



# Chaffee County Community Wildfire Protection Plan

## 2024 Annual Community Report





## Wind and fire are shaping the American West's future. Where does Chaffee County stand?

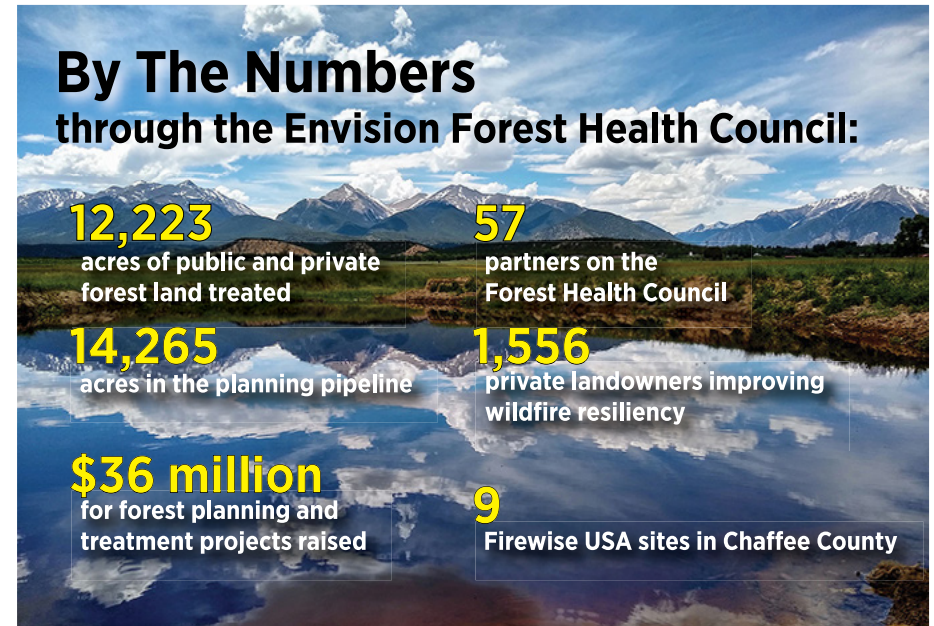
Did the L.A. wildfires cause you to wonder whether such a catastrophe could occur where you live? Prolonged dry conditions paired with vicious wind events are causing destructive fires, from northern California's Paradise fire in 2018, to Maui's deadly firestorm in 2023, to the Marshall fire near Boulder, where more than 1,000 homes burned in the timespan of a workday.

These "megafires" and others like them have started in the surrounding landscape — a downed power line, an errant campfire — on a day when the wind is blowing so hard that the fire cannot be extinguished before it moves into an urban area and burns home after home to the ground.

Such an event could occur in Chaffee County. Like everywhere else in the American West, acres of dead and dying trees, warmer temperatures, drier seasons and bigger wind events pose a big threat to life, property and infrastructure. Local foresters and firefighters say it's just a matter of time before the next wildfire. Whether it ignites during strong winds is a matter of chance.



Chaffee County's Community Wildfire Protection Plan (CWPP) works to decrease the risk and get residents ready for the next wildfire. The Forest Health Council is tasked with leading execution of the strategies outlined in the plan. The council is comprised of professionals from every land management agency and organization concerned with forest management and wildfire response in the county. See page 12 for a list of member organizations.



The council plans forest mitigation collaboratively so that each project and program is more effective than it could have been if done independently. Council members agree that one of the main CWPP goals is to strategically thin trees as mapped and prioritized, to help reduce wildfire risk and fight a fire. See the map on page 3. The goal is to treat 30,000 targeted acres by 2030 and at Year 5, more than 12,000 acres have been treated. Fundraising and planning is in place to double that number.

Additional goals in the wildfire plan are designed to help the community prepare. The council has created and supported programs that address homeowner responsibility and action, overall readiness to evacuate, and updated building codes for fire-ready future development.

More than 1,500 residents have taken action to decrease their individual risk, from participating in a Chaffee Chips slash haul away event to signing up for the county's emergency notification system. Residents have even volunteered to patrol public lands for unattended campfires (See page 9).

