

# 2010 Annual Report

## Firewise of Southwest Colorado





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*Keeping lives, homes, and property  
from being damaged by wildfire*

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## OBJECTIVES

The FireWise Council has several objectives that they strive towards annually including:

- 1) increasing the number of homeowners undertaking mitigation efforts
- 2) increasing the number of Neighborhood Ambassadors
- 3) encouraging the development of Community Wildfire Protection Plans (CWPPs)
- 4) getting subdivisions recognized as Firewise Communities USA program
- 5) reaching more southwest Colorado residents with information about their wildfire risk and how they can reduce that risk, and
- 6) participating in Fire Prevention and Education Month

Each of these objectives is addressed below.

- 1) **Homeowners undertaking mitigation efforts:** This objective unfortunately is a hard one to quantitatively measure, mainly because it is difficult to get all of our volunteers to track and record work as it is accomplished. However, some do track volunteer hours for their subdivisions. Durango Ridge Ranch homeowners conducted over 900 hours of mitigation work this year, Deer Valley Estates over 500 hours, and Enchanted Forest had a record number of volunteers participate in their annual clean-up day.

Another indicator of work being accomplished is that last spring the Colorado State Forest Service offered a grant that would reimburse home/property owners up to \$470/acre for mitigation work and \$333,183 was awarded to five subdivisions as well as the City of Durango for mitigation work on over 700 acres (some of which will not occur until 2011).

- 2) **FireWise Ambassadors:** We have nine new Ambassadors from La Plata County representing the high-risk subdivisions of Falls Creek Ranch, Los Ranchitos, Grandview area, Florida River Estates, Electra Lake, Lake Durango, Peak Trail, and Hidden Ridge Ranch, and one new Ambassador from McElmo Canyon in Montezuma County. Only three of these areas had representatives on the Council previously. All Ambassadors have received their “orientation” and begun their Ambassador duties.

Unfortunately, we also had a number of Ambassadors (12) leave the program – either due to illness, moving, or lack of interest by their neighbors. Currently, our net number of Ambassadors is 65, with 2 from Archuleta County, 9 from Montezuma County, and 54 from La Plata County.

Ambassadors recorded 817 hours of volunteer time attending meetings and working within their neighborhoods, but we know the actual number of hours is much higher as it is difficult to get all our volunteers to report their hours.

- 3) **Community Wildfire Protection Plans (CWPP):** Though the Council is not directly responsible for writing CWPPs, we do offer support to communities wishing to undertake them in the form of presentations to Homeowner Associations, support at meetings, and review of documents. The Council and its partners (USFS/BLM, CSFS, Fire Departments, and Emergency Managers) are an integral part of the collaborative CWPP process. In 2010, the Council hired a part-time CWPP Coordinator, Tammy Tyner, who works with homeowners and CWPP contractors to help overcome hurdles and keep the collaborative planning process moving along.

Tammy helped organize several collaborative efforts at Durango West 2, Falls Creek, Forest Lakes, and Cedar Mesa Ranches. Based on an effort by CWPP contractor Bruce Short at Durango West 2, the Council is trying a more “informal” approach to reach homeowners and offering a BBQ at information sharing events. CSFS, BLM/FS, and fire departments have also been an integral part of these efforts by providing Smokey Bear, fire trucks, and personnel to visit with homeowners.

Tammy and Pam also developed the Request for Proposals and Contractor list used by Upper Pine Fire to solicit bids for the Forest Lakes CWPP.

As we all know, the planning process is never a fast one. If a subdivision hires a contractor to write the CWPP the process is generally completed within one year; if the HOA decides to develop the CWPP themselves the process may take 2-3 years.

The status of “in-progress CWPPs” in SW Colorado is:

- Durango West 2 CWPP -- finalized and awaiting signatures
- Falls Creek Ranch – anticipated completion June 2011
- Forest Lakes – anticipated completion June 2011
- Cedar Mesa Ranches (Mont. Cty.) – anticipated completion June 2011
- Vista de Oro – anticipated completion Sept. 2011
- Crowley Ranch (Arch. Cty.) – anticipated completion Dec. 2011
- Spring Valley Ranch (Arch. Cty.) – anticipated completion Dec. 2011
- Electra Lake – just beginning process
- Dolores County – anticipated completion July 2011

- 4) **Firewise Communities USA Program:** Sponsored by the national Firewise Program, this program recognizes communities that have a completed fire assessment (and/or CWPP), undertake Firewise activities on a yearly basis, and spend \$2 per capita on mitigation work annually. We are pleased to announce that in December 2010 **Deer Valley Estates**, located east of Bayfield, became the **first** Firewise USA community in southwest Colorado. Deer Valley is an exemplary Firewise community that has completed reflective address signing for the subdivision, added additional water storage capacity, mitigated their road ROWs, completed a CWPP (Nov. 2009) and will be constructing a hammerhead turnaround at one of their dead-end roads in 2011 (see attached story).

- 5) **Education and Outreach:** The Council continues to offer educational in-services at their bi-monthly meetings in Durango at which we typically have 22-30 participants. In addition to guest speakers, Ambassadors that received grant funding also make presentations on the work accomplished. Topics this year included:
- a. High-Risk Communities – What they are and Where they are Located; Use of BLM Community Assistance grant at Vista de Oro
  - b. Xeriscaping; 2010 Fire Season Outlook; and an update on the LPC Fire Code (esp. Open Burning Permit);
  - c. “Don’t Invite Wildfire Into Your Home” by Patrick Mahoney, Florida Dept. of Forestry Mitigation Specialist; FireWise mini grant report on work accomplished at Tripp Creek and Deer Valley Estates
  - d. Fiscal Responsibility Information Committee on proposed ballot initiatives A60 and 61 and Proposition 101;
  - e. Pagosa’s Bio-Gen Plant; New guidelines for fire departments in protecting homes from wildfire; Upper Pine’s Los Pinos Mitigation Project

Four Ambassador meetings were held in Montezuma County and in addition to Ambassadors were frequently attended by Montezuma Planning Dept. personnel and the Emergency Manager. In-service topics included: working with OEM and the county road signing program.

Karen regularly attended the Montezuma County Chief’s meeting and kept them up-to-date on FireWise happenings. Pam updated the La Plata/Archuleta Fire Chiefs early as needed.

In addition to continuing with education efforts for our FireWise Ambassadors, the Program Director and Chapter Coordinators also participate individually, and often with partners, in HOA meetings, CWPP meetings, and occasionally on home assessments. Presentations were also made to the La Plata County and Archuleta County Commissioners. This year we also tried a booth at the Durango Farmer’s Market one Saturday, an Open House in Montezuma County, a booth at the Montezuma County Sustainability Fair in August, and a booth at the Archuleta County Safety Expo.

- 6) **Fire Prevention and Education Month – May 2010:** The Council had three main activities for Fire Month in 2010.
- a. In late April we held a Home Ignition Zone Workshop (developed by the National Fire Protection Association and national Firewise organization). The Council partnered with Fort Lewis Mesa Fire Protection District to teach the class, which had 18 participants, mostly Neighborhood Ambassadors. See attached Success Story for a more detailed description of the Workshop.

