



Chaffee County Community Wildfire Protection Plan

2023 Annual
Community Report



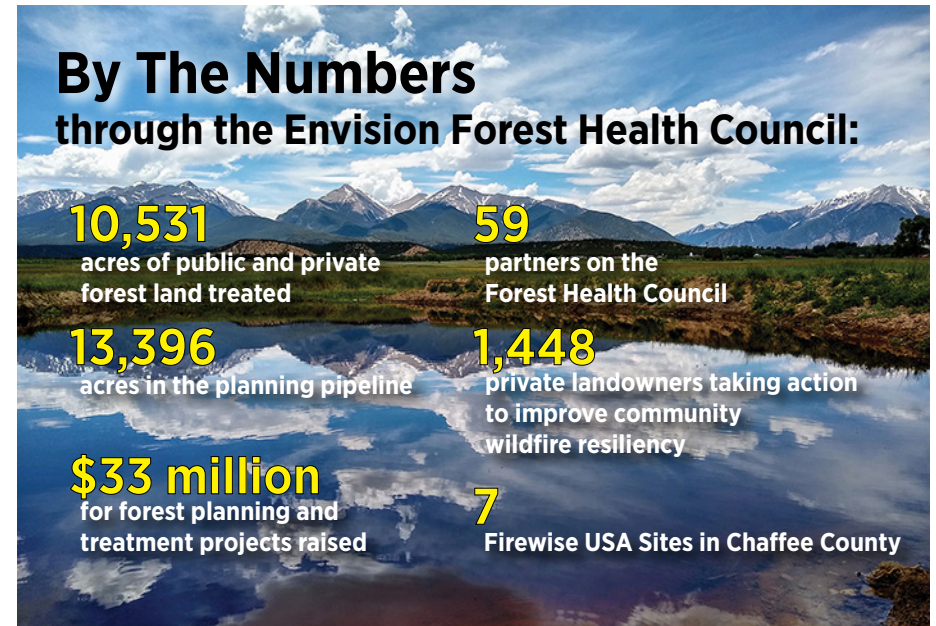
Implementing the Community Wildfire Protection Plan

Western wildfires destroyed 246% more homes and buildings over the last ten years than they did during the previous decade. As more people build homes and recreate in areas where natural vegetation meets human developments, threats to life, property and infrastructure increase. Acres of dead and dying trees, warmer temperatures, drier seasons and bigger wind events exacerbate the issue.

The Community Wildfire Protection Plan (CWPP) in Chaffee County addresses wildfire risk with comprehensive solutions. The plan identifies the most important lands to treat to reduce the chance of a wildfire causing widespread damage to our community. The Forest Health Council — comprised of professionals from every land management agency and organization concerned with forest management and wildfire threat & response in the county — is tasked with leading implementation (see page 12 for a list).

Envision Chaffee County facilitates the council to help the group discuss mutual concerns for public safety and natural resources in a positive, solution-oriented environment. They meet four times a year to plan forest mitigation so that each project is more effective than it could have been if done independently. Every member of the council agrees that the main

goal of the plan is to reduce the potential effects of a wildfire on our most important community assets by selectively thinning trees as mapped and prioritized in the CWPP. The plan sets a course to deliver solutions that reduce wildfire risk and ultimately improve forest health (see story, page 3).



Forest Health Council partners produce this CWPP Community Annual Report to provide an update about progress toward implementing the 10-year plan. A record number of acres were treated in 2023 — a banner year for wildfire resiliency. The combined work means the county is more than a third of the way toward achieving the CWPP’s major goal of treating 30,000 acres by 2030. We also are preparing for an inevitable wildfire through multiple community programs and strategies described in this report.

The Forest Health Council’s collaborative approach and level of success has become a model for converting a community wildfire plan into action, County Commissioner Greg Felt told the council members in January 2024. “You truly are the gold standard in Colorado for prioritized, cross-jurisdictional forest work.”

How targeted tree thinning results in strategic wildfire mitigation

Our county's wildfire plan is primarily based on Treatment Priority Areas showing where thinning trees can most effectively reduce the risk of wildfire to the community assets that residents deemed the most important. The plan was created by first engaging the community through a [survey](#), which showed strong support for forest treatment, as 84% said they have "no concern" about land management activities such as thinning trees.

