

DENVER AND THE WEST

Establishing a Colorado Fire Plan Collaboration critical

By **Jim Hubbard**

At the close of the 2000 fire season, 3,569 wildfires had burned more than 167,000 acres in Colorado and destroyed over 74 homes and structures. We all breathed a sigh of relief that the fires of 2001 were not as large and devastating. But the risk is far from over.

Those of us that respond to wildfires – the U.S. Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management, other federal agencies, the Colorado State Forest Service, counties and local fire departments – feel only a temporary reprieve. Fires don't respect property lines so cooperative response efforts are critical. We know that restoring the condition of the land so that fire can function more naturally will take the same cooperative efforts across ownerships and jurisdictional boundaries.

As caretakers of public and private forests, we face grave risks ahead. While fire is a natural process in forest and grassland ecosystems, its ability to function naturally has been influenced by changing public values and management policies. Decades of aggressive fire suppression, in combination with drought cycles, past management practices and other influences, have left many of Colorado's forests with a heavy buildup of "fuels." These fuels include insect and disease killed trees, forests choked with dense growth, and grass and

shrublands overwhelmed by fire-prone invasive weeds. The situation is further complicated by the massive influx of people from urban cities into previous "wildland" areas. This zone where people and wildland fuels meet is known as the Wildland-Urban Interface – or, in Colorado, the "Red Zone."

Restoring fire to a more natural function in Colorado's forests and grasslands will require a variety of tools: prescribed burning, thinning of forest fuels, and use of natural fire to achieve resource benefits. In many places, the successful reintroduction of fire cannot go forward unless we begin by reducing vegetative fuels through thinning, thereby reducing the risk of out-of-control fires.

The public has an important responsibility to engage in discussion of how and where these tools are implemented. Many options are available, but it is up to the public to explore the tradeoffs and values involved in issues such as where to thin fuels for protection of people and resources, where to allow prescribed burning, and how to plan and respond to the related smoke and air quality impacts.

One thing is certain: Without timely action, current forest conditions will continue to support wildfires that threaten the safety of our firefighters and residents. These fires are costly to local, state and federal governments as

well as to the health of surrounding natural resources.

Through a collaborative effort known as the National Fire Plan, citizens and governments have taken steps to reduce the risks from wildfire to communities and the environment. States and the U.S. Forest Service received funds through their State and Private Forestry programs to target work with communities, rural fire departments, and private landowners. The Colorado State Forest Service and the U.S. Forest Service are working collaboratively along with other federal, state and local partners to implement landscape-scale projects across public and private boundaries.

Reducing the threat of wildfire to people and natural resources will require sustained effort and public investment. The State of Colorado has recently completed a Report on the Condition of Colorado's Forests, which outlines issues for public consideration. The Colorado State Forest Service also led an inter-agency working group that issued a report to the Governor on ways to improve the State's response to wildland-urban interface in a variety of areas. The Western Governors' Association is working with federal agencies and a variety of stakeholders to develop a process for these kinds of decisions to be made collaboratively. It is important that residents of Colorado en-

gage in these and related efforts to improve the sustainability of natural resources and values we all treasure.

Although the snow and cold temperatures of winter have dampened public concern over wildfire in Colorado, they have not reduced the long-term threat to lives, property and resources. The last decade of wildfires and forest health issues has served as a wake-up call compelling westerners to reevaluate our beliefs, actions, and policies about managing wildfire in the 21st Century. Now is the time to act. If we do not join and work together, we will be forced to react at a very high cost to both resources and communities.

Contact your local State and Forest Service offices to see how you can help reduce the risk of wildfire in and around your community.

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