

THE RANCH

COMMUNITY WILDFIRE RISK ASSESSMENT

Define Community:

The Ranch neighborhood is located north of Durango, CO just east of Highway 550 in the small community of Hermosa. It is in the Animas Valley with relatively flat topography which slopes from the west to the east toward the Animas River. Mountains up to 2500 ft. above the valley floor surround the Animas Valley. Private land holdings extend from the valley floor up the ridges to the east and west but the San Juan National Forest occurs on the top, or close to it, of the ridges.

The Ranch contains a mix of townhouses and single family homes totaling about 110 units. The townhouses occur in pairs as duplexes. Most of the homes have wood siding and about 25-30% of the homes still have wood shake roofs which were required when the community was developed. The rest have some type of composite roofing material.

The neighborhood is approximately 285 acres in size and has community "common space" dispersed throughout the homes in a mosaic pattern. The common space is characterized by a couple of ½-2 acre parks with sizable ponds and then the rest of the space varies in size but no lots appear to exceed approximately ½ acre in size. The space between many units ranges from approximately 30 feet to 100 feet. A complex system of small streams and ponds run throughout the neighborhood. The neighborhood has paved roads that allow easy two way traffic but only a single access to Hwy. 550.



Grass or trees cover the entire neighborhood and it has extensive water features. Frequent

sprinkler irrigation occurs from May – October. The irrigation is on timers set to turn on every few days. The result of the irrigation is that the grass, shrubs, and trees are lush. The entire neighborhood is mowed about once per week during the May-October growing season. Numerous ponderosa pine and spruce trees permeate the neighborhood. The developer planted most of them in the late 1970s – early 1990s. The trees have grown quickly due to irrigation and relatively fertile soils and many are 10-18 inches in diameter. The crowns are broad due to open spacing and unfortunately are close to many homes due to small lot sizes. In fact many homes have tree branches touching the sides of the home or overhanging the roof. The forested “reserve” area (approximately 36 acres) is on the southeast corner of the neighborhood and it contains a mixture of large cottonwood and small boxelder trees. This reserve area is bordered on the south by Hermosa creek (about 20 ft. wide) and on the east by pastureland. A few spruce trees are beginning to seed into the reserve but are mostly small.



Wildfire Risk:

Due to extensive, well-mowed grass in the neighborhood the likelihood of surface fire spread is slim. The most likely source of fire spread would be from a house fire where flying embers drop onto nearby combustible materials on an adjoining home. The same scenario could play out if there was a crown fire burning on the San Juan National Forest, especially to the west of the community, and sparks and embers landed on shake shingle roofing and combustible materials near homes; burning embers from the Missionary Ridge and Valley fires in 2002 rained down on The Ranch. The large, broad tree crowns could provide a good vector for fire spread among often-closely spaced structures. While embers are most likely to ignite a home, trees could easily carry fire from structure to structure.



Trees overhanging homes also drop needles which can accumulate on rooftops and in gutters. The roof edge is a particularly vulnerable part of most homes.

There is some likelihood that the reserve forested area could serve as an initial source of fire which could then spread to one or more of the eight houses located in a strip roughly 100 feet from it. The deciduous trees that comprise the overstory and understory of the tree canopy likely would not carry a fire well. There is, however, a significant groundcover of herbaceous plants which might serve as a vector for fire spread, especially in the dormant season or in a dry year.

Wildfire Preparedness Activities:

The Ranch has participated in FireWise of Southwest Colorado's Neighborhood Ambassador Program since 2013.

At the recommendation of the current Ambassador, a retired forester, the HOA removed hazard trees (especially dead and dying aspen) and pruned pines and spruce four times during 2015-2016 in the common spaces between the houses. At the same time, some homeowners removed trees and tree branches overhanging their roof or touching the sides of the houses, using CSFS guidelines as much as possible, especially in zones 1 and 2. In both years, the HOA took advantage of FireWise's Chipper Rebate Program.