The community also was asked to prioritize what they most want protected from wildfire and post-fire flooding. The seven community assets, in order, are firefighter lives, human life, drinking water, infrastructure, homes, wildlife, Arkansas River recreation, scenic views and trail systems.

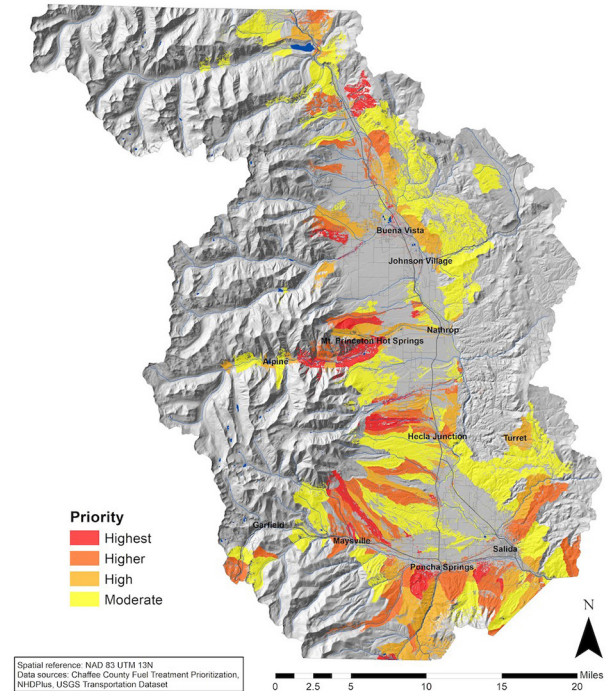
With this input, the Colorado Forest Restoration Institute (CFRI) at Colorado State University quantified wildfire's risk to the priorities listed above using GIS modeling technology. They mapped locations of power lines, evacuation routes, cell towers, water supply and more, and created maps showing where fire is most likely to happen and how intense it would be if it occurs. Intensity can range from knee-high flames in grasslands to towering crown fires that can be much more difficult to suppress.

All of these factors combine to produce the Composite Wildfire Risk map (bottom right), showing where our community's valued assets are at the highest risk. The cost of doing treatments is factored into the final map (top right) to identify where treatments can do the most to lower risk for the least amount of money — or where we can get the best "bang for the buck." Treatment options include thinning trees, prescribed fire, thinning to clean up slash and a patch-clearing method used in the piñon-juniper forest called mastication.

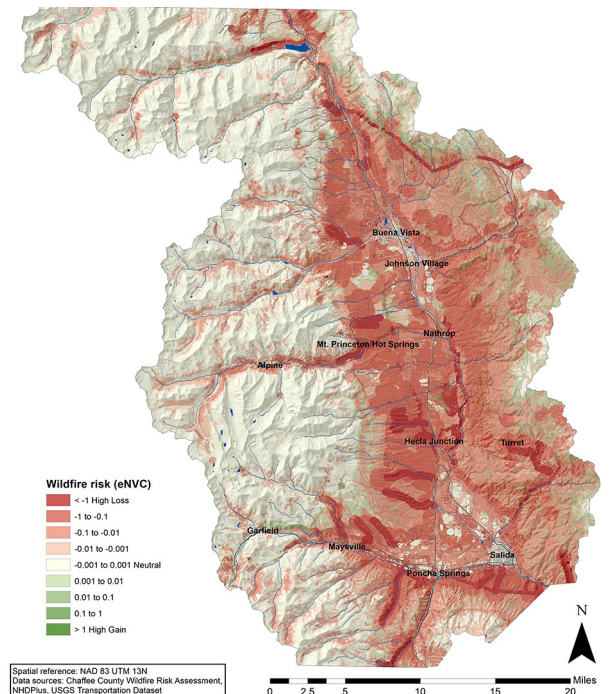
Many communities across the American West are trying to address the threat of wildfire.

CFRI's modeling — guided by local experts and driven by community priorities — demonstrates that treating a small, targeted portion of the total landscape can substantially reduce the risk. By implementing the elements of the CWPP, and focusing collaboratively on the Treatment Priority Areas, Chaffee County is using a disciplined approach to treat the right acres and make progress toward a fire-ready future.

