

SPECIAL REPORT

Out front on the Front Range



Work continues for districts

Shortly after Colorado's Hayman Fire scorched nearly 138,000 acres in the summer of 2002, NACD set out to learn about the economic and environmental consequences of fire.

Our report, "What We Leave on the Land," is available for review at NACD's Web site, www.nacdnet.org/special-reports/.

A visit to the Colorado Rocky Mountains Front Range in September 2003 by NACD's Urban, Community and Coastal Resources Committee is the occasion for this fire follow-up report. "Out Front on the Front Range" reviews the successes and challenges faced by fire-tested conservation partners. Their messages are straightforward and positive, intended to show what worked, what didn't and what

can be done to improve our actions.

A lot is at stake as we seek to evolve and improve our work in fire-prone regions of the West and elsewhere in America.

One thing is certain: The list of people willing to pitch in is impressive. It includes the USDA Forest Service, state foresters, conservation districts, local communities and fire departments, watershed associations, homeowner associations and literally thousands of local volunteers.

A big job it is, too. A broad consensus agrees: There will be more, bigger fires in the future. But we've learned a lot about fire in recent years, and the pace of work to mitigate wildfire impacts and to better manage forested lands has increased dramatically.



Landowner Mel Koleber was named district conservationist of the year by the Jefferson Conservation District in Colorado for his efforts to rehabilitate lands scarred by wildfires.

'Critical role' for local conservation pros

Colorado State Forester Jim Hubbard doesn't mince words when he talks about conservation districts' roles in fire activities. "Especially in restoration and emergency rehabilitation, they're critical. They are at the front line," he says. "They are the ones in contact with the private landowners most directly."

Hubbard cites the work of Colorado conservation districts in response to the huge Hayman Fire of 2002 and other fires, including the 2000 Hi Meadow Fire. The Douglas, Jefferson and Teller-Park districts all had roles in coordinating restoration and emergency rehabilitation. These are not large, well-funded districts. Typically they have one district employee, Natural Resource Conservation Service technical assistance partners and, most importantly, active, engaged boards. Still, they have earned Hubbard's respect for their work.

"During a fire, most of the other agencies are involved in suppression efforts," he says. "Conservation districts deal with the people and their needs." Colorado districts have served as the first line of contact for private landowners in the wake of fires. "I was getting calls 24 hours a day," recalls Jefferson District Manager Sally Lobel about her experiences during the Hayman Fire.

Those contacts are essential, because landowners must grant permission for site surveys on their land and subsequent restoration and rehabilitation efforts.

"Districts in Colorado have been very much involved in applying for restoration funds, coordinating volunteers and participating in recovery activities," says Hubbard. Districts have also been hard at work on education and outreach aimed at helping landowners with defensible space efforts. In the Teller-Park district, the conservation district board has been active in looking for ways to encourage development of biomass enterprises that would use the excess fuel loads from local forests to develop products of value or produce energy.

Districts on the Front Range have been tested by fire. They have scored some successes and run into some challenges. We review

some of those one pages two and three of this report. A key message for other districts: Your expertise and understanding of local needs and watersheds are essential. Get involved. Stay involved. You are needed.

Key points from the Front Range

- It's important for conservation districts to develop working relationships with USDA Forest Service and state forestry agencies. Conservation districts on the Front Range have run training sessions for volunteers involved in post-fire rehabilitation. They have also encouraged FireWise activities through a variety of educational and outreach efforts.
- District watershed expertise and local connections are invaluable during and after wildfires. While other agencies are involved in fire suppression, districts can be at the front line in contacting private landowners and paving the way for rehabilitation and restoration efforts.
- Watersheds don't stop at political boundaries. Forming a watershed association can assure that activities are coordinated at the watershed scale. The Douglas, Jefferson and Teller-Park conservation districts were among founders of the Coalition for the South Platte (CUSP).
- The wildland/urban interface doesn't stop at the edge of a town. Colorado's Front Range is an example of a "broad" interface. Districts can help encourage wise development in these areas, reducing risk to people and structures when fires occur.