- b. Our second event was to bring Florida Dept. of Forestry mitigation specialist, Patrick Mahoney, out from Florida. Patrick works closely with the national Firewise organization and has 15-20 Firewise USA communities within his district. He gave presentations in La Plata and Archuleta Counties titled “Don’t Invite Wildfire into Your Home” and also met with the La Plata County Fire Chiefs and other fire specialists in southwest Colorado.
- c. Our third event was BLM Fire Mitigation and Education Specialist Craig Goodell giving presentations in Montezuma and Archuleta Counties titled “Living with Wildfire in Southwest Colorado.”

### **Other Important 2010 Projects**

**Mini Grant Projects:** For the past two years the FireWise Council has offered a “mini grant fund” for use by Neighborhood Ambassadors. There is no match required and funds are distributed on a first-come first-served basis. In 2009, the Council was awarded \$25,000 through a BLM Community Assistance grant which funded our mini grant fund. The funds could be used for development of a CWPP and/or community mitigation projects, especially those identified in an approved CWPP. Examples of mitigation projects might include ROW clearing, treatment of common space, or development of a fuel break that would benefit at least five homes.

Mini grants approved in 2010 included:

**Tripp Creek** (Joy Mathis) – *La Plata County*

**\$2,000** to complete mitigation for brush and tree thinning along the road right-of-way and the removal of hazard trees falling across Tripp Creek Road not completed in last year’s project (funded by private land owner). Tripp Creek has eight lots with six homes within the gated area of Tripp Creek and there are two homes below the gate directly on Tripp Creek Road. There are approximately 20 –25 people living in the area at any given time. **Status:** Project completed.

**Durango Ridge Ranch** (Patricia Haupt) – *La Plata County*

**\$7,000** for mitigation work along seven miles of common road within the subdivision. DRR only has one road in and one road out of the development with heavy growths of Ponderosa, cedar and scrub oak/Gambel oak along the roads. Work included removing some Ponderosa and thinning scrub oak 15 feet from the main roads for better sight distance and access in case of a fire. DRR is approximately 1500 acres in size with 34 lots averaging 35 acres each. There are 19 homes within DRR with approximately 2 people per home. Total area treated amounted to approximately 11 acres. **Status:** Project completed, except for some reseeding to be done before the snow flies.

**Cedar Mesa Ranches** (Paul Ruatti) – *Montezuma County*

**\$7,000** for development of a Community Wildfire Protection Plan. The subdivision has 139 lots with 73 homes, of which 58 are occupied year-round. **Status:** Cedar Mesa Ranches has hired forestry consultant Bruce Short to develop their CWPP. The first

collaborative meeting of cooperators occurred on Sept. 8<sup>th</sup> and was attended by the Firewise Program Director and CWPP Coordinator, CSFS, Mesa Verde NP, Montezuma County OEM, two Cedar Mesa homeowners, and the contractor.

**Vista de Oro** (JT Coyne) – *La Plata County*

\$1,000 for completing their CWPP. Funds to be used to cover expenses like postage, copying, mapping, and joint meeting expenses (handouts, etc). The CWPP will be used to compete for future mitigation grant applications and as an educational tool for absentee property owners. Vista de Oro is a 1200-acre subdivision with 35 lots and 10 homes. There are approximately 30 full- and part-time residents. **Status:** Scheduling difficulties between CWPP Coordinator and homeowners has temporarily postponed this project.

**Fort Lewis Mesa FPD** – *La Plata County*

\$4500 to fund the cost of two 12,000-gallon tanks for water storage at the new Fort Lewis Mesa Fire Protection District Station #5 located on County Road 117. Funds covered the transportation of these tanks, equipment on site to offload the tanks and bury them, and supplies for plumbing the tanks. Plumbing was completed by Fort Lewis Mesa volunteer firefighters. These tanks would offer the department 24,000 gallons of water located strategically to an area of high fire susceptibility, including the Vista de Oro subdivision. The purpose of this water storage is exclusively for fire suppression efforts in the wildland environment. Though the request was outside the intended use of the mini grant fund, it clearly met the criteria of community assistance, and since there was about \$5,000 left in the mini grant fund and no other immediate requests for the money, the request was approved. **Status:** Project completed. Tanks were delivered, buried, and plumbed in early Aug. and the tanks were filled a couple weeks later.

**Forest Lakes** – *La Plata County*

\$300 to assist with a community “mitigation awareness” event in late June. Funds covered the rental of the community building, water, and snacks. Partners involved in the event included the FireWise Council, CSFS, BLM/FS, Upper Pine River Fire Dept. and two mitigation contractors. **Status:** Project completed.

**Additional 2010 Accomplishments**

- Hired a part-time Community Wildfire Protection Plan (CWPP) Coordinator
- Shared CWPP Framework (developed in 2009) with Ambassadors and CSFS State Office
- Wrote article on Firewise accomplishments for SJMA Spring/Fall Newsletters
- Wrote nine “Focus on Firewise” newsletters and/or monthly E-News (about 3,000 contacts)
- Facilitated six Steering Committee meetings
- Held three Ambassador Orientations for new Ambassadors
  - May -- 4 Ambassadors, 1 media, 1 other
  - Oct. – 9 Ambassadors

- Dec. – 2 Ambassadors (Montezuma County)
- Hosted Volunteer Picnic and Recognition Event (Aug.)
- Made presentations to County Commissioners, civic groups, FLC class, and HOAs (approx. 800 contacts)
- Participated in/organized education/outreach activities at Forest Lakes, Durango West 2, Summit Lake East, Cedar Mesa Ranches, and Durango Farmer’s Market
- Shared information about our program with Western Region Wildfire Council (Montrose/Telluride) as they hope to develop a similar program
- Contracted with professional writer and professional photographer to assist with documenting FireWise projects in southwest Colorado (See attached stories)
- Worked with Durango Herald and Cortez Journal on several articles about mitigation and our FireWise program
- Partnered with Pagosa Lakes POA on the development of a defensible space project (treating greenbelt area between two subdivisions) in Archuleta County using grant money from CSFS
- Collaborated with Mountain Studies Institute, CSFS, and BLM/FS on the wildfire and mitigation portion of the La Plata County Community Energy Action Plan (CEAP)

### **Grant Monies Received**

The FireWise Council received several grants in 2010. All were invaluable in allowing us to sustain and grow the FireWise program and we are most grateful to all our funders. Grants received include:

- ▶ **\$21,935 from La Plata County** for Program Director
- ▶ **\$18, 850 from Montezuma County** for Montezuma Chapter Coordinator (includes some time for Program Director)
- ▶ **\$12,200 from Colorado State Forest Service** for the development of two demonstration sites -- one in Archuleta County and one in Montezuma County
- ▶ **\$15,000 from the San Juan Public Lands Center** for Fire Prevention and Education Month in 2011 as well as other outreach and education activities
- ▶ **\$44,000 from the BLM** (\$3,600 for Program Director’s time in counties outside La Plata County, \$7,400 for Educational Workshops and Displays and CWPP Collaborative Efforts, \$9,000 for CWPP Coordinator position, and \$24,000 for Ambassador “Mini Grant Fund”)
- ▶ **\$535.00 from Archuleta County** to assist with Ambassador recognition, orientation expenses, and DVD reprints



# Focus on Firewise

*in Southwest Colorado*

## FireWise Success Stories in Southwest Colorado



2010

## About These Success Stories

Though the date on this compilation of FireWise stories is 2010, these stories represent many years of hard work by dedicated volunteers and community members. Many of them have been with the FireWise Council of Southwest Colorado since its inception in 2003 and/or the Neighborhood Ambassador Program which came into being in 2004. And this is just a sampling of success stories -- more are happening every month.