## CWPP: Strategic Wildfire Mitigation

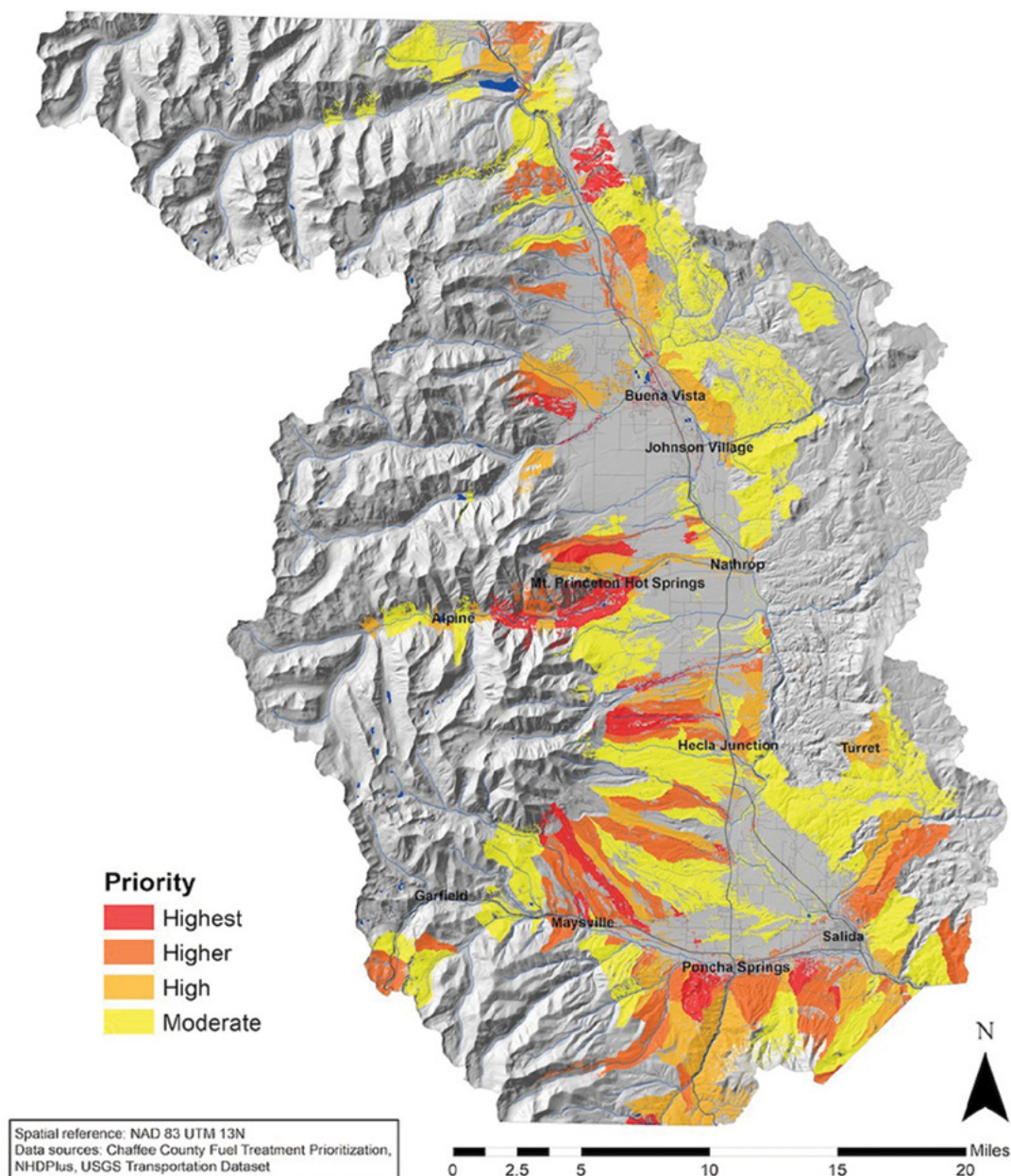
Chaffee County's wildfire plan identifies Treatment Priority Areas where thinning trees can most effectively reduce the risk of wildfire to the community assets that residents deemed the most important. The plan was created by first engaging residents in a survey to prioritize what to protect from a wildfire and post-fire flooding. Those, in order, are firefighter lives, human life, drinking water, infrastructure, homes, wildlife, Arkansas River recreation, scenic views and trail systems.

