

Funding shortfall dousing fire plan

Front Range protection is linked to federal aid

Article Published: Thursday, May 22, 2003 - 12:00:00 AM MST

By [Theo Stein](#), Denver Post Environment Writer

Forest officials Wednesday outlined an aggressive 10-year strategy of thinning and controlled burns to defend mountain communities scattered across half a million acres of Front Range forests from wildfires.

THE PLANS

Here are some of the larger wildfire-reduction projects planned for the Front Range:

New projects in planning:

James Creek Fuel Reduction, Arapaho-Roosevelt National Forest: Up to 5,000 acres of thinning and prescribed burns in 52,000-acre project area northwest of Boulder.

Sugarloaf Fuel Reduction, Arapaho-Roosevelt: 4,500 acres of thinning and 1,200 acres of prescribed burns in 36,000-acre project area just west of Boulder.

Projects underway or nearing start:

Trout West Fuels Reduction, Pike-San Isabel National Forest: The Hayman fire burned some of the 25,000 acres planned for thinning and burning near Woodland Park. Contracts to be let this year.

Upper South Platte Watershed Restoration, Pike-San Isabel National Forest: 17,500-acre demonstration project now entering second year of work. Hayman fire burned some of project area.

Crystal Lakes, Arapaho-Roosevelt National Forest: 3,000 acres of thinning and burning over 18,000-acre area near Red Feather Lake.

Winiger Ridge, Arapaho-Roosevelt: 1,000-acre demonstration project underway near Nederland.

But the effort faces a funding shortfall of more than \$55 million over the next four years that could leave the agencies with shelves full of plans and no money to implement them.

"Let's be upfront," said Jim Bedwell, supervisor of the Arapaho-Roosevelt National Forest. "We're going to need increased congressional support."

Project leaders said they hope to complete planning efforts for 180,000 acres of projects in the hills west of Fort Collins to Colorado Springs, and remove unnaturally dense and flammable underbrush on 28,000 acres with saws or controlled fire. But to do that they'll need \$9.9 million more than the \$16.2 million allotted for the current fiscal year, they said.

In 2004, officials hope to treat 35,750 acres and complete plans for another 145,000 acres. But they'll need \$12.9 million more than the \$18.7 million currently budgeted. Agency projections show the gap growing to \$16.3 million in 2005 and \$17.8 million in 2006.

Bedwell's remarks came at a briefing for congressional aides by the Front Range Fuel Treatment Partnership, the interagency effort convened by U.S. Forest Service regional forester Rick Cables after the calamitous 2002 fire season.

Last year showed that delays are not an option for at-risk towns like Evergreen, Estes Park and dozens of smaller communities scattered through the foothills, said Dave Hessel of the Colorado State Forest Service, chairman of the team.

Last year, 3,072 wildfires burned more than 600,000 acres and 388 houses in Colorado, according to the state office of emergency management. The combined costs of suppression, forest rehabilitation, rebuilding structures and the effects on the state economy totaled nearly \$2 billion.

The partnership, which includes the Forest Service, National Park Service, Rocky Mountain Research Station and the Colorado State Forest Service, is looking for ways to

address fire risk across a tinderbox mountainous landscape cut into a quilt of political jurisdictions.

A main tool will be grants funneled to communities willing to tackle the thick timber lapping up against their neighborhoods, like the Crystal Lakes subdivision in northern Larimer county.

"Our biggest concern is sustaining the funding for these projects," said Tony Simons, the county wildfire safety coordinator.

This year, Cables found \$4 million for hazardous-fuel programs on the Pike-San Isabel and Arapaho-Roosevelt National Forests by cutting forest budgets elsewhere in the region.

"We've made the investment with our own funds to get started," Bedwell said. "But it's not something we can do every year."

Forest supervisor Bob Leaverton, supervisor of the Pike-San Isabel National Forest said President Bush's Healthy Forest legislation might help speed up individual projects by limiting environmental reviews and appeals.

The bill, written by U.S. Rep. Scott McInnis, R-Grand Junction, and approved by the House of Representatives on Tuesday, contains no money for actual work.

But Leaverton said Bush's support should signal to private investors that a steady, long-term supply of small-diameter trees and wood chips will be coming out of Western forests.

In the long run, Forest Service officials hope to develop markets for wood and competition for contracts to reduce the \$600-per-acre cost of thinning.

"If we can get the cost down, we can cover more ground," he said.