On behalf of our local fire departments as well as our local, state, and federal partners, I thank these FireWise Neighborhood Ambassadors for their tireless dedication and persistence in working with their neighbors to improve their community's wildfire preparedness, and ultimately that of southwest Colorado. We all know it hasn't always been easy.

Your efforts are truly appreciated. The work you and your neighbors have accomplished will hold our communities in good stead when that next big wildfire comes. And there's no doubt it will come.

The FireWise Council's many partners have also given considerable time over the past seven years attending and presenting at FireWise Council meetings and homeowner meetings, reviewing documents, and assessing properties and making recommendations. What the FireWise Council and our Neighborhood Ambassadors have accomplished would not have happened without your technical, monetary, and moral support, and for that I thank you.

Funding from La Plata and Montezuma Counties for the past two years has been invaluable in allowing the Council to sustain and grow and is much appreciated. In addition to the Council's efforts towards making our communities safer and creating healthier forests, we also feel that relationships between fire departments, emergency managers, and residents are being enhanced and we hope you do also!

And last, but not least, thanks to Rae Brooks for capturing the spirit of each of the Neighborhood Ambassadors and their efforts to enhance their communities' safety.

With many thanks and much gratitude,

*Pam*

Pam Wilson, Program Director  
FireWise of Southwest Colorado

**FireWise Success Stories**  
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## Deer Valley Estates: *CWPP Helps Residents with Wildfire Preparedness*

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Les Kole never imagined when he volunteered to write a wildfire plan for his Colorado subdivision in 2007 that the task would take him more than two years.

Deer Valley Estates' Community Wildfire Protection Plan was approved in December 2009, the first such plan to gain official sign-off in La Plata County. The 32-page document comes complete with graphs, tables and photographs, and also contains five maps, seven appendixes and a further 27 pages of reference material.

"It's a good feeling to have it done," said Kole. "We're much better prepared."

Kole volunteered for the job after attending a meeting of the FireWise Council of Southwest Colorado in 2006, then being named Deer Valley's FireWise Ambassador by the subdivision's board of directors. He had written plenty of reports and proposals during his 35-year career as a parks and recreation manager and had also served as a wildland firefighter. He had been evacuated for wildfires four times while living in California.



*Volunteer limbing trees cut for shaded fuel break.*

Located 25 miles east of Durango, Deer Valley Estates is a 360-acre parcel of land, heavily timbered with Ponderosa pine and thick with Gambel oak underbrush. With 34 of its 84 lots jutting up against the San Juan National Forest, the community is considered at high risk for catastrophic wildfire.

The Healthy Forest Restoration Act of 2003 encourages all communities within the wildland-urban interface to examine their risk of wildland fire and develop action plans to reduce their exposure. The priorities laid out in these Community Wildfire Protection Plans (CWPPs) influence how local, state and federal funds are spent.

Kole spent a lot of time reading CWPPs written by professional companies for communities throughout the West. "I did a lot of research," Kole said. "I worked on it every morning four or five days a week."

A \$2,000 grant from its local FireWise Council allowed Deer Valley Estates to hire a firm to produce the maps for its CWPP. The community also distributed laminated sets of maps to local dispatchers, first responders, the sheriff's department and others.

The CWPP recognizes that Deer Valley Estates, which includes about 150 year-round residents, can be damaged merely by the presence of wildfire, even if homes are not destroyed. "When views are seriously eroded, much of the intrinsic value of the residences will be lost," the plan

says. “Large areas of heavily burned, charred forest are objectionable, whether or not the structures burn.”

Installing standardized, reflective address signs on all lots, so emergency workers can easily spot them, was the top priority identified as the plan was under development. The signs, provided by La Plata County, were in place even before the CWPP was approved. The community also



*Volunteers working on the shaded fuel break.*

installed two 10,000-gallon underground water tanks, plumbed to the fire district’s specifications. Residents rely on their own wells for water, as Deer Valley has no fire hydrants.

Creating shaded fuel breaks by thinning vegetation along seven roads was another priority. The right of way extended an additional 15 feet on each side of the 30-foot roads, allowing for a 60-foot-wide fuel break. Roads, especially those running along ridges, give firefighters a chance to halt a fast-moving wildfire.

With the help of a \$12,050 grant from the Colorado State Forest Service, 27 volunteers worked more than 500 hours on the project. They removed brush, stumps, deadfall, and a total of 265 Ponderosa pines along almost four miles of roads.

“We’ve opened up the right of way to the fullest extent,” said Kole, “so that gives us extra protection if a fire comes towards us.” The work hasn’t detracted from the area’s natural beauty either. “Actually when you drive through, you can’t even tell where those trees were taken out,” Kole added.

Mitigation work will continue in and adjoining Deer Valley Estates for many years. The CWPP divides the subdivision into six zones where the Ponderosa pine will be thinned and lower-growing ladder fuels will be removed. The work will be done in stages, with the final zone slated for treatment in 2016. The plan also calls for constructing hammerhead turnarounds at the end of dead-end roads to improve emergency vehicle access. The San Juan National Forest mitigated a 200-foot strip on three sides of the subdivision in 2004 and is getting ready to hydromow that area again. An additional 3.8 acres of Forest that has never been treated is scheduled for thinning in 2017.

Almost all Deer Valley Estates property owners have already cleared or reduced fuel and vegetation on their own property to slow the spread of wildfire toward their home and reduce the intensity of the fire as it passes.

The CWPP did, however, identify two homes that were only marginally defensible. Having wildfire hazards laid out in such chillingly detailed fashion has changed mindsets, said Kole. Long-time residents who had never cleared any brush on their property are now taking action.

*Les Kole has been a FireWise Neighborhood Ambassador since 2006 and currently serves as Chairman of the FireWise Council’s Steering Committee as well as heading up Deer Valley’s Firewise Committee.*

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## Durango Ridge Ranch: *A Wildlife Watcher's Paradise Just Got Even Better*

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Patricia Haupt knew mitigation would help protect her home from wildfire. She was pleasantly surprised to find it also improved wildlife viewing.

"I can literally look out any window of my home, or stand on my deck, and spot deer and elk," said Haupt. "Before they would have been hidden because of the scrub oak."

Haupt and her husband, Jim Wygle, live at Durango Ridge Ranch, eight miles west of Durango, Colorado, at the base of the La Plata Mountains. The former working ranch, which pushes up against the 4,000-acre Perins Peak State Wildlife Area, was split into 34 lots in 1996, with 19 homes now built.

In July 2010, extensive mitigation was carried out in the wildlife area, which abuts Haupt's and Wygle's home to the west, north and northeast, and also adjoins several other Durango Ridge properties.