Community Strengths and Vulnerabilities:

Strengths of The Ranch neighborhood include flat terrain, paved two-lane roads in the interior of the neighborhood, irrigated and mowed lawns, including common areas, pervasive water features which would limit ground fire spread, four previous removal and pruning activities

(chipping partially funded via FireWise chipping grants), and a relatively strong Ranch Property Owners Association (RPOA) that can make many decisions, especially on activities with trees and shrubs particularly in the common areas.

The primary vulnerabilities of The Ranch neighborhood include its single access point to Hwy. 550, with juniper bushes extending from the entrance to the mail house on Cottonwood Creek Road, and high vulnerability of home ignition from falling embers with the quarter to one third of homes with shake shingle roofs, large trees which drop needles on roofs and decks, and other combustibles around homes. An ignition to the juniper bushes could make it difficult to impossible to exit the neighborhood.



Figure 1Left: Though trees are well irrigated and construction details include a stone barrier adjacent to the wood siding, gutters trap needles from nearby and overhanging trees, leaving this garage particularly vulnerable at its eaves. Right: This home has decent defensible space, but is extremely vulnerable due to its shake shingle roof.

Evacuation Readiness:

About half the homes are occupied by permanent residents while the other half are part-time residents. During the summer, more residents are present, perhaps 65-70%. During the winter months, only about 40-60% of residents are present at any one time. Due to close proximity of the homes and being a relatively close-knit group, most of the permanent residents know which homes are occupied and vacant.

It is unknown as to whether many of the homeowners have developed evacuation plans. To our knowledge there has been no concerted effort, at least in a long time, to organize any type

of evacuation or notification plan. There are no residents needing assistance at this time though most of the residents are of retirement age.

Plan of Action:

Based on the vulnerabilities and beliefs about fire risk and spread in your community, create a list of achievable actions to reduce the risk and make community members more prepared for wildfire.

Keep in mind the five areas of consideration for a Fire Adapted Community: Evacuation Readiness, Access, Built Environment, Defensible Space, and Community Protection.

Some initial ideas from The Ranch include:

- HOA replace wood shake roofs on mail house and pump house/storage shed
- Strongly encourage homeowners who still have wood shake roofs to replace them as soon as is financially possible
- Use the Community Assessment as an educational and inspirational tool for homeowners to comply with CSFS guidelines for defensible space and home hardening
- Identify and continue to remove any flammable material (trees, shrubs, etc.) within zones 1 and 2 of homes; this will involve a mixture of work in common areas by the RPOA and private space by homeowners
- Ensure that addresses are clearly marked and visible (reflective) for each home
- Replace wood street signs with reflective metal signs
- Organize a concerted effort to educate and encourage homeowners about readiness and evacuation planning as well as development of a community wide plan
- Encourage residents to register for Code Red (La Plata County Emergency Notification System)
- Seek Firewise Communities USA recognition
- Identify and clearly mark an alternative exit to The Ranch that could be used if the main entrance/exit is blocked

Using and Reviewing this Assessment:

This Assessment is a tool for sharing general information about the wildfire hazards in your community. The plan of action is for short-term goals to be pursued with the lead of the community's FireWise Neighborhood Ambassador(s). This plan should be reviewed each year to reflect the actions taken by the community and outline a further plan of action. As needed, the fire district and forestry professionals should be invited back to review the work that has been done, and its potential efficacy for addressing the risk it is proposed to reduce.

This Assessment can be used for the purposes of seeking Firewise Communities USA status from the national Firewise organization. See www.firewise.org for more information and to obtain an application.

This Assessment is not a substitute for individual homeowner action. It is critical for residents to become informed of their specific risks and vulnerabilities to life and property. Neighborhood

Ambassadors are available to provide technical support and encouragement for individual property actions, but will be focusing on their own properties and activities that can reduce the wildfire risks to the community as a whole. Even if you have addressed all of the vulnerabilities identified in this plan, there is no guarantee that there won't be significant losses from a wildfire in your community; however, every step taken as individuals and as a community reduces the risks posed by wildfire in your community. This Community Assessment was completed with input from:

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