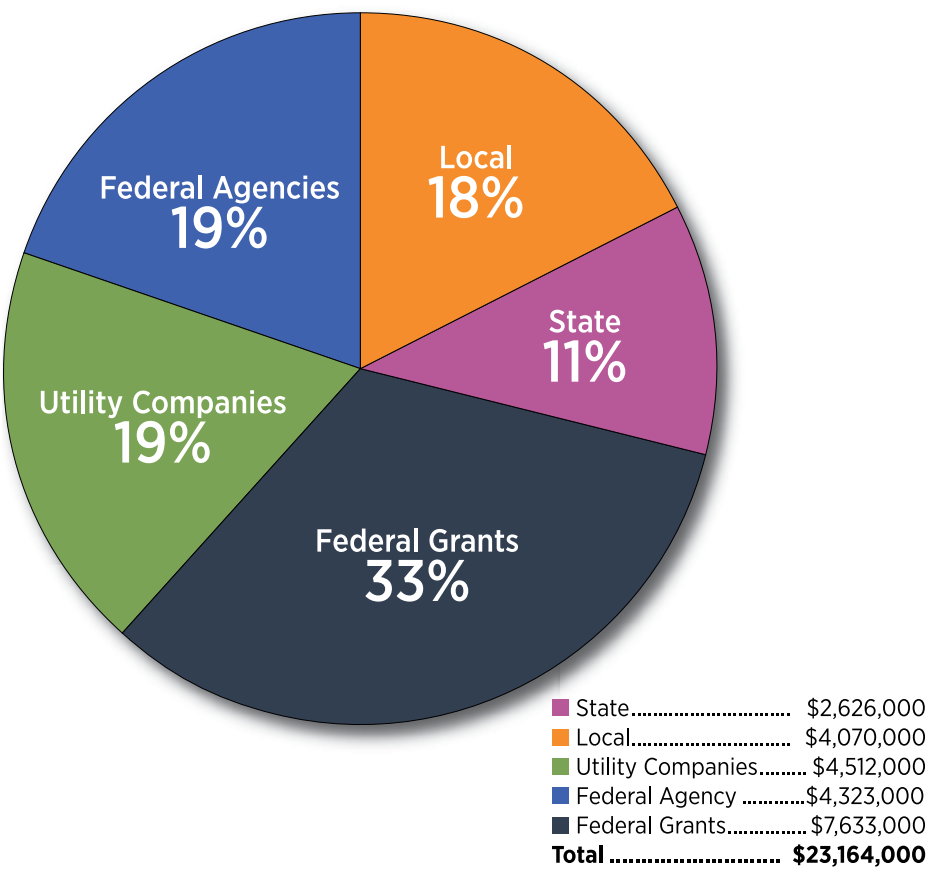
State sources

The National Fish and Wildlife Foundation (NFWF) continues to invest in the county’s forest treatments through the RESTORE Colorado grant program, which funds restoration projects that improve wildlife habitat. In 2022, \$305,000 was awarded to the Riverside project north of Buena Vista to reduce the risk of high-intensity wildfire and restore habitat along the west side of Highway 24.

The RESTORE Colorado partnership includes Great Outdoors Colorado, the Gates Family Foundation, Colorado Department of Natural Resources, Colorado Parks and Wildlife and the Colorado Water Conservation Board. Its investment in our community totals more than \$1 million.

In 2022, Chaffee County won grants from the Colorado Strategic Wildfire Action Program (COSWAP) created after the 2020 fire season by the Colorado legislature. Among \$17.5 million in state dollars awarded, Chaffee and Lake counties each received \$500,000 for forest treatments, as well as additional financial support to increase workforce capacity. The capacity funding paid to train dozens of sawyers through the Maysville-based Colorado Firecamp wildland firefighting school. Southwest Conservation Corp is a major grant recipient and partner.

Chaffee County CWPP Funding Sources



Chaffee and Lake counties comprise one of three Rocky Mountain Restoration Initiative focus areas, which provided COSWAP opportunities to our local communities. RMRI is a statewide collaborative co-convened by the National Wild Turkey Federation and the U.S. Forest Service.