The Colorado Forest Restoration Institute (CFRI) at Colorado State University quantified wildfire's risk to the priorities listed above using GIS modeling. 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.

All of these factors combine to produce a map that shows where the community's valued assets are at the highest risk. The cost of doing treatments is factored into the final map (right) to identify where treatments can do the most to lower fire risk for the least amount of money — or where to get the best “bang for the buck” with forest thinning. Treatment options include prescribed fire, cleaning up dead and downed trees by hand thinning with chainsaws, and a patch-clearing method used in the piñon-juniper forest called mastication.

CFRI's modeling demonstrates that treating a small, targeted portion of the total landscape can substantially reduce the risk of widespread damage to the assets. 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





Foresters are working with hundreds of residents from Granite to Poncha Pass to take steps toward better wildfire resiliency. Roadside thinning projects have been completed on land adjacent to large prescribed burns, which are next to subdivisions where homeowners have mitigated their individual lots.

In Chaffee County, the right acres are being thinned to decrease risk and the treatments are connecting across landscapes, from city to federal to private lands.

“We’re getting the acreage treated but that’s only half the story,” said J.T. Shaver, a supervisory forester with the Colorado State Forest Service. “The connectivity across boundaries is also coming to fruition, which means the results are much more effective.” See the map on page 5.

Forest Health Council partners produce this annual report as a progress update and to be transparent about activities surrounding the 10-year plan, such as forest treatment locations and fundraising.