Fuel Treatment Priority



Composite Wildfire Risk



Taking Action

More than 5,000 forested acres of public and private lands were treated in 2023, bringing the total in four years to 10,531. That is 35% of the way toward achieving the CWPP's top goal of treating 30,000 targeted acres by 2023. Treatments span both public (23%) and private property (70%).

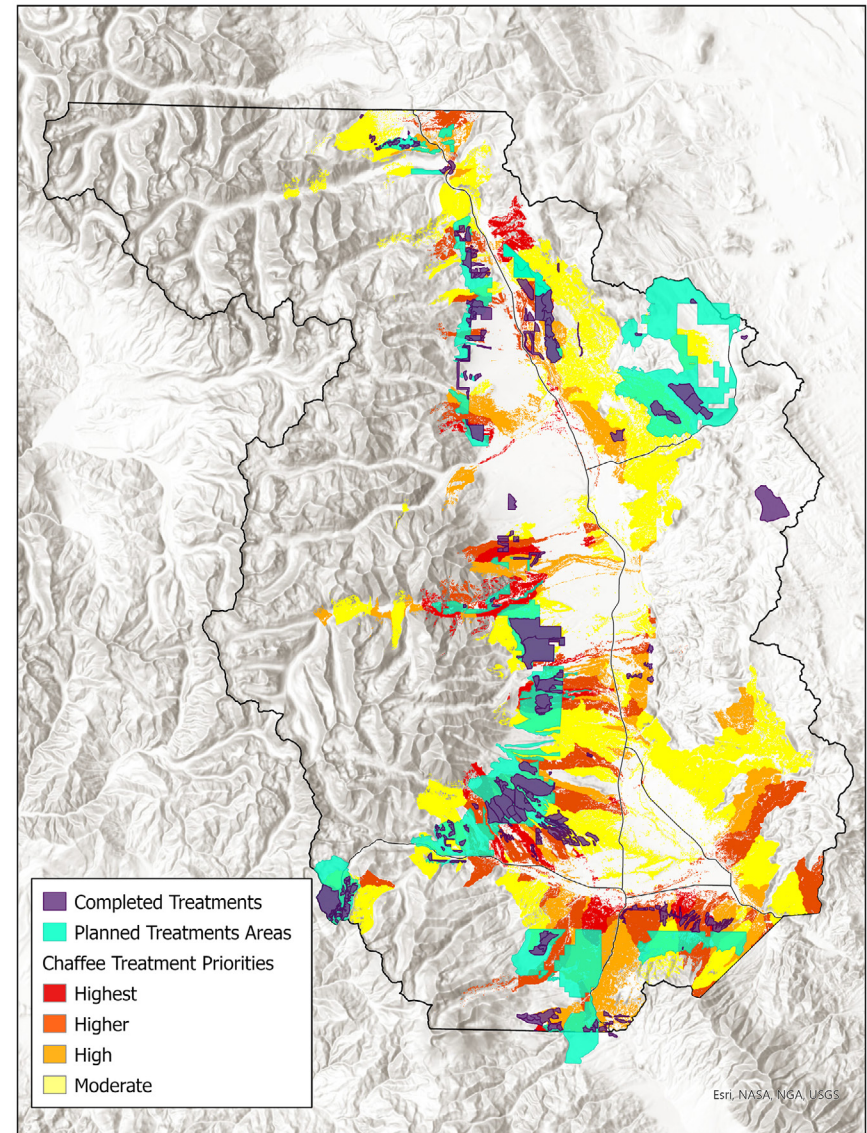
The U.S. Forest Service conducted low-intensity prescribed burns on more than 3,098 acres in the fall of 2023, a record for the Salida Ranger District, according to Mountain Zone Fire Management Officer Chris Naccarato. Three years worth of preparation in the burn units contributed to the successful events at the base of Mount Shavano northwest of Poncha Spring and in the Threemile Creek area west of Nathrop.

"We brought in outside resources and crews to assist our local staff here to achieve the intended results with these burns," Naccarato said. Outcomes are planned more than a year in advance through a detailed written burn plan that is reviewed at multiple levels before approval. Preparation then involves setting burn perimeters on the ground by both hand-thinning trees and setting a hand-dug lines in the months and weeks before the event. The weather is closely watched so the burn is set under optimal conditions that minimize smoke dispersal into nearby neighborhoods and towns.