Adding up some successes

Conservation districts are increasingly involved in fire control efforts, including education, fuel reduction and post-fire rehabilitation. Based on experiences of district involvement in Colorado, here are some successes that underscore the value of district involvement in fire collaboration efforts.

Watershed work

Three conservation districts were among original sponsors of the Coalition for the Upper South Platte (CUSP) and remain active with the watershed protection group. At the request of the Forest Service, CUSP took over operation of the Forest Service's Hayrack Fire Assistance Center, set up during the Hayman Fire to provide assistance to fire victims. CUSP coordinated more than 40,000 hours of volunteer time for fire rehabilitation. The nonprofit group continues to receive and channel funds to local partners like conservation districts for a variety of activities.

District Legwork

The Jefferson Conservation District has served as the connector for fire victims and assistance. The district is the first contact linking landowners to post-fire assistance.

Local expertise

Conservation districts and their long-time technical assistance partners, the Natural Resources Conservation Service, have considerable watershed expertise. That expertise was put to test in post-fire conditions from Colorado's Hi Meadow and Hayman fires. Together, the partners administered NRCS Watershed Protection program (EWP) funding.

Local contracting

By serving as the local sponsor for EWP funds, the Jefferson Conservation District was able to use local contracting authority to rapidly contract for post-fire work crews. The slower government bids process was avoided. Rapid response is essential to protecting watersheds with aerial seeding, contour tree felling and other post-fire activities. Sponsors have 220 days to expend EWP funds once they are provided.

Educate for gains

Conservation districts such as Jefferson continue extensive education work on fire outreach, stressing fuel load reduction, use of safe building materials and other activities in the suite of defensible practices advocated under the National Fire Plan. The activities are crucial. As noted in the Western State Foresters' 2002 "Fire in the West" report, "Information and education has the greatest long-term impacts." The Jefferson District was among those that held a workshop for fire volunteers, contractors and homeowners on seeding, ground scarification, contour tree felling, sandbagging and other restoration activities.

Treatments work

As noted in the 2002 "Fire in the West" report: "In the critical Cheesman Reservoir area, the only green pine trees left after the passage of the (Hayman) wildfire were in a narrow band around the edge of the reservoir where vegetation had been thinned to enhance recreation, in the area burned by a previous forest fire in the '60s and in the area of a fuel reduction project funded in part by a (National Fire Plan) grant." The USDA Forest Service, the state forestry



Rustic cabins along the South Platte River are available for rent to anglers, but the river is threatened by sediment from the Hayman Fire of 2002.

agency and Denver Water were among partners in that project. As the body of evidence that proper fuel treatment strategies can mitigate wildfire impacts, conservation districts should continue to work with federal, state and local National Fire Plan collaborators to build on and communicate successes.

Creative matching

EWP requires a 25 percent match from the sponsor. In the case of Colorado's Hayman Fire, downed trees used for contour tree-felling to abate erosion were valued at \$15 each.

Small-diameter symposium

The Teller-Park Conservation District planned to host a symposium on the use of small-diameter wood products on Oct. 31. Speakers were to include the local USDA Forest Service district ranger, a panel on harvesting opportunities on federal and state lands and another panel on markets available now and in the future. Information will be provided on financial and technical assistance for developing small businesses. A follow-up forum is planned on available grants to assist in business start-ups.

Totaling the costs

The Teller-Park District aims to team up with Denver Water in the coming year to sponsor a forum on the true cost of wildfire, using the Hayman Fire as a case study. Costs are plentiful, including suppression, rehabilitation, expenses incurred by private landowners, continuing expenses for removing sediment from drinking water reservoirs, extra water treatment costs, destruction of fisheries and wildlife habitat, impacts on tourism and numerous other costs that linger long after the fire burns. "We want to use the examples of those real costs to argue for addition funds at the state and federal level for more wildfire prevention technology and application throughout the 'red zone' in Colorado," says Bill Gordon, president of the conservation district.