## Taking Action

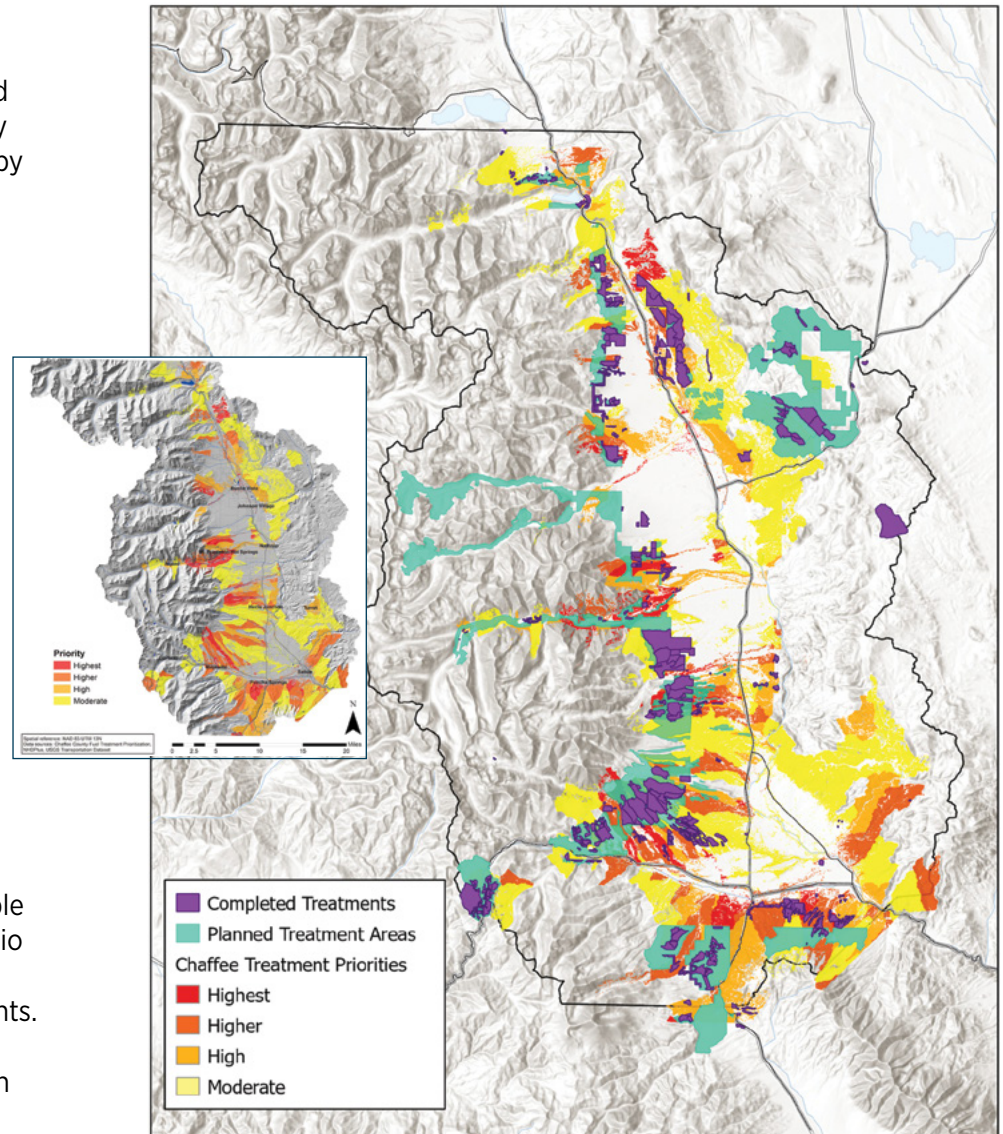
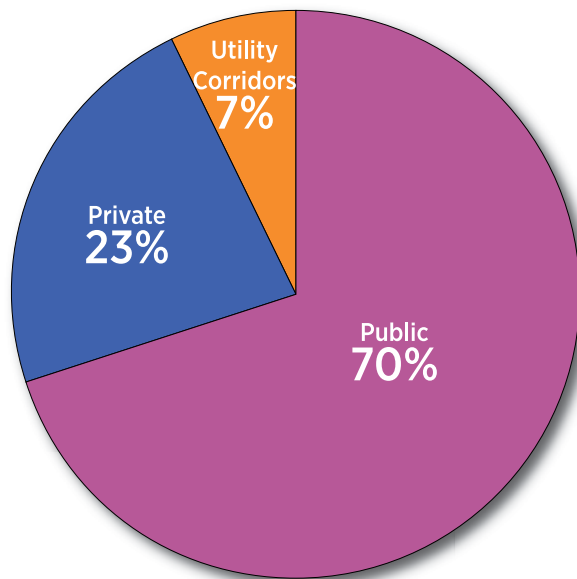
More than 1,600 forested acres of public and private lands were treated in 2024, bringing the total in five years to 12,223. That is 41% of the way toward achieving the CWPP's top goal to treat 30,000 targeted acres by 2030. Treatments span both public (70%) and private property (23%).

The U.S. Forest Service conducted a low-intensity prescribed burn on more than 400 acres south of the Browns Creek Trailhead in the fall of 2024. It marked the second year in a row the agency removed vegetation in the Threemile Creek landscape west of Centerville.

In addition to reducing the accumulation of fire fuels, prescribed burns help maintain healthy and diverse forest ecosystems and wildlife habitat. Burns are planned more than a year in advance and as the event approaches, the weather is closely watched so the burn is set under optimal conditions that minimize smoke dispersal into nearby neighborhoods and towns.

Fire personnel monitor burn units until the fire is completely out, using drones with heat detection as well as ground personnel for days or weeks afterward. The events are announced to the public ahead of time, as the agency makes an effort to inform as many residents as possible in newspapers, radio and social media about the treatments. Prescribed fire is more effective than other methods of removing fire fuels. The Interlaken fire in June 2024 near Chaffee's northern border with Lake County demonstrates this effectiveness. See Page 6 for the story.

**Treatments by Ownership**



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. 12K+ acres have been thinned (purple) since 2020, and 14K additional acres are planned (teal) to achieve the 10-year goal of treating 30K targeted acres by 2030.