The couple also mitigated their own ranch-style home, completed in 2008, initially clearing a 30-foot perimeter. Since then, they've extended the cleared area to 100 feet, leaving patches of oak for nesting birds and to provide some greenery.



*A hydromower created large opening in the dense oak brush in the Perins Peak Wildlife Area.*

Six years earlier, Haupt had a first-hand lesson on wildland fire and its dangers. In 2002, the Hayman fire -- the largest in Colorado history -- burned within four miles of the couple's home in Roxborough Park, a development nestled against the foothills southwest of Denver.

The Hayman Fire scorched more than 138,000 acres, burned 133 homes and forced the evacuation of 5,340 people.

"We were on reverse 911 for three days," said Haupt. "You couldn't see across the street to the neighbor's house, that's how bad the smoke was. You couldn't stay in your house, unless you had air conditioning."

With the fire approaching, emergency crews came through Roxborough Park, marking all the homes with colored surveyors' tape to indicate whether they would be defended, considered for protection, or passed on by.

Later, many owners whose homes were tagged for drive-by cleared vegetation and removed wood-shake roofs and siding in favor of more fireproof materials. "It was a rude awakening for a

lot of people,” said Haupt, “so a lot of homeowners stepped up and did something about it.” Haupt, who volunteers as a FireWise Ambassador since moving to Durango Ridge, has emphasized that mitigation work should be done on the 1,500-acre development’s southern end. Most of the homes in Durango Ridge are located in this area of rolling hills, densely covered with Ponderosa pine.

With the help of a \$7,000 grant from the FireWise Council of Southwest Colorado, mitigation has just been completed along almost half of the seven miles of road within the development. A crew thinned stands of Ponderosa pine around curves, and removed low-growing limbs and scrub oak in other areas.

They also cleared an area to provide a safety zone for firefighters and heavily mitigated another where roads intersect in order to allow better access for emergency responders.

The vegetation changes on the northern, more-elevated portion of the ranch, where Haupt and Wygle live. Fires in this area in the early part of the last century stripped away the Ponderosa pine, leaving mostly scrub oak -- and vista views.

The mitigation work done on the couple’s land, and in the Perins Peak State Wildlife Area, have only improved those views. Haupt reports 10 black bear sightings in the few weeks since the work was done. Besides elk and deer, she has also spotted hawks, falcons and eagles.

The thinning of vegetation benefited some of the wildlife, too. Haupt noticed that a pair of nesting Golden eagles, which she has been observing since moving to Durango Ridge, suddenly had a lot more hunting territory.

And she is optimistic that mitigation work recently done by neighbors will attract newcomers.

“Three or four homeowners have really opened up their parcels,” she said. “So hopefully, with more hunting area, we’ll have another pair of nesting eagles.”

*Patricia Haupt has been a FireWise Neighborhood Ambassador since 2007 and frequently serves as an “alternate” on the FireWise Steering Committee.*



*Line of sight was improved at many of the curves along the subdivision's roads.*



*Oakbrush was pushed back 10-15 feet from the road to increase the size of the fuel break.*

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## Elk Stream Ranch: *Trying to Best Mother Nature*

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Left to her own devices, Mother Nature would have been doing her own mitigation work over the years at Elk Stream Ranch, a southwest Colorado subdivision, creating a mosaic of burned and unburned areas that would have left the area less susceptible to intense wildland fires.

Fire suppression efforts, however, have short-circuited the natural fire cycle, allowing the buildup of unnatural levels of brush and deadwood.

“If we’re not going to let Nature do it, then we’ve got to do it ourselves,” said Elk Stream property owner Philip Walters. “If we don’t, Nature is going to get impatient and send fire and pestilence in here to do it for us.”

But Walters, who spearheaded the creation of a Community Wildfire Protection Plan (CWPP) for Elk Stream Ranch, knows that fear alone can’t inspire the subdivision’s 35 property owners to undertake mitigation work.

“You have to sell it through its positive value,” he said. “It’s going to make the forest healthier, safer, and more attractive.”

Elk Stream’s CWPP focuses on keeping the subdivision’s East Canyon roads open during a wildfire. The community, located halfway between Durango in the foothills of the La Plata Mountains, had a narrow brush with wildland fire in 2002. Residents were on stand-by for evacuation when the Cow Camp Fire burned to within five miles of the subdivision’s southern border.

“They thought the fire would get down in the canyon, which is aligned with the prevailing afternoon winds,” said Walters, an engineer who does energy-efficient research for an environmental consulting company.

Although that scenario didn’t play out, Walters says there is nothing like watching a wildfire to spur interest in fuels management. It certainly got him interested. The CWPP that Walters spent 18 months shepherding to completion was the first approved in Montezuma County and also in southwest Colorado. Adopted in 2008, the 10-year plan focuses on reducing fuels within 150 feet of each side of Elk Stream’s canyon roads.

“That would give us, when finished, a 300-foot fuel break, centered on the road,” said Walters. Three years into the project, about a third of the work has been completed.

A fuel break along Road 46, the main canyon road, will allow easier evacuation of residents and easier entry for firefighters. It will also provide firefighters with anchor points, helping them contain fire to one side of the canyon.





Homeowners and the subdivision are sharing costs for the mitigation work, with each being reimbursed half their expenses through a Colorado State Forest Service grant. “Even without the grant, the subdivision would still do 50 percent of it,” said Walters. “The grant helps us take the project a lot further.”

Work began in the summer of 2008, as the economy nose-dived. “Just about the time we were getting going, everybody slammed their wallets shut,” Walters said. They received an extension for the grant work, and have since picked up momentum.

A hydromower has performed most of the mitigation, chewing up brush, Gambel oak and ladder fuels, then broadcasting the mulch to help stabilize soil.

Other work was done by hand, sometimes by property owners themselves, using chainsaws. Owners, Walters learned, have different aesthetics. Some went for a manicured look; others left clumps of oak and brush.

Many were pleasantly surprised to discover how many attractive trees they had on their property after the underbrush was removed. Wildlife viewing also improved. Increased settlement in the canyon had chased away elk, for example, but they have started returning to the mitigated areas.

“I don’t think elk like crashing through the heavy brush anymore than we do,” said Walters.

Getting absentee owners to participate in the mitigation work has been challenging. About half of Elk Steam’s property owners are investors, with no plans to build. “They don’t see any reason to participate, even if it’s heavily subsidized,” said Walters, who has lived at Elk Stream since 1999.

Mitigating 150 feet from the center of roads means going well beyond the normal easement, so property owners must be sold on the importance of the work. Many who are unfamiliar with the process visualize in horror a bulldozed firebreak.

But Walters expected it to be a long, slow project. “You won’t get through to everybody every year,” he said. “Some people you may never get through to. The best you can do is try.”

*Philip Walters has been a FireWise Neighborhood Ambassador since the program’s inception in 2004.*



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## Fort Lewis Mesa FPD Station #5

*Working together for the greater good*

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Land: Donated by a local rancher. Building: Paid for by a state government grant. Water storage tanks: Delivery and plumbing hardware covered by a grant from the local fire council, with excavation donated by a local contractor and muscle power provided by volunteer firefighters.

