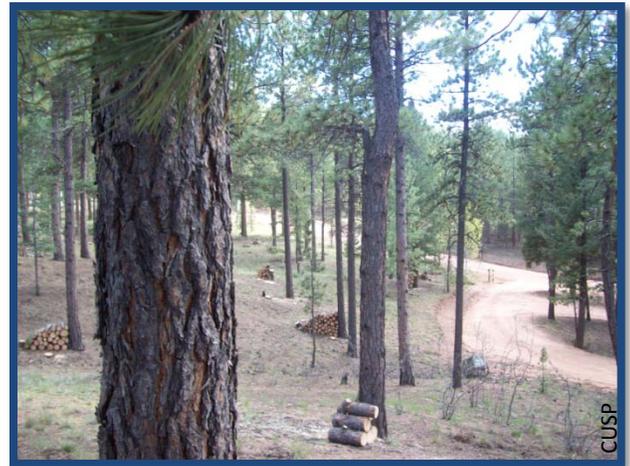


American Recovery and Reinvestment Act Colorado State Forest Service Success Story Community Wildfire Protection Plan Development and Implementation Grant



The South Platte River flows from the 14,000-foot mountain peaks west of Hoosier Pass. Seeps, rivulets and streams within a 2,600 square-mile area, which includes five counties and most of the Pike National Forest, converge to form the South Platte River. The river gently meanders through South Park and then turns north to continue its journey toward Denver and the northwest corner of the state. Its waters provide a variety of recreational opportunities and drinking water for the Denver metropolitan area.

The 1996 Buffalo Creek Fire, 2000 High Meadows Fire and 2002 Hayman Fire occurred in the Upper South Platte River watershed. For 60 years, neither nature nor humans adequately thinned trees in the area, so all three fires burned uncharacteristically hot. Homes were lost, wildlife was displaced, and tons of soil and debris poured into streams that fed the South Platte. The Upper South Platte provides more than 85 percent of the drinking water for the Denver metropolitan area, yet the vast majority of people who draw water from their taps do not realize how management activities in the watershed can affect them personally.

The Coalition for the Upper South Platte (CUSP), a charitable, nonprofit organization founded in 1998 and headquartered in Lake George, Colo., works with numerous partners and thousands of volunteers to improve water quality and ecological health, mitigate and suppress wildfires, provide information and education, and identify and sustain alternative sources of energy.

The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act Community Wildfire Protection Plan Development and Implementation Grant from the Colorado State Forest Service allowed CUSP to expand its wildfire preparedness services to communities in the watershed. To date, seven Community Wildfire Protection Plans (CWPPs) have been completed and five more are in progress. Many federal and state wildfire preparedness grants available to subdivisions, fire protection districts and counties require that communities have a CWPP in place in order to compete for funding.



Communities with existing CWPPs are working with CUSP to implement fuels-reduction projects identified in their plans. The work is located in right-of-ways, common areas and on a collection of individual properties. CUSP helps communities convert concepts described in CWPPs to tangible projects on the ground.

To date, the grant has allowed CUSP to create four in-house positions, utilize the services of five private contractors and reach out to additional communities in Douglas, El Paso, Park, and Teller counties.



With ARRA funding, CUSP rehired a former employee as the CWPP coordinator. Marti Campbell has a degree in forestry, but facilitating the development of a CWPP takes more than just natural resource knowledge – it requires patience, perseverance and commitment because plan development easily can take six months to complete. Through the process, residents learn what they can do as a community to reduce the negative impacts of wildfire and thereby have a healthier forest. “As a recipient of ARRA funding,” Campbell said, “we are proud to say these dollars are working right here and right now for the benefit of our communities and our forest.”

In January 2010, CUSP hired Mario Mora as a forester. In December 2010, he completed his first semester of a master’s degree in biology at Colorado State University-Pueblo, focusing on riparian ecology. Mario has an undergraduate degree in forestry and is a former U.S. Forest Service seasonal employee. Mora says that working with private landowners is a new experience, but it’s also the most rewarding part of the job. Some subdivisions are “seasoned” and others are implementing their first fire mitigation project. “I enjoy sharing the science that lies behind the action. We’re not just cutting trees, we’re affecting wildfire behavior, improving forest health and wildlife habitat,” said Mora. “We’re actively caring for the forest.”



After trees are thinned and shrubs removed from under tree canopies, something must be done with the cut vegetation. Tree trunks can be used for firewood and other products. It’s also important to leave some debris on the ground, where it can decompose and replenish the soil. As part of the CUSP Neighborhood Fuels Reduction Program, the field crew chips leftover debris for private landowners. Landowners cut trees and shrubs, piling the branches so they are easily accessible to the chipper. The three- to five-person crew then feeds the branches through the chipper dispersing the chips across the ground where they decompose and act as a valuable mulch and erosion-control byproduct.

Mark Herndon, CUSP field crew leader, has been a CUSP employee since 2004. He is the backbone of the field operation and is an experienced wildland firefighter. Each crew member has different work experience, ranging from a youth corps crew sawyer, a logger, a furniture maker who began as a volunteer and a filmmaker/web designer. Each enjoys the physically demanding outdoor work.

Jean Rodeck, a resident and fire mitigation proponent in the Ridgewood subdivision north of Woodland Park, has been whittling away at defensible space around her home for the past 10 years. In 2010, the area between her house and the road was completed, and work began on the hillside behind her house. “Between the guy who started the project and CUSP who tidied it up, it’s just fabulous,” Rodeck exclaimed. “CUSP guys are so wonderful; they sensitively do the work.”