## Fuel Treatments Work

### Interlaken fire lessons learned: Vegetation management prevents catastrophic wildfires

Two different types of forest treatments completed in the years before the Interlaken Fire likely helped prevent large-scale destruction:

- Defensible space saved historic structures on the south side of Twin Lakes, since the blaze started “a stone’s throw” from the buildings, according to Leadville District Ranger Pat Mercer.
- An area treated with a prescribed burn in 2018 “checked up” the wildfire, reducing its intensity and helping firefighters put it out, according to Mountain Zone Fire Management Officer Chris Naccarato.

The Interlaken fire started on June 11, 2024, on National Forest land on the south side of Twin Lakes, threatening historic structures along the lakeshore, homes in nearby Cache Creek, drinking water stored in the reservoir, scenic views, wildlife and access to recreation such as the Colorado Trail. Fire danger conditions were rated moderate — not high or extreme — during a time of no fire restrictions.

An abandoned campfire along the Interlaken Trail started the blaze. A western wind pushed the fire into a forested hillside, where it consumed heavy dead and downed timber for days and became an active, hot fire with flames shooting 60 feet into the air. But the fire’s intensity reduced significantly when it reached the site of the 2018 Flume Creek Prescribed Burn. Flames dropped to a few feet high as the fire slowed down and “ran” out of “fuel” to feed it. That allowed firefighters to move in and safely set a fire control line and eventually put it out.

The Forest Service and partners had been in the planning stages of treating the landscape around Twin Lakes that burned. The fire burned 700 acres over two weeks before it was extinguished — a contribution to the planned fuels reduction work — but at a cost of \$5 million to suppress.

The abandoned campfire had been made in a shallow ring using a single layer of stones on uncleared ground. The fire likely burned underground through organic matter such as pine needles, resurfacing outside the ring

on the forest floor. Wind set the emerged fire ablaze, moving it toward the east where the Interlaken site’s historic structures sat about 60 feet away. The prior removal of vegetation about 15 years ago from around the historic buildings likely saved them.

When a wildfire starts in a landscape with heavy dead and downed timber, fire behavior can become very intense and hard to predict. In many areas of Chaffee County, this is caused by insect infestations that killed most of the trees.

Naccarato said that more treatments like prescribed burns are needed: “The Interlaken fire is living proof that fuels treatments really do work, and they’re worth it.”

See page 9 to learn what is being done to manage human-caused wildfire risk such as errant campfires.

### The 3 Things That Drive Wildfires – Watch Now!



**“We can’t control the topography, and we can’t control the weather. But the one thing we can control is the fuels.”**

– USFS Planner Kat Gray describes in this video how a 6-year-old prescribed burn became a “game changer” as firefighters tried to suppress the 2024 Interlaken wildfire near Twin Lakes.



## Treating Private Lands

Fully one-third or 10,000 acres of Chaffee County's Treatment Priority Areas are privately owned. Forest Health Council partners collaborate with these landowners to increase the pace of private property treatments. In the past five years, 3,200 acres of private property have been treated.

The Colorado State Forest Service (CSFS) added staff positions in the Salida Field Office to improve the pace of multi-property projects through the Chaffee Treats Forest Health & Wildfire Mitigation Program — a partnership dedicated to helping private landowners reduce wildfire risk and restore forest health on a landscape-scale basis.

Offered to landowners located in the CWPP Treatment Priority Areas, [Chaffee Treats](#) is the place for private landowners to go to connect with foresters and become part of the wildfire solution. The program includes large, multi-landowner projects as well as individual projects on small parcels using Colorado Firecamp sawyer trainees and the COSWAP-funded youth corp crews.

A ramp-up of the program since 2020 culminated in multiple projects occurring at the same time across the county. Chaffee Treats partners also include the National Forest Foundation and the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service, which has granted \$5.7 million to Chaffee County for these targeted private property treatments.

Several hundred landowners have now participated, contributing to 3,200 acres of private property treatments since 2020. Participating 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.