The result: The fifth and newest station of the Fort Lewis Mesa Fire Protection District in southwestern Colorado. Situated on Country Road 117 about 21 miles west of Durango, Station #5 opened in April 2010.



“There’s actually more work in doing it this way than going out and putting the money on the table,” said Chief Steve Ebner. “Problem is we don’t have the money to put on the table.”

The Fort Lewis Mesa fire district encompasses about 250 square miles, with 35 volunteer members providing protection from structural and wildland fire to 1,450 rural households. Station #5 is located on the district’s western side, which is highly susceptible to fire, with frequent summer lightning strikes.

The 1,838-square-foot building houses a water tender, engine and brush tanker. Although it is not staffed around the clock, nine volunteers live within three miles.

The community, Chief Ebner added, was a big help in building the station. The property owners’ association at Vista de Oro, a nearby subdivision, initially located the land for the station. Neighbor Ted Wiedemann agreed to donate eight acres from his 100-acre holding.

Vista de Oro also maintains the county road that the station sits on, and does snow plowing in the winter.

After the parcel, worth \$68,000, was subdivided from Wiedemann’s property, the fire protection district applied for a Department of Local Affairs grant to build the station, with letters of support from Vista de Oro. It received \$139,000, which covered the cost of construction.

“When the state sees that the local community really wants this to happen, it makes a difference,” said J.T. Coyne, Vista de Oro Firewise Ambassador.

For water storage, Ebner tracked down two 12,000-gallon tanks in New Mexico, then asked the Firewise Council of Southwest Colorado for \$4,500 to ship the tanks to Colorado and buy parts to plumb them to the fire district’s requirements. A local contractor offered to bury the tanks and volunteer firefighters did the plumbing.

With a clip of a ceremonial ribbon strung across the bay doors, the new station officially opened on April 23, 2010. Clyde Johnson, president of the fire district's board of directors, did the ribbon-cutting honors before a crowd that included two La Plata county commissioners, all five members of the fire district's board of directors, and Ebner and his assistant chief.

The new station proved its worth less than two months later. In the early morning hours of June 20, the King Coal Mine called 911 to report that fire had broken out in a large equipment-repair shop.

Station #5 lay just three miles from the mine. Previously, the nearest station was more than eight miles away. Crew from Station #5 were at the mine within 11 minutes, and successfully suppressed the fire, saving much of the equipment in the building and preventing the fire from spreading into nearby dry brush.

In September 2010 the finishing touch was put on the Station when mitigation was completed on the 9-acre parcel. Chief Ebner had asked Fuels Specialist Todd Gardiner of the Dolores Public Lands Office if the BLM would consider treating the 40-acre parcel just to the north of the Station.

"The BLM land was dense pinyon-juniper forest and definitely needed treatment," said Gardiner.

Gardiner coordinated it so the contractor hydromowed the Station land at the same time so "the treatments flow together very nicely."



*Dense vegetation near fire station.*



*Back side of the fire station after mitigation.*

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## Home Ignition Zone Workshop: *Making the Home Area Defensible Against Flying Embers*

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If homeowners don't take the time to prepare their property for wildland fire, hard-pressed firefighters will move on when a fire is raging and concentrate their limited resources on more defensible homes.

"That's a harsh reality," said Steve Ebner, who probably opened a few eyes when he told students at a workshop held recently in Durango, Colo., that firefighters forced to ration resources look at unprotected homes as fuel for the fire.

"When you think about it, it really makes sense," added Ebner, chief of the Fort Lewis Mesa Fire Protection District in southwestern Colorado. "Why should we take the time when the homeowner hasn't?"



*Students visit with instructors Steve Ebner and Cassie Ramsey (right) during the home assessment.*

Eighteen students, most serving as Firewise Ambassadors for their neighborhoods or subdivisions, took the two-day workshop, entitled "Assessing Wildfire Hazards in the Home Ignition Zone," from April 30 to May 1, 2010.



*Students in the 2010 Home Ignition Zone Workshop*

Marilyn Brown, Firewise Ambassador for Timberline Estates, a subdivision east of Durango, wasn't even sure what the workshop title meant before she signed up. But she found the class indispensable. There will never be enough fire engines to have one sitting at the end of every driveway, she said, so homeowners have to do their part.

Ken Kurz also lauded the class. "For me, it was invaluable, even though I felt I was quite well-informed," said Kurz, Firewise Ambassador for the Rock Ridge subdivision in northwestern Durango.

Sponsored by the FireWise Council of Southwest Colorado and the San Juan Public Lands Center, the course focused on reducing home loss in the wildland-urban interface by teaching owners how to reduce the ignitability of their homes and immediate surroundings.

The workshop had never before been offered in the district, although Fort Lewis Mesa firefighters had covered similar topics in their outreach efforts with property owners.

Two of Ebner's colleagues with the Fort Lewis Mesa district -- John Vogel, wildland fire captain and Cassie Ramsey, wildland fire lieutenant -- also served as instructors.



*Students work on filling out their assessment sheets.*

A three-hour field trip on the second day offered students a chance to conduct hands-on evaluations of two subdivision homes and recommend mitigation measures.

Even if resources were available, firefighters are limited in their response when homes aren't properly mitigated, said Ebner. "We prepare as best we can to be effective in these wildland-urban interface settings," he said. "But if homeowners don't prepare their property, then it's difficult to do the job we're trained to do."

Trying to fight fire on property that has not been properly prepared to withstand fire also puts firefighter's lives at risk, said Ebner. And, while mitigation isn't cheap, it costs just a fraction of fighting fire.

Homeowners don't have to cut down every tree to make their property safer, Ebner pointed out. But proper thinning, reducing ladder fuels and creating buffer zones make homes more defensible, especially because fire-suppression policies over the past century have resulted in severe overgrowth.

Students also heard about new research that shows how wildland fire actually ignites homes. Most homes survive the initial fire front, but succumb to flying embers that set ablaze cedar-shake siding, woodpiles, left-over construction material, grassy wells around basement windows or other flammable material.

The FireWise Council hopes to offer the workshop next year in neighboring Montezuma and Archuleta counties.

Impressed with the FireWise program and its FireWise Ambassadors who took the course, the Fort Lewis Mesa Fire Protection District originally wanted to return its teaching fee to the FireWise Council, but was persuaded to take it, and in turn, donated it to the Fort Lewis Mesa Fire Fighters Association fund, which helps pay for specialized firefighting gear and equipment.

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## Indian Camp Ranch:

### *Mitigation Protects Homes and Archeological Sites*

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Indian Camp Ranch isn't just the country's first archeological subdivision; it's also probably the first to tout its own fire truck.

And those signs posted on every property that tell firefighters where the fire hydrants are and how much hose to lay out to reach the house? Also likely unique to Indian Camp Ranch.

"We've tried in our own amateur way to be as smart as we can get in the fire business," said Indian Camp Ranch developer and owner Archie Hanson.

The 1,200-acre development, set on open farmland and gentle terrain covered with pinon pine and juniper forests, lies two miles west of Cortez in southwestern Colorado. Hanson and his wife, Mary, decided to make the Cortez area their home more than 20 years ago after taking a guided archeological tour of the Southwest.