State credited with moving ahead

Districts have had success working with the Colorado state forestry agency, and they credit that agency for aggressively addressing fuel load reduction with accelerated contracting for cutting on state lands. This has encouraged more work on private land, and opened the door to other possibilities. For instance, the USDA Forest Service has the authority to contract with the state for work federal land when it adjoins state forests.

Acknowledging some challenges

Perched at the wildland/urban interface, thousands of communities across America are at risk. There are lessons to be learned from challenges identified by those who have experienced major fires. Here are some cited by conservation district voices and those of their partners for "Out Front on the Front Range":

Now what?

An emergency handbook for conservation districts was suggested by several Front Range conservationists. The handbook would include how-to information on steps to take during and after a fire, including how to contact landowners, sources of information, key names and contact numbers, standards and specifications on rehabilitation treatments, glossaries of terms and other information.

Waiting for funding

In the case of the Hayman Fire, federal EWP resources weren't received until 11 weeks after the fire was declared contained on July 2, 2002. EWP funds are special appropriations from Congress. In 2002, when more than 40 major fires burned, allocations were bundled for action. That resulted in some delays. As one conservation district partner put it, "If they could make it a line item in the federal NRCS budget based on historic uses, it could be easily allocated out annually."

Are we liable?

Liability can be an issue for conservation districts and other partners as they try to get involved with post-fire rehabilitation efforts. Using volunteers for local EWP match is an example. Technically, volunteer hours can't be counted retroactively. In the case of the Jefferson Conservation District, the county agreed to assume costs in order to expedite rehabilitation treatments. Contractors are generally covered by their own bonds and insurance, but take care to assess potential liabilities in fire activities.

Contacting landowners tough

Good records for land ownership, land use and topography are often lacking, making the job of contacting fire victims and private landowners difficult. Homeowner associations can be helpful in providing some of that information, and technologies like Geographic Information System computer programs can tighten the system.

Training needs ongoing

Thousands of volunteers jump in to help with fire restoration efforts. There's a need for increased and ongoing volunteer indoctrination, voices on the Front Range say.

A long time gone

Fires leave longtime scars on both land and water. Watershed issues such as flooding, impaired drinking water and declines in fish habitat can be felt years after wildfires. That makes initial fire rehabilitation efforts crucial.

Rehabilitation runs short

Hamstrung by budget shortages, the USDA Forest Service has been unable to complete restoration and rehabilitation work on its lands in the wake of the Hayman Fire. Funds committed to restoration were transferred to cover national fire suppression costs in 2002. The result: Landowners in burn area are the recipients of sediment moving from public lands.

EWP process cumbersome

Emergency Watershed Protection program funds are crucial to rehabilitation and restoration on private lands, but the Teller-Park Conservation District found the process for contracting with private landowners for the work was cumbersome, says District President Bill Gordon. The district plans to host an exit conference on how the process might be improved.

Long-term needs lacking

Emergency restoration and rehabilitation funding doesn't address long-term needs in the wake of wildfires. Districts don't have the resources to meet ongoing needs, and other sources are lacking. "We have a real lack of resources," says Karen Berry, a member of the Jefferson District. Landowner Mel Koleber has been working hard to restore his family's land in the wake of the Hayman Fire. "It's very disheartening to think about in my son's time and my grandson's time what we can expect around here."



The South Platte River rumbles down canyon walls below the Cheesman Reservoir dam. The South Platte watershed supplies up to 80 percent of the drinking water for the Denver metropolitan area.

NACD committee learns at the interface

NACD's Urban, Community and Coastal Resources Committee was addressing its priorities when it went in search of information during its September meeting in Lakewood, Colorado.