## Chaffee Chips & Firewise USA

The Forest Health Council created the Chaffee Chips slash removal program to help landowners begin to create defensible space. A total 861 landowners have spent nearly 10,000 hours making slash piles with Chaffee Chips. Managed by Chaffee County Fire Protection District,



Gov. Jared Polis visited Chaffee County in 2024 to celebrate mitigation work funded by the Colorado Strategic Wildfire Action Program (COSWAP).

Colorado State Forest Service and Envision, the program is funded by Chaffee Common Ground with matching contributions from the program partners. To see where slash removal events are taking place in 2025, visit the [Chaffee Chips webpage](#).

The number of Firewise USA communities in the county has climbed from three to nine since 2020, surpassing the CWPP's goal to double the number of designations in 10 years. The program provides resources to help homeowners learn how to adapt to living with wildfire and encourages neighbors to work together to take action now to prevent losses.

Congratulations to landowners in the newest Firewise USA site at the Base of Mount Princeton, which includes residents from Pine Grove Estates, Lost Creek Ranch, Whispering Pines and The Journey's End. And a big thank you to members of the Firewise committees in these neighborhoods and towns: Alpine, Chateau Chapparal, Game Trail, Maysville, Mesa Antero, Mount Harvard Estates, Piñon Ridge Estates, and St. Elmo.





## 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.

Sangre de Cristo Electric Association managed vegetation in Chaffee County along 4 miles of power lines, spending \$250,000 in 2024. Integrity Tree Service continues to be the contractor doing this work for the co-op in northern portions of the county.

SDCEA also adjusted system settings to be more sensitive during times of high fire danger. This causes outages, since the power is turned off for safety until the line can be inspected and power restored.

In 2024, Xcel Energy's wildfire mitigation crews inspected and replaced 310 wood distribution poles and repaired 77 in Chaffee County. This included 26 pole replacements in the mountains over Monarch Divide – serving the ski area and town of White Pine – that required multi-year federal permitting and construction in challenging terrain and conditions.

Xcel Energy also submitted its 2025-2027 Wildfire Mitigation Plan to the Colorado Public Utilities Commission, with plans to make further strategic investments and improvements to the system in the coming years.



## Community Preparation

In addition to targeted forest treatments, the wildfire plan 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.

## County Land Use and Building Codes Updated

Development projects in the unincorporated county came under new wildfire safety standards in 2024 that are based on the International Wildland Urban Interface Code and the defensible space plans as laid out by the Colorado State Forest Service. Part of the new Chaffee County Land Use Code includes driveway clearance and slope standards, turnaround access, ignition-resistant material requirements, and a requirement to remove vegetation around new structures — also known as defensible space. Pursuant to the County's building codes, the amount of treated area required depends on the level of fire danger at the property. For more details about new county codes, visit the county website or contact Miles Cottom at [mcottom@chaffeecounty.org](mailto:mcottom@chaffeecounty.org).

Defensible space is the area around a home or structure that has been modified to reduce fire hazards by creating space between potential fuel sources. It can increase the likelihood a home survives in a fire, and may also allow firefighters to safely attempt to protect the property, according to the Colorado State Forest Service. CSFS provides a [guide](#) as well as a [video](#) describing what property owners can do to lessen risk of wildfire by managing vegetation.

## Managing Human-Caused Fire Risk

The majority of wildfires are caused by human activity — unattended campfires, burning lawn debris, and equipment malfunctions like downed power lines or 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. The 2024 Interlaken fire, sparked by an abandoned campfire, raised concerns even higher.



Chaffee Rec Adopters monitor campsites for errant and illegal campfires, and they manage campfire rings at designated sites for better safety.

The Chaffee Recreation Rangers program, in its fourth season, adds forest patrollers who encourage good visitor behavior through personalized outdoor education. The patrollers also check for smoldering and illegal campfires. In 2024, they had contact with more than 3,000 visitors and doused several abandoned campfires.