A long-time California real-estate developer, Hanson accumulated land west of Cortez, then, unusually, commissioned an archeological survey before subdividing the property in 1989. To his surprise, archeologists identified 210 Anasazi ruins -- homes, granaries, towers, and middens for refuse -- the densest concentration recorded in Colorado.

Feeling a responsibility to preserve the sites, Hanson wrote up rules governing how buyers would be expected to protect them, even though Colorado law places no restrictions on owners with ruins on their property. Each 35-acre Indian Camp parcel contains at least one Anasazi site -- some have as many as 17. The Hansons have excavated an entire Anasazi village on their property.

The fertility that likely attracted the Anasazi still remains: Indian Camp Ranch is designated agricultural land. A local rancher raises 450 acres of wheat annually on parts of all 32 Indian Camp properties and grazes 160 head of cattle for three-month periods in the spring and winter.

Besides protecting the ruins, Hanson vowed to make Indian Camp Ranch as fire-proof as possible. Over the years, he has performed large-scale thinning work and encouraged homeowners -- 19 homes have now been built -- to mitigate their own property.



*Mitigated area below home.*

"We have preached that we need 10-foot crown separation," he said. "If you have a 10-foot crown separation, you cannot have a forest fire."

He also laid out extra roads to provide access to fire-prone areas; had maps made detailing the location of every homeowner's butane tank, and gas, electrical and water connections; and equipped five residents with emergency satchels containing maps, flares, flashlights, and fire extinguishers.

Every man, woman and child in the sprawling subdivision has been taught to head for one of the two entrances when they see smoke to help the first firefighters on the scene get to the source of the fire.

A number-and-letter grid system for addresses also helps firefighters find homes. “We aren’t allowed to name anything Bluebird Lane or Prettyview Road,” said Hanson. “It’s not very romantic, but it’s practical.”

Once firefighters roll up to a 35-acre property, the metal-framed reflective signs, an Indian Camp Ranch exclusive, tell them immediately how much hose they will need and the location of fire hydrants.

Hanson also gave fire extinguishers, hidden in wine bottles with the bottoms chopped off, to all homeowners. Cooking is the leading cause of house fires in the United States, and Hanson believes that, by disguising them, women will actually keep his fire extinguishers in their kitchens.

And there’s the fire truck: Hanson bought a 2,000-gallon gasoline delivery truck, painted it red, and equipped it with pumps and hundreds of feet of fire hose. It stands ready, with keys in the ignition.

“Everyone’s under orders to grab and go,” he said. “You don’t have to ask permission.”



*Mitigation has occurred on the area on the right side of the photo but not the left.*

Hanson doesn’t expect the truck will ever shoot water directly on a fire, but it could resupply firefighters with water. Meanwhile, the truck gets used for watering roads and other chores.

The subdivision’s biggest project was the removal of more than 8,000 pinon pines hit by beetle infestation. A \$43,000 cost-share grant from the Colorado State Forest Service covered half the cost. “It looked awful, and it was a fire hazard,” said Hanson. “We’ve had as many as 2,600 lightning strikes in one day. Lightning strikes were our big worry, not a person with a match.”

The work at Indian Camp Ranch, which was completed in July 2002, eventually spurred the adjoining Canyons of the Ancients National Monument to undertake its own thinning project. A hydromower removed vegetation along a two-mile common property line to reinforce Indian Camp’s own fuel break, and created a mosaic pattern over another 240 acres. Archeologists had identified islands of Anasazi sites, which were left untouched.

“They did a beautiful job,” said Hanson, no doubt cheering both the thinning operations and the care taken to preserve the Anasazi ruins.

*Archie Hanson has been a FireWise Neighborhood Ambassador since the program’s inception in 2004.*

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## Rock Ridge: *One Homeowner's Efforts to Protect His Home*

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Ken Kurz has gone about reducing the risk of his home being destroyed by wildfire -- and influencing his neighbors to take similar measures -- in the same careful manner that he must have once directed an Eli Lilly research laboratory in Indianapolis, Indiana.

In his mitigation quest, Kurz has consulted local firefighters, had three home inspections -- including one carried out on behalf of his home insurer -- and attended a two-day workshop to learn how to reduce the ignitability of his home and its immediate surroundings.

"As a scientist, I'm a little bit on the analytical side," said Kurz, Firewise Ambassador for Rockridge, an 80-acre subdivision in northwestern Durango, Colorado.

Kurz holds a doctoral degree in physiology and describes himself as "blissfully retired." Since moving to Rockridge in 2005 with his wife, Debbie, he has worked progressively on mitigation, beginning with items closest to his home and working outward to his property line.

Bordered by the Perins Peak State Wildlife Area and by land administered by the Bureau of Land Management, Rockridge is rated at the highest level of wildfire risk by La Plata County.

Kurz started by following advice from a firefighter to remove an understory of Gambel oak from a stand of Ponderosa pine near his home. When his neighbors saw the results, some of them were inspired to do some thinning of their own.

"There's a common misconception that, 'Oh, gee, if I mitigate I just clear-cut everything, and I'll lose my privacy,'" said Kurz. "But you can cut the lower limbs and remove the understory, and still have your privacy."

Kurz has also encouraged his neighbors to take advantage of the city's twice-annual slash pickups. Some people are dissuaded from doing mitigation because of the large amounts of slash accumulated, he said.

To get the word out, Kurz made up a flyer, explaining to his neighbors why it is important to create defensible space around their homes.

Being a scientist, Kurz provided Web links to back up his claims. He then piggy-backed on newspaper deliveries in his area, inserting his flyer into the papers, as they were being



*Before understory removal.*



*After understory removal of oak and other brush.*



delivered. "It's something they are going to open," said Kurz, who has sent out the flyers for the past two years.

Kurz wishes everyone in his subdivision would mitigate, but a firefighter told him to be patient and persistent, as he encourages his neighbors to take action. "Each year, about half a dozen will do some mitigation," he said. "Gradually, we'll increase the numbers who have taken the initiative to decrease the risk."

In the spring of 2010, Kurz learned at the two-day workshop that it's not the approaching wall of flame that poses the greatest risk to homes. Instead strong winds accompanying wildfire may deliver a blizzard of small embers that ignite spot fires on flammable surfaces up to a mile ahead of the main fire. Firefighting resources can be quickly overwhelmed dealing with these spot fires, even though hydrants may be available throughout a neighborhood.

That got Kurz thinking. The stone planter close to his house, which held low-growing evergreen shrubs to provide screening for his deck, also contained bark mulch. The blizzard of embers could ignite the bark, spread to the shrubs and then to the wood-clad undersurface of his roof overhangs.



"And this is after I've done all this mitigation," he said.

He got rid of the bark mulch. The area under his deck, where pine needles and leaves could accumulate, was also vulnerable. Kurz screened it off with rusted corrugated steel sheeting.

*Kurz installed rusted corrugated steel under his deck and steps to prevent the accumulation of debris and/or flying embers from becoming lodged underneath.*

Then there were the doormats that sat outside all three doors to his house. The mats most effective at removing dirt from shoes were made from a petroleum by-product, a firefighter told him. The thickly grassed mats would be perfect surfaces for embers to accumulate -- and eventually ignite.

