

Stewardship Stories: Wildfire Adapted Partnership (WAP) and the Crowley Ranch Reserve, OSC

By Sage Faulkner



The idea for this article was sparked at the most recent “Watering Hole” a social event Chama Peak Land Alliance (CPLA) hosts occasionally to let members gather and visit about conservation and stewardship needs and socialize amongst each other. Several guests from Crowley Ranch Reserve (CRR), in Chromo, Colorado, joined us and I soon found myself visiting Dawn and Chris Olson about the Wildfire Adapted Partnership (WAP) defensible space cost-share grant on CRR.

This is their story and we wanted to share it so that other landowners with WAP opportunities in their county might consider using this resource for those in WAP counties. We have all watched smoke billow over the last few years with growing concern as extenuating management issues, climate issues, standing dead, drought and broken landscape views all exacerbate the risk of wildfire. This is how a few volunteers; a ready-made program and a need came together to move in a positive direction for building defensible space around a common lifeline for a small community.

Because water is so important to CRR, the water tanks are a focal area of concern for wildfire mitigation. Dawn Olson and Jim Averbeck were co-chairs in Crowley’s OSC (Open Space Committee) in 2022 and hosted a meeting with a USDA forester, mitigation specialists, local firefighter resources and landowners. Several recommendations came out of that meeting for their small tight-knit community. Ultimately, the approval to apply for a WAP grant came through the 2022 HOA Board of CRR led by Steve Kohlhagen. A work plan was developed by the OSC to proactively address the risk of wildfire in the water tank area. After some push back from community members on the first proposal, additional expertise was sought from the fire modeling institute of the US Forestry Service and the plan was altered to better align with concerns. The WAP provided a detailed work plan, the OSC obtained mitigation bids, the cost-share program began the process, and with the project completion, the OSC was able to gift the cut oak logs to the community.

Balancing needs for safety and aesthetics, opening community dialogue, education, and fire concerns were key in the foundation of the successful execution of the grant, and the water tank area was successfully turned into a defensible space. It is important to note the process will be simpler for individual landowners as opposed to a homeowner's association, as building consensus often adds time.

WAP started because of the Missionary Ridge Fire near Durango. A Firewise USA meeting was held the following year, and the resulting non-profit that is today known as WAP got its roots from that community concern. The program is currently staffed by part-time coordinators and over 150 volunteer neighborhood ambassadors. The program is available in La Plata, San Juan, Archuleta, and Montezuma counties in Colorado. The cost share program helps landowners and communities address fire mitigation by developing defensible space and community planning for wildfire through education. Landowners in these counties can start by scheduling a home wildfire risk assessment at no cost.

Dawn says the grant process was quite easy as she and Jim worked with Bill Trimarco, the Archuleta County Coordinator for WAP. The project was completed in just over a year, and while +70 hours of volunteer time was logged on behalf of CRR, the overall work was completed between the WAP coordinator and the contractor that did the mitigation. The results gave the CRR water manager a foothold on dirt clearance needed around the water tanks, the aesthetic concerns were managed, defensible space was built, and community awareness was improved.

Congratulations to CRR for working towards wildfire adaptation!

Special thanks to Dawn Olson, Jim Averbeck, and Bill Trimarco / WAP for their information.

<https://www.wildfireadapted.org/>

photos courtesy of Dawn Olson, OSC and Jim Trimarco, WAP

Before



After