The [Chaffee Rec Adopters](#) program has empowered more than 650 volunteers to monitor camping areas. The work involves cleaning out, downsizing and removing campfire rings to promote safer fires, as well as checking for and dousing abandoned campfires. Rangers and Adopters also install metal campfire rings in some designated dispersed camping areas, which ensures safer campfires.

Signage has been added in dozens of locations around Chaffee County to communicate fire danger levels and fire restrictions. For example, Smokey Bear “fire danger” dial signs are now visible on top of Trout Creek Pass at the entrance to Chaffee County, and Chaffee Fire placed new dial signs at its stations throughout the county.





## Funding A Fire Ready Future

Funding from diverse partners has been raised for projects that effectively address wildfire risk. And the local Common Ground tax dollars have been leveraged, as promised. About \$3 million was raised in 2024, bringing the total amount of funding to \$36 million from two dozen different sources to implement the CWPP. A major federal investor is the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), which contributed \$5.7 million from its Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) in 2021. Spending by the U.S. Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management combine with the RCPP grant to deliver nearly half of the total investments.

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.

Chaffee County also successfully participates in CSFS's many grant programs, contributing to the total of nearly \$5 million raised in state-level support. Success winning funding for wildfire resiliency stems from the 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 \$5 million in forest health and fire resilience since 2019.

### Regional & Statewide Partners

Envision hosted more than 100 Colorado leaders in Salida and Buena Vista in September 2024 for the Connecting Colorado event. Members of the Forest Health Council and other local partners shared Chaffee County's successful strategies, including how to identify treatment priority areas, how to achieve connectivity across treated landscapes for more effectiveness, and how to create a slate of community actions to further help in wildfire preparedness. The two-day event included presentations, site visits and discussions about streamlining funding across the state. The event was sponsored by Great Outdoors Colorado, Rocky Mountain Restoration Initiative, Colorado Department of Natural Resources, Colorado Parks and Wildlife and the National Forest Foundation.