"Just like kindling in a bonfire," he said. "Even though I've mitigated most of my property, something as simple as that could burn my house down." Kurz switched to thick rubber mats.

Now Kurz has decided to replace the bark mulch under the low-growing shrubs around his house with a five-foot perimeter of gravel. The particular shrubs Kurz selected had been recommended by the Colorado State Forest Service for their high moisture content. But embers could easily ignite the mulch and spread fire to the walls of his house.

Kurz is waiting for the leaves to drop before starting the project. He promises his wife the gravel will only be visible in the spring after the snow melts and before the bushes come into leaf.

*Ken Kurz has been a FireWise Neighborhood Ambassador since 2008.*



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## Tripp Creek:

### *Improving Access and Sight Distance for Firefighters*

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For weeks, Joy Mathis watched in horror -- and fascination -- as the second largest wildfire in Colorado history burned across the Animas Valley from her home in a gated community north of Durango.

While the Missionary Ridge Fire was raging, a smaller blaze called the Valley Fire, which began in a nearby subdivision after an electric fence ignited weeds, burned 10 homes in just minutes and sent flames to within a mile of the Mathis home in Tripp Creek.

“Those people barely got out with their lives,” said Mathis. “It was a nightmare. We were on alert to evacuate. Those fires got me very interested in preparing for fire, and what I could do for my community.”

The Missionary Ridge Fire eventually charred more than 70,000 acres, burned 56 homes and forced the evacuation of 2,300 families.

Just two weeks before the Missionary Ridge Fire started on a Sunday afternoon in early June 2002, Mathis and her husband, Scott, finished mitigating their six-acre sloped property. They had moved to Tripp Creek just eight months earlier, and hired a private company to hand-thin brush and trees the first spring they lived in the subdivision.

“It was just something we needed to do, and we’re really glad we did,” said Mathis, a registered nurse who serves as the FireWise Ambassador for Tripp Creek.

“When the fire department came up to alert us about the fire, they were quite in awe of the work we’d done on our own property, and said they could indeed save our home, if the fire spread to our community.”

That mitigation work hasn’t been a one-shot deal either. The couple, who moved to Colorado from southern Florida in 1998, keep it up every year.

“Trees grow,” said Mathis. “You have to make sure you maintain your property. Plus you have a moral obligation to your neighbors and



the surrounding forest. We are close to Forest Service land. They did a huge amount of mitigation. It needs to be a joint effort. They've done their work and we should do ours, too."

The subdivision allowed the U.S. Forest Service to use Tripp Creek Road, the development's only entrance and exit, to reach the mitigation work area in the San Juan National Forest. Six of the seven properties at Tripp Creek abut the mitigation area, which lies between Tripp Creek and the subdivision where the Valley Fire started.

The two-year thinning operation, officially called the Tripp Gulch Mechanical Fuels Project, was completed in 2010. A contractor reduced fuels on 128 acres by mowing a mosaic pattern that emphasized natural clumps and openings. The Southwest Conservation Corps used chainsaws to hand-thin another 49 acres on steep ground, piling the vegetation into teepees for later burning.

In 2009, the subdivision had begun expanding the right of way on Tripp Creek Road. A resident donated \$2,000 for the initial work. It was completed in April 2010, with the help of a \$2,000 mini-grant from the FireWise Council of Southwest Colorado.

"Now the overhang isn't so thick or heavy, so it's safer for the firefighters," said Mathis. "And the fire hydrants are easily seen and accessible."

Mathis also spearheaded the collection of information for a call list that provides detailed information on all the subdivision's residents, including next of kin and out-of-state contacts, and whether the household keeps any animals, or contains any individuals with special needs.



*Clearing around a fire hydrant to make it more visible and accessible.*

"And anything else they want to put down," said Mathis. "It's a pretty detailed spreadsheet, so if there is any type of emergency, people have a way of getting hold of each other."

In 2003, Mathis co-produced and co-directed a 30-minute documentary video called "After the Fire," about the Missionary Ridge Fire and the mudslides that occurred in its aftermath. The aim was to show people what can happen, and encourage them to mitigate their homes to prevent future fire loss.

*Joy Mathis has been a FireWise Neighborhood Ambassador since the program's inception in 2004.*

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## Vista De Oro:

### *On the way to becoming a recognized Firewise community*

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The brush has been cleared, the cisterns buried, and the firebreaks plowed. But the citizens of the Vista de Oro subdivision in southwestern Colorado aren't finished: They are now aiming to be designated a nationally recognized Firewise community.

In 2002, when the subdivision opened, few of the new homeowners had experience living in fire-prone areas. Set on agricultural land 22 miles west of Durango, the community was rated as highly at risk for wildland fire, based on accessibility, building construction, availability of water and other factors.



*Residents learn about a brush tanker during an annual clean-up day.*

After buying a 35-acre Vista de Oro lot the year it opened, retired naval officer J.T. Coyne began attending meetings of the Firewise Council of Southwest Colorado, which teaches homeowners how to protect their property from wildfire. On Coyne's encouragement, the Vista de Oro's homeowners' association joined the council in 2004 and began looking at ways to reduce the subdivision's risk of wildland fire.

The community first set up a phone tree, so residents could alert each other in the event of a fire. They all now carry laminated wallet cards that list names, telephone numbers and other details for all the subdivision's residents, including what pets they own, so they can account, if necessary, for each other and everyone's animals. They also added road signs, so firefighters could find their way around the subdivision.

The community also began holding annual cleanups to clear brush from common areas and from around electrical transformers and underground utilities.

A fast-burning blaze that approached the border of the subdivision in 2007 spurred residents to further action. "As the ember flies, it wasn't far at all," said Coyne, who was evacuated with other residents. "Everyone could see how big the fire was and how fast it moved."

Before the fire, Coyne had been having trouble convincing all his neighbors to remove trees and shrubs close to their homes and to reduce fuels in the surrounding area. After the fire, he said, "they were totally convinced to become a Firewise community." The next year, residents began adding cisterns on their properties to make water more available to firefighters. The community also bought two larger recycled gas storage tanks for additional water storage. A nearby contractor donated time and equipment for the excavation work to bury the tanks. Round blue

reflectors near number signs on driveways mark homes with the large cisterns, which hold 6,000 gallons each. A single house fire can consume 16,000 gallons.

The same year, a mini-grant from its local Firewise Council allowed the subdivision to hire a bulldozer to cut a 12-foot firebreak in heavy juniper forest on its western border with a ranch.

Last year, Vista de Oro residents received a community assistance grant from the Bureau of Land Management to thin vegetation on larger portions of their properties to provide a fuel break to slow any fire that might emerge from a nearby canyon. Coyne, who now chairs the subdivision's Firewise Committee, got a \$1,000 grant to thin three acres. He hired a four-man crew, equipped with chainsaws and chippers. Homeowners received a total of \$21,000, with some thinning up to eight acres.