The agency is aware that smoke resulting from prescribed fire is a concern for some residents, Salida District Ranger Perry Edwards said. "Most people do understand that a couple of days of smoke is better than weeks on end of smoke from a wildfire that also brings the negative economic affects of having smokey skies in the tourist season."

The events last fall were announced weeks ahead of time as the agency made an effort to inform as many residents as possible, including newspapers, radio and social media. Community members shared the news multiple times over on social media, and that proved to be very helpful.

The U.S. Forest Service has increased the pace of prescribed burning when conditions allow, because low-intensity burning is more cost efficient and effective than thinning trees alone. For more information and background, view [Wildfire Crisis Strategy](#), a 9-minute video featuring Forest Service Chief Randy Moore.



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 effects on critical community infrastructure and improve firefighter safety. 10K+ acres have been thinned (purple) since 2020, and 13K additional acres are planned (teal) to achieve the long-term goal of treating 30K targeted acres by 2030.

Fire Mitigation on Poncha Pass

The Colorado State Forest Service (CSFS) added staff positions in the Salida Field Office to improve the pace of multi-property treatment projects through the Chaffee Treats Forest Health & Wildfire Mitigation Program (Chaffee Treats). The program clusters individual homeowner mitigation so that results are more effective in slowing wildfire spread, creating more favorable conditions to fight a fire, and protecting community infrastructure such as drinking water and communications towers. Partners also include Colorado Firecamp, National Forest Foundation and the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service, which has granted \$5.7 million for these targeted private property treatments.

Fully one third — 10,000 acres — of the treatment priority areas identified in the CWPP are privately owned. Several hundred landowners have now participated, contributing to more than 2,000 acres of private property treatments since 2020. Chaffee Treats has partnered with landowners

in multiple neighborhoods, from north to south: Riverside, Game Trail, Younglife Camp, Trail West, Three Elk, Lost Creek Ranch, St. Elmo, 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, Weldon Creek, North Fork above Maysville, Shavano Creek and Little Cochetopa west of Poncha Springs.

To see what these treatments look like and to hear from a participating homeowner, view this video titled [Progress at Poncha Pass](#) from the fall of 2023. The 400+ acre project spanning two watersheds has [reduced wildfire risk](#) for residents of two counties and protected recreation spaces on federal land, power lines, a critical evacuation and transportation route and drinking water. The project partnership between CSFS and the Bureau of Land Management combats hundreds of acres of dead trees caused by two different types of insect infestations. The project work continues in 2024.



Forest Restoration north of Buena Vista

The Riverside Upland Restoration Project was completed in 2023, improving wildlife habitat and reducing the risk of catastrophic wildfire on the west side of Highway 24 north of Buena Vista. Bird Conservancy of the Rockies, along with the National Forest Foundation, identified and developed the 400-acre multi-jurisdictional project with major funding from RESTORE Colorado. Dense forest stands were restored to renew meadows filled with a diverse understory, thin tree conditions to reduce the effects of wildfire, and create a diversity of habitat elements and forest structures to increase wildlife habitat value.

“The project will bring back ecosystem function and all of the ecological processes that occur in a healthy and resilient landscape,” said Kyle Deschenes, a wildlife habitat biologist with Bird Conservancy of the Rockies who headed up the project with multiple partners. “The results really speak to the collaborative nature of projects going on in the county.”

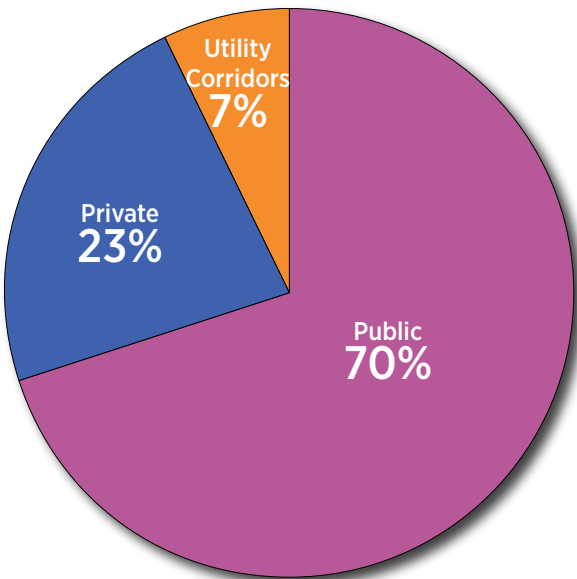
Fire Mitigation on Rodeo Road

A forested fuel break along Rodeo Road was created by the CSFS in the spring of 2023, to protect neighborhoods at the base of Mount Princeton from a fast-moving wildfire that could start in the Collegiate Peaks Wilderness.