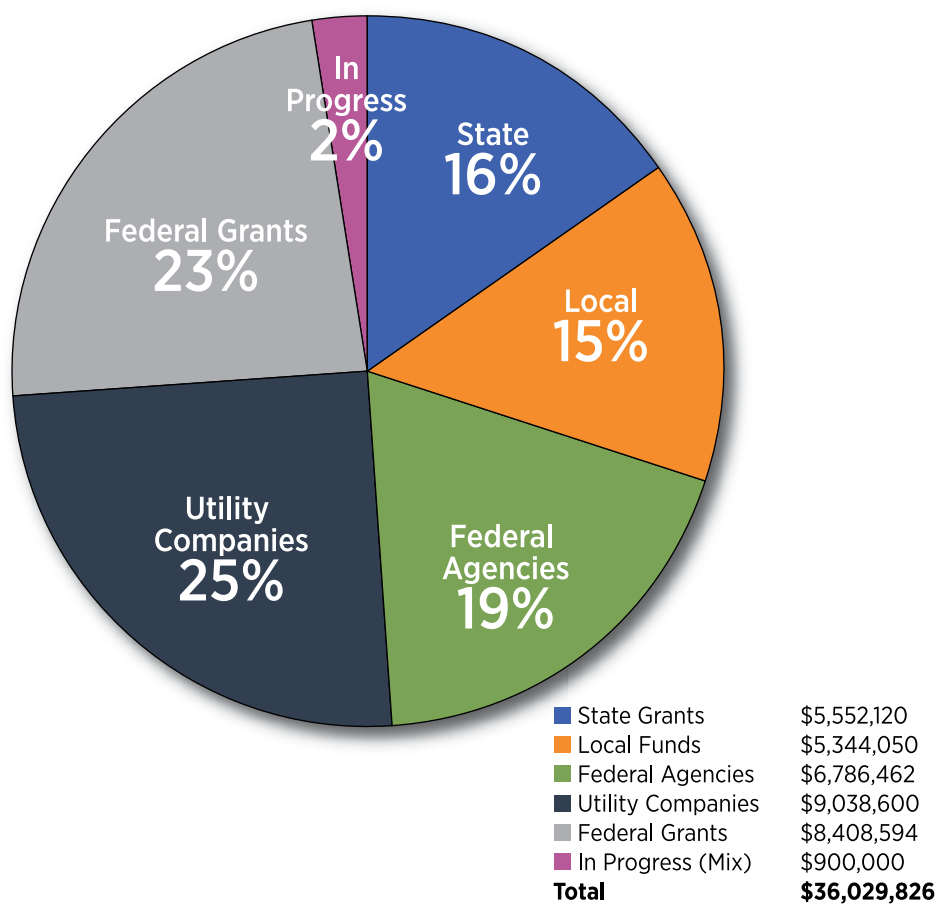


The Arkansas River Watershed Collaborative (ARWC) focuses on watershed health and post-fire recovery, launching the Twin Lakes Wildfire Ready Action Plan in 2024 to identify threats in post-fire scenarios such as the 2024 Interlaken fire on the border with Lake County (pictured). ARWC also manages a chipping program and fuel mitigation projects in Lake County.





Chaffee County CWPP Funding Sources



The National Forest Foundation is a major partner in Chaffee County, attaining and managing funds from both federal and state sources under the Upper Ark Forest Fund to support both wildfire and recreation projects. As a community partner, NFF helps address funding complexity and gaps in federal agency capacity, managing more than \$10 million and also managing contracts with private companies to complete forest treatments on federal lands in Chaffee and Lake counties.

The Forest Health Council is comprised of more than 50 leaders working on many fronts to implement the wildfire plan 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 resident priorities and developing a map that shows where to treat lands for the highest cost efficiency and overall benefit.

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.



The Colorado State Forest Service burns piles in Little Cochetopa Creek, as part of a fuel break designed to protect Poncha Springs and surrounds.



## 2024 Forest Health Council Members

- Arkansas River Watershed Collaborative - Jonathan Paklaian
- Bird Conservancy of the Rockies - Kyle Deschenes
- Bureau of Land Management Rocky Mountain District - Doug Mayes, Matt Norden
- Chaffee Board of County Commissioners - Gina Lucrezi, PT Wood
- Chaffee County Fire Protection District - Kira Jones, Jeff Zechman
- Chaffee County Office of Emergency Management - Rich Atkins
- Chaffee County Administrative Staff - Don Reimer, Miles Cottom
- Chaffee County Weed Department - Kayla Malone
- Colorado Firecamp - Kent Maxwell
- Colorado Forest Restoration Institute at Colorado State University - Brett Wolk, Allison Rhea, Jarod Dunn, Jackie Edinger, Stephanie Mueller
- Colorado Congresswoman Brittany Pettersen (CO-7) - Justin Kurth
- Colorado Mountain College - Heidi Slaymaker
- Colorado Parks and Wildlife - Sean Sheppard
- Colorado Springs Utilities - Mark Shea
- Colorado State Forest Service - Damon Lange, JT Shaver, Leeza Vasko, Kellie Solis
- Colorado Water Conservation Board - Chris Sturm
- Envision Chaffee County - Cindy Williams, Kim Marquis, Kim Smoyer
- Lake County Conservation District - Harmony Jump
- National Forest Foundation - Sam Pankratz
- Salida Fire Department - Aaron Jonke
- Sangre de Cristo Electric Association - Ryan Doke, Chris McGinnis
- South Arkansas Fire Protection District - Aaron Jonke
- Upper Arkansas Water Conservation District - Greg Felt
- Upper Arkansas Watershed Partnership/ Central Colorado Conservancy - Nathan Ward
- USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service - Joni Burr
- US Forest Service Salida Ranger District - Perry Edwards
- US Forest Service Leadville Ranger District - Patrick Mercer
- US Forest Service Mountain Zone Fire - Chris Naccarato
- US Senator John Hickenlooper's Office - Patrick Ortiz
- US Senator Michael Bennet's Office - Erin Minks
- Xcel Energy - Ashley Valdez, Zoe DeVito



[info@envisionchaffeecounty.org](mailto:info@envisionchaffeecounty.org)

<https://envisionchaffeecounty.org>