The wildland/urban interface and Smart Growth are two of the committee's top priorities. It chose Colorado and the rugged Rocky Mountains to explore complex issues that challenge communities located in the interface.

One definition of the wildland/urban interface is "any area where humans and their developments meet or are intermixed with wildland fuels." That definition appears in the 2002 Western State Fire Managers report, "Fire in the West." Underscoring the fact that the interface is a national concern, the report went on: "These locations can be as different as the pine forests of Flagstaff, the brush fields of San Bernardino, the palmetto thickets of Orlando, or the maple forests of Boston. Anywhere that buildings are erected in the woods, sooner or later, wildfire will be a threat to those buildings."

The committee learned that in graphic fashion on a field tour through fire-scarred areas where houses had been built. In parts of Colorado, rapid growth has collided with unnatural forest conditions with huge fuel buildups. The combination is frightening: More and bigger fires impacting more people.

Committee member Karen Berry, who lives in Jefferson County and also serves on the Jefferson Conservation District Board, has trained fire volunteers, helped the district conduct studies and encouraged wise development practices. "To me, Smart Growth includes efficient use of firefighting resources," she says. County hazard plans, required in Colorado, can help. "We would like to get people out of building in the 'stupid zone' so the Forest Service and others can use their funds for other purposes."

One tour participant noted that the field tour graphically underscored the challenges posed by "mountain subdivisions."

Luz Parris Sweetland, USDA Forest Service advisor, reminded the committee of the need to address its priorities in part by developing a larger partnership base. The committee saw examples of how that is being accomplished in the metropolitan Denver area. Conservation districts were among founders and remain active in the Coalition for the South Platte, a watershed group that encompasses 2,600 square miles of the South Platte River watershed.

"The idea of a watershed group is kind of new, but if I had any advice from you, it would be go home and form a watershed group,"



Members of NACD's Urban, Community and Coastal Resources Committee trudge up a rise while on a tour of the Front Range of the Colorado Rocky Mountains in September. Here, committee members are visiting a site charred by the Hi Meadow Fire of 2000. Local conservation districts and partners were able to deliver fire rehabilitation in a timely manner, evidenced by the growth of grasses that were aerial seeded after the fire.

CUSP Director Carol Aquarius told the committee as it gathered for her presentation at the Cheesman Reservoir, source of water for millions in the state.

CUSP's representation is broad, with conservation districts, communities, businesses, citizen groups and other members making up a board that is being expanded from the original 11 to 23 members. With such broad membership, the key to success is finding common ground, Aquarius said. Protecting a watershed that means so much to so many is one area where they have found that common ground. The group has played an expanding role in efforts to address wildland/urban interface issues and their impact on the key watershed.

NACD's commitment to issues explored by the committee is broad. NACD's board of directors has made passage of healthy forests legislation one of its top priorities. The Forest Resources Committee has made outreach and education on the National Fire Plan a priority for the past two years.

"Conservation districts need to find out everything we're doing in the National Fire Plan and Cohesive Strategy, and as one of the best conservation delivery systems in America, find out where they can become involved. It might be education, it might be fuel treatments, perhaps working with others to help develop small enterprise businesses that utilize small-diameter wood to manufacture products."

**Larry Payne, Director
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Contacts

National Fire Plan Web site:

www.fireplan.gov

Includes a wide range of information on the National Fire Plan, including contracting and grants information. Also includes links to interagency partners' Web sites.

NACD Web site:

www.nacdnet.org

Click on "Special Reports" for "Conservation Districts' Role in Implementing National Fire Plan," and "What We Leave on the Land," a report on the economic and environmental consequences of the Hayman Fire.

State Foresters

State foresters oversee an array of National Fire Plan and other forest health programs. An updated list of state foresters and their contact information can be found at www.stateforesters.org.

Local Federal Land Managers

Conservation districts that include or are adjacent to federal lands should contact local federal land managers and regional managers for the lands within the district.

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