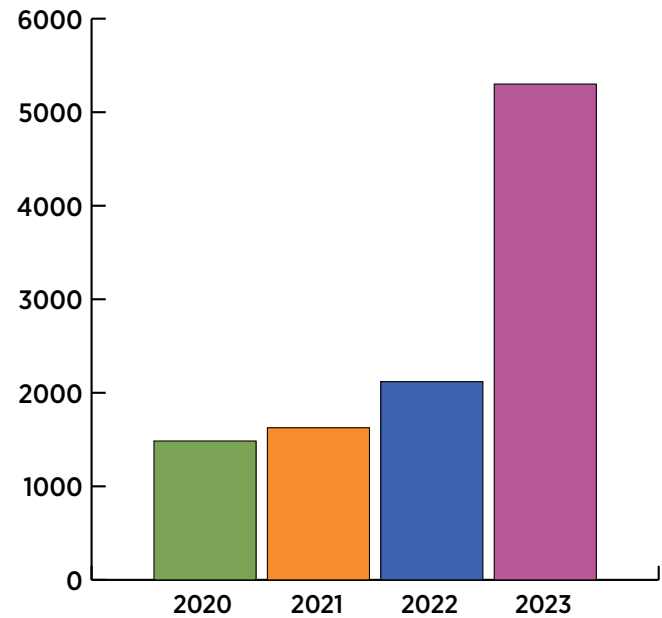
The 110-acre fuel break resulted from selectively removing trees to reduce the intensity of a potential canopy fire, which can spread quickly from one treetop to the next, especially in high winds. The fuel break provides a chance for a fire to slow down with the help of first responders. The work took place on the Maxwell Park State Land Board section and Frontier Ranch, a camp operated by Young Life.

At the same time, homeowners in Pine Grove Estates, Whispering Pines, The Journey’s End and other area neighbors worked with Colorado Firecamp and the Southwest Conservation Corps to thin residential lots, which compliments the fuel break and creates a larger area of wildfire resiliency at the base of the 14,000-foot mountain. The fuel break was completed in July 2023.

Treatments by Ownership



Acres Treated by Year



Chaffee Chips & Firewise USA

The Forest Health Council created the [Chaffee Chips](#) slash removal program to help landowners create defensible space around their homes and other structures. A record 901 slash piles were removed in 2023. A total 750 landowners have spent more than 8,600 hours making slash piles with Chaffee Chips.

The program is managed by Chaffee County Fire Protection District, Colorado State Forest Service and Envision Chaffee County. It is funded by Chaffee Common Ground with matching contributions from the program partners.

Chaffee Chips has contributed to the addition of several Firewise USA designations in the county, as neighbors work together to reduce the risk of wildfire. Meeting the criteria helps homeowners get organized in their safety efforts. Contact info@envisionchaffeecounty.org to get connected and learn how to help your neighborhood achieve a designation.

Utilities

Electric service providers continue to maintain and operate their systems to minimize the risk of a utility asset being the ignition source of a wildfire. The two utilities combined spent \$3.7 million in Chaffee County



on this work in 2023. Sangre de Cristo Electric Association continues to remove vegetation in power line rights-of-way in its five-county service area.

Xcel Energy removes vegetation under its mitigation plan and also replaces old poles and rebuilds conductors and major lines. The utility is now using drones to inspect poles; computer modeling to analyze how extreme wind loading affects their system; and is piloting new technology on the Front Range that improves wildfire notification using triangulated cameras.

The use of satellite imagery by Xcel has improved vegetation management by computing the distance between power lines and trees and even vegetation growth rates.



Community Preparation

In addition to targeted forest treatments, the 10-year county wildfire plan also outlines goals related to community preparation. It is important that residents and homeowners remain personally prepared for a wildfire. The best protection is achieved by creating defensible space around your home and having a family evacuation plan in place.