The property owners' association is now aiming for the subdivision to qualify as a nationally recognized Firewise community, which officially denotes that the community has achieved a high level of protection against wildland fire. Among the requirements is a community assessment and action plan. Vista de Oro's Community Wildfire Protection Plan, a detailed document that includes history of fire in the area, description of terrain and homes, mitigation plans and evacuation plans, is close to completion. The community, said Coyne, hopes to earn the Firewise designation by the end of 2010.



*J.T. Coyne has been a Firewise Neighborhood Ambassador since 2004 and serves on the Firewise Council's Steering Committee, as well as Vista de Oro's Firewise Committee.*

## **Fuels Reduction Effort Crosses Boundaries to Make Durango Safer from Wildfire**

*Ann Bond, Public Affairs Specialist, San Juan Public Lands Center*

DURANGO – Government agencies have joined with private landowners in 2010 to reach across jurisdictional boundaries to reduce fire danger on thousands of acres on the western boundary of Durango. The goal of the combined efforts is to create fuel breaks across an oakbrush-dominated landscape of hills and ridgelines stretching from Durango to the La Plata Mountains.

“Federal, state and local governments are working with private developers and subdivisions to manage vegetation over a large landscape to protect the public, firefighters, communities and ecosystems,” said Craig Goodell, San Juan Public Lands Center Fire Mitigation and Education Specialist.

The BLM and Division of Wildlife, which jointly manage 13,442 acres in the adjacent Perins Peak Management Area, both hired Rue Logging of South Fork to thin vegetation on state and federal lands adjacent to Twin Buttes. The contractor used hydro-axes to create openings with the double purpose of reducing fire danger and improving wildlife habitat.

“Our project focused on 215 acres of BLM lands, which we identified as strategic for reducing the potential spread of a wildfire,” said Craig Sullivan, BLM Perins Peak Mechanical Fuels Project Coordinator.

The Division of Wildlife portion of the project was much larger, with hydro-axes treating 1,400 acres of state lands stretching from west of the Durango City limits to rural subdivisions east of Hesperus. Horizon Environmental Services and Ecosphere Environmental Services of Durango were hired to plant 28,000 ponderosa pine seedlings to help re-vegetate 350 acres where large trees were nonexistent but desirable from an ecological perspective. The state’s portion of the project was funded through an American Recovery and Reinvestment Act grant administered by the Colorado State Forest Service.

“The key to this project, and others like it, will be monitoring and maintenance of the ecosystem at a landscape level,” said Joe Lewandowski, Colorado Division of Wildlife Southwest Region Public Information Specialist. “This includes the surrounding private and public lands, and all the projects that have occurred across the landscape. I would measure the long-term success by our ability to maintain and tie together what we have started.”

In a newly incorporated area on the west side of town, the Durango City Council included a Forest Management Plan as a Condition of Approval for annexation of the new Twin Buttes development. The plan addresses wildfire mitigation and forest

health over the entire 597-acre property, with Twin Buttes responsible for forest management on the 317 acres to be developed for home sites, and the City of Durango responsible for managing the designated open space.

A grant from the Colorado State Forest Service funded fuels reduction on 124 acres of the Cliff Rock open space parcel. The City hired Ecosphere Environmental Services of Durango to manage the project and Coal Bed Creek Construction of Dove Creek to do the mitigation work. Fuel breaks were cleared in a mosaic pattern with hydro-axes, machines with front-end attachments resembling giant lawn-mower blades. The City expects to have funds remaining to treat an additional 280 acres of open space soon to be dedicated by Twin Buttes.

“This is a case of a developer thinking ahead and working with the City to reduce fire danger and improve wildlife habitat,” said Maria Irwin, Ecosphere forestry consultant on the Twin Buttes project.

The City and Twin Buttes also signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and Colorado Division of Wildlife to pool resources towards further comprehensive fuels reduction. The agreement granted the BLM a perpetual easement across the private property and municipal open space to access federal lands for future agreed-upon projects.

Meanwhile, residents of Durango Ridge Ranch on the western boundary of the state wildlife area were working to accomplish the same goals after their 1,500-acre subdivision of 35-acre ranchettes was rated by La Plata County as having high fire risk on its Fire Risk Communities of Concern map.

Patricia Haupt, a volunteer FireWise Neighborhood Ambassador, and her husband, Jim Wygle, created defensible space around their home and encouraged neighbors to follow suit. To date, 19 Durango Ridge homeowners have completed almost 900 hours of fuels mitigation work, either through their own labor or under contract. In addition, a grant from the FireWise Council of Southwest Colorado allowed the subdivision to thin vegetation along its roads to make evacuation for residents and access for firefighters easier and safer in the event of a wildfire.

The nearby Durango West 1 and 2 subdivisions, located to the south and east of Durango Ridge Ranch, have gone a step further and developed Community Wildfire Protection Plans (CWPPs).

“These plans help homeowners improve their wildfire readiness,” said Pam Wilson, Program Director for FireWise of Southwest Colorado. “It’s not just about fuels mitigation – recommended actions might include changing restrictive covenants, adding water sources, enlarging turnarounds on dead-end roads, clearing rights-of-way or improving signage. Ideally, plans are done through a collaborative process, which can really bring a community together working towards a common goal.”

In 2009, Durango West 1, a 55-acre subdivision with 256 homes and a population of 650 residents, received a grant from FireWise to hire Short Forestry of Mancos to develop a CWPP, which was completed in 2009. The metro district also secured a grant from the Colorado State Forest Service to thin vegetation on 11 acres of common property, one of the recommendations in the CWPP. Some 20 property owners have continued mitigation work on their residences, including hazard-tree and shrub removal, branch pruning, and needle removal from roofs and gutters.

Across the highway, Durango West 2, a 260-acre subdivision with 357 homes and 1,500 residents, received two separate grants from the Colorado State Forest Service – one to develop a CWPP (to be completed this month by Short Forestry) and one to reduce fuels on 56 acres of common property, a prioritized action in the CWPP. The contract for the mitigation work has been awarded to Affordable Fellers, Inc. of Durango. Both Durango West subdivisions include Firewise educational information in their monthly billing statements to residents and homeowner newsletters, and sponsor annual clean-up days and community fire prevention events.

The overall result of these public and private projects is that both the developed and undeveloped areas west of Durango will be far less vulnerable to the threat of catastrophic wildfire. Additional fuels-reduction projects have both been completed and are planned within the larger landscape.

“Projects are strategically chosen and conducted in the areas of greatest need to provide the best level of protection possible in what fire managers call the wildland-urban interface,” said the BLM’s Craig Sullivan. “Cumulatively, these efforts are beginning to link together an important buffer of protection against destructive wildfires for the communities in and around Durango.”

The BLM and U.S. Forest Service have treated vegetation northwest of Durango on public lands in the areas of Hidden Valley, Junction Creek, Deep Creek, Falls Creek, Tripp Gulch and Animas City Mountain. In addition, the City of Durango has conducted hand-thinning in Dalla and Overend Mountain Parks on the west side of town. Private subdivisions and landowners in many of those same areas are following suit.

“Wildfires don’t respect property boundaries,” said the BLM’s Craig Goodell. “It takes collaborative efforts, such as these, across multiple jurisdictions and ownerships, to be truly effective in mitigating wildfire hazards.”