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Article Launched: 5/19/2006 01:00 AM

local news

Fire-defense costs searing

Report: Treating 1.5 million acres on Front Range could hit \$600 million over 40 years

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To protect people from wildfire and restore the forests' health, a report released Thursday estimates 1.5 million acres in 10 Front Range counties must be "treated" by tree thinning and prescribed burns.

The price tag: At an average cost of more than \$400 an acre, treatment could hit \$15 million annually for 40 years - or a total tab of \$600 million.

"The numbers are overwhelming," said Rocky Mountain regional forester Rick Cables.

Pay now or pay later, Cables said, pointing out that Colorado's largest fire - the 138,000-acre Hayman in 2002 - cost \$240 million in firefighting, economic losses and rehabilitation. The money, he said, instead could have been used to reduce the risk of catastrophic wildfire.

The Front Range Fuels Partnership Roundtable, a consortium of 30 organizations formed in 2002 after the state's worst fire season, spent two years developing 10 recommendations on how to focus and speed up the work.

"Our forests are out of balance," said Brian McPeck, deputy director of The Nature Conservancy. "This is a solvable problem, and we all have a role to play in that."

The report urges more funding for forest treatments, incentives for private landowners who control more than half of the acreage at risk, treatment-cost reduction, increase in commercial uses for forest debris, promotion of community wildfire-protection plans, and prioritization of forest treatments.

"People are ready to get something done. That's a milestone in Colorado," said Bob Leaverton, supervisor of the Pike-San Isabel National Forest and Cimarron and Comanche national grasslands.

The report suggests "stewardship" contracts for treating large areas of federal lands, an approach the Forest Service will use this fall when it puts contracts out for bid to private companies.

"We can't burn it all," Leaverton later told commissioners in Jefferson County, where about 64,000 people live in high-wildfire-risk areas. "If we remove it, we can do something with it," such as contracting with private entrepreneurs to convert trees and debris into energy to bring treatment costs down.

Jim Bedwell, supervisor of the Arapaho-Roosevelt National Forest and Pawnee National Grassland, said trees removed from U.S. Forest Service lands won't be the total solution for biomass facilities such as the wood-pellet plant being considered in Jefferson County.

Accelerating fire-reduction efforts has taken on new urgency, with some areas in Colorado being drier now than in 2002.

"This fire season may be among the most challenging," Gov. Bill Owens told several hundred people who gathered at the Denver Botanic Gardens for the report's release.

On Thursday, Owens signed an act that creates the state's first permanent funding source for wildfire preparedness.

Revenue from a portion of mineral leases will flow into the fund, which is expected to provide about \$3.2 million each year for

firefighting equipment.

Owens also announced that Colorado is a partner in an interstate wildfire compact that he said will make it easier to provide resources across state lines.

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