Make sure you will get timely emergency notifications by signing up for Everbridge to receive alerts through email, telephone and text messaging. In 2023, countywide participation in the service increased by 5.3% as 583 additional residents signed up. [Join them now!](#)

Envision worked with Chaffee Fire and the county Office of Emergency Management to create the simple 6 STEPS to family evacuation preparation: [Get started here!](#)

Community Development

As Chaffee County updates its Land Use Code, wildfire threat is addressed by applying [new development standards](#) for construction in the wildland-urban interface. Based on the International [Wildland Urban Interface](#) Code, these include rules for driveway clearance, slope and turnaround access; ignition-resistant materials for roof, siding, decks and gutters; and a plan for vegetation removal around new structures.

County Planning Director Miles Cotton notes that homes built in the valley are just as combustible as the beetle-kill pine when not built appropriately. “These wildfire mitigation standards will go a long way in protecting what we have here and preventing a knowable disaster from becoming catastrophic,” he said.

Managing Human-Caused Fire Risk

While lightning causes wildfires in Colorado, humans also cause them via discarded cigarettes, unattended campfires, burning debris and equipment malfunctions such as downed power lines and sparks from dragged towing chains.

High concern among residents about errant and illegal campfires was highlighted in the [Chaffee Wildfire Survey](#), administered by Envision in



2019 to help inform the wildfire plan. In response, more than two dozen new signs have been placed around Chaffee County to communicate fire danger levels and fire restrictions.

Envision staff worked with the U.S. Forest Service to place Smokey Bear signs in visible locations from Trout Creek Pass to the Browns Creek Recreation Area, and Chaffee Fire placed new signs at its stations throughout the county.

Members of the Game Trail Homeowners Association worked with Chaffee Fire to place a sign northwest of Buena Vista along County Road 365, which is the access to 14er trailheads, the Colorado Trail and about 80 campsites in the North Cottonwood Creek drainage. A homeowner agreed to have it placed on their property along the road.

Smaller signs have been erected near campfire rings at each of more than a dozen designated campsites in Chubb Park. They flip open to indicate when it is illegal to have a fire.

The Adventure by Nature marketing campaign by the Chaffee County Visitors Bureau spreads educational information through social media outreach to hundreds of thousands of visitors and potential visitors, including a short video about how to have a campfire.

The Chaffee Recreation Rangers program, in its third season, adds forest patrollers who encourage good visitor behavior through personalized outdoor education. The patrollers also check for smoldering and illegal campfires. And, the Chaffee Rec Adopters program has empowered more than 400 volunteers to clean up camping areas. This work includes the removal of 60,000 pounds of trash and ash as they focus on safety by cleaning out campfire rings and downsizing them to promote smaller fires.



Funding A Fire Ready Future

Funding from diverse partners has been raised for projects that effectively address wildfire risk. “We have successfully brought in the many sources of funding we talked about at the beginning,” said Adam Moore, a supervisory forester with the Colorado State Forest Service who helped write the plan in 2019 and 2020. “And we’ve also leveraged the local Common Ground tax dollars as promised.”

About \$10 million was raised in 2023, bringing the total amount of funding to \$33 million from two dozen different sources to implement the CWPP. When the plan was signed in 2020, the estimated cost for treatments and support staff was roughly \$45 million. Today, those costs have inflated to an estimated \$65 million. A major federal investor is the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), which contributed \$5.7 million from its Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP). Spending by the U.S. Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management combine with the RCPP grant to deliver 41% of the total funds raised.