Chaffee County also successfully participates in the Colorado State Forest Service’s many grant programs, contributing to the total \$2.6 million raised in state-level support.

Local sources

Our success winning federal and state funding for wildfire resiliency stems from a local commitment to forest health approved by county voters in 2018. The 0.25% sales tax generates revenues for Chaffee Common Ground, which has invested \$3.7 million in forest health and fire resilience since 2019. In 2022, \$519,205 was granted for mitigation as well as staff and equipment for firefighters and foresters to complete work prioritized in the community wildfire plan.

The National Forest Foundation (NFF) continues to pool funds from federal and state programs, private companies and foundations, growing the Upper Arkansas Forest Fund in 2022 to about \$9 million. “Funding success has been through our ability to use local funds to leverage additional resources, which is necessary to support treatments,” said NFF’s Marcus Selig, a Forest Health Council member.

Local & regional leadership

The community wildfire plan recognizes the need to build partnerships to achieve success. Leaders from every level are working together, starting with the Forest Health Council. The number of partners on the council increased to 57, from 44 in 2021. This growth is related to new staff, as described above, as well as participation from new entities such as the Colorado Division of Fire Protection and Control and U.S. Senator Michael Bennet’s office, as well as our neighbors in Lake County.

Lake County

Lake County updated its community wildfire plan in 2022, mirroring Chaffee County planning methods by incorporating resident priorities and developing a map that shows where to treat lands for the highest cost

efficiency and community benefit. Lake County is committed to reducing the overall risk to assets by nearly 50%. The treatment plan is to reduce fuels on 20,000 acres by 2033. Lake County identified about 14,000 acres of priority treatments for the future and has raised \$1.2 million.

RMRI

The Upper Arkansas River Basin is 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 Chaffee 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.

Co-convened by the National Wild Turkey Federation and the U.S. Forest Service, RMRI helps Chaffee County successfully connect with funding opportunities and partner with our neighbors in Lake County to achieve similar work.

The threat of wildfire was identified by the Envision process in 2017 as a top community concern. The Envision Healthy Landscapes Program was created to update the wildfire plan and then help facilitate greater collaboration among local, state and regional organizations to foster improved forest health and wildfire resiliency. Under the Forest Health Council, landscape treatments are prioritized and new funding sources tapped. We need to continue to build staff capacity to plan and treat the right lands. We need to support the acceleration of prescribed burn events that are more effective and cost efficient than thinning alone. We need to continue fundraising to cover the cost of inflation. And the community needs to stay engaged and be willing to treat on their high priority lands, create defensible space and remain prepared to evacuate.

“The wildfire resiliency initiative in Chaffee County transcends political partisanship and divisiveness. We’re getting more done than anywhere else in the state, and doing it in a way that does not just strengthen forest health but strengthens our community. The impact is not just in the forest, it’s in people’s hearts and spirits.”

– Commissioner Greg Felt

2022 Envision Forest Health Council Member Organizations

- Arkansas River Watershed Collaborative
- Atmos Energy
- Bird Conservancy of the Rockies
- Bureau of Land Management Rocky Mountain District
- Chaffee Board of County Commissioners
- Chaffee County Fire Protection District
- Chaffee County Office of Emergency Management
- Colorado Division of Fire Protection and Control
- Colorado Firecamp
- Colorado Forest Restoration Institute at Colorado State University
- Colorado Parks and Wildlife
- Colorado Springs Utilities
- Colorado State Forest Service
- Envision Chaffee County
- Lake Board of County Commissioners
- Lake County Conservation District/Central Colorado Conservancy
- Leadville Fire Protection District
- National Forest Foundation
- Salida Fire Department
- Sangre de Cristo Electric Association
- Tri-State Generation & Transmission Association
- USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service
- US Forest Service Salida Ranger District
- US Forest Service Leadville Ranger District
- US Forest Service Mountain Zone Fire
- US Senator Michael Bennet's Office
- Xcel Energy



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