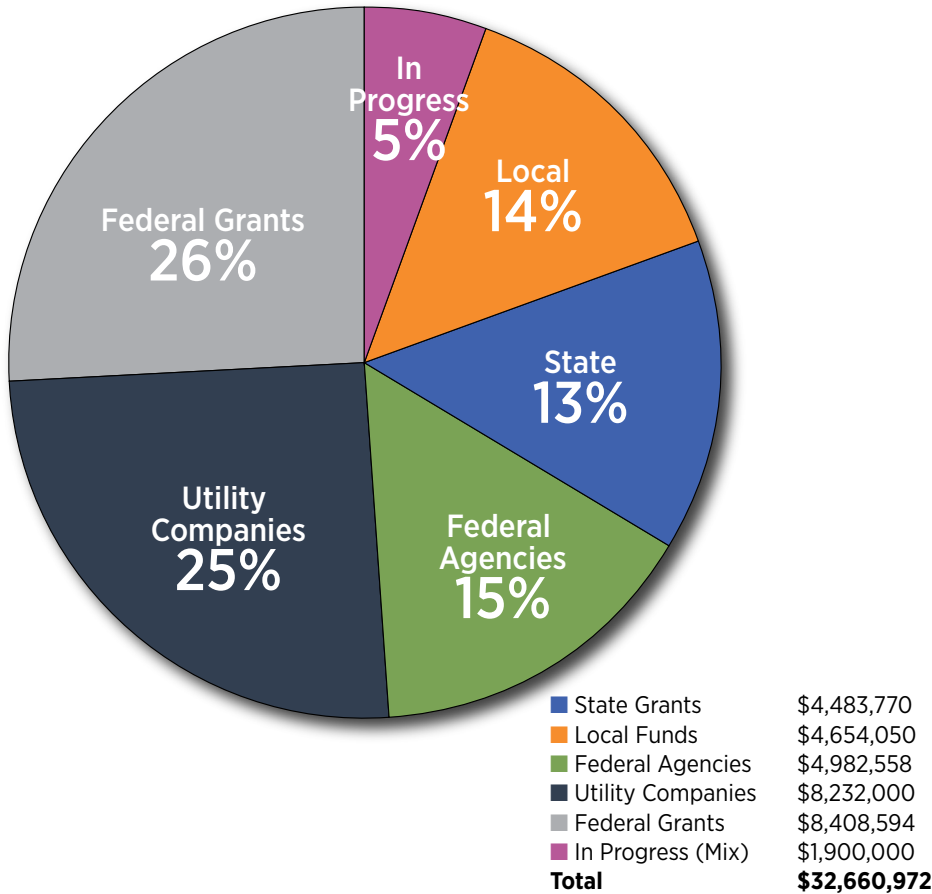
Additional investors include the [RESTORE Colorado](#) grant program, which supports restoration projects that improve wildlife habitat, and the Colorado Strategic Wildfire Action Program (COSWAP), which has funded both treatment projects and workforce development in Chaffee and Lake counties since the program was created by the Colorado legislature in 2020. Watch a [video about these projects](#) and the Colorado Youth Corps

Chaffee County also successfully participates in CSFS’s many grant programs, contributing to the total of nearly \$18 million raised in federal- and state-level support. Success winning 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 \$4.2 million in forest health and fire resilience since 2019.

Our Regional Partners

The Forest Health Council is comprised of more than 50 leaders working on many fronts to implement the CWPP and connect that work regionally, for example in Lake County. The Leadville community updated its wildfire plan in 2022, mirroring Chaffee County’s methods by incorporating

Chaffee County CWPP Funding Sources



resident priorities and developing a map that shows where to treat lands for the highest cost efficiency and community benefit.

“We are yarding up the numbers in Leadville, generating the acres, the projects and the funding necessary,” said Pat Mercer, who, as Leadville District Ranger with the U.S. Forest Service, serves on both county wildfire councils. “The roadmap to get there is clearly visible through what Chaffee has accomplished.”

The treatment plan in Lake County is to reduce fire fuels on 20,000 acres by 2033. The council has identified about 14,000 acres of priority

treatments for the future and has started or continues projects around Turquoise Lake and County Road 4, among other areas.

Both counties together are a [Rocky Mountain Restoration Initiative](#) (RMRI)

priority landscape. Co-convened by the National Wild Turkey Federation and the U.S. Forest Service, RMRI's mission is to improve the resilience of forests, wildlife habitats, communities, recreation opportunities and water resources across all lands in the Rocky Mountains.



2023 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
- Colorado Congresswoman Brittany Pettersen's Office
- Chaffee County Fire Protection District
- Chaffee County Office of Emergency Management
- Chaffee County Weed Department
- 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
- Colorado Water Conservation Board
- Envision Chaffee County
- Lake Board of County Commissioners
- Lake County Conservation District
- Lake County Open Space Initiative
- Leadville Fire Protection District
- National Forest Foundation
- Salida Fire Department
- Sangre de Cristo Electric Association
- Terra Firma Forestry
- 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 John Hickenlooper's Office
- US Senator Michael Bennet's Office
- Xcel Energy



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