

Identification of Barriers to and Opportunities for Forest Health Forest Health Advisory Council

PROBLEM STATEMENT

As a result of changes in fire frequency, change in social values, recent draught and disease, and lack of active management, Colorado’s forests are unhealthy. Precious human values such as water and wildlife resources, recreation opportunities, and forested communities around the State are in jeopardy due to high-severity fire, insect infestations, and other transitional disturbances.

CHALLENGES, BARRIERS, AND OPPORTUNITIES

While the health of Colorado’s forests is impaired and requires urgent attention, there are many viable solutions to improving the situation. While no single action will effectively address the many challenges facing elected officials, land managers, and private citizens, there are many opportunities to make significant strides toward healthier conditions and more resilient communities.

<i>Challenge</i>	<i>Barriers</i>	<i>Opportunities</i>
<i>Wildfire</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Suppression costs are very high. • High-severity wildfires devastate human values and the ecosystem. • There is currently inadequate support for managers to utilize unplanned ignitions (lightning strikes, human-started fires) as a management tool. • Post-wildfire Burned Area Emergency Response (BAER) team values-at-risk (VAR) assessment legally allows only USFS land assessment of risk and not for non-USFS lands. VAR analysis also only allows assessment for short-term hydrologic impacts. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase and shift funding to active management in an attempt to decrease suppression costs. • Reintroduce the presence of low- and mid-severity fire on the landscape. • Identify a suitable planning process that allows land managers to utilize unplanned ignitions under the proper conditions. • Develop a collaborative approach to expanding post-wildfire so that VAR analysis done by the BAER Team crosses jurisdictional boundaries and the timeline is expanded (15 to 20 years).
<i>Prescribed Fire</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prescribed fire, although managed, still has inherent risk. • There are often not enough financial and staff resources to implement a prescribed fire. • Air-quality and other permitting processes and the associated limited burn windows discourage the use of prescribed fire. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase the use of prescribed fire as a matter of risk management when compared to wildfire. • Shift funding to active management. • Make air-quality and other permitting processes more flexible so that managers can use prescribed fire in a timely manner. • Share resources across agencies and non-governmental organizations to address capacity issues.

<i>Challenge</i>	<i>Barriers</i>	<i>Opportunities</i>
<i>Recreation</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Colorado citizens use the forest for many different recreation activities, which are sometimes viewed as conflicting with management needs. • Unhealthy forests can discourage recreation, which is a main driver of Colorado's economy. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase the health of Colorado's forests to accommodate a variety of recreation activities. • Educate recreational forest users about the importance of forest health and the presence of fire in the places where they recreate. • Encourage a robust recreation economy. • Better plan recreation use to maintain resource values while ensuring quality experiences.
<i>Limited Financial Resources</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There is not enough money available to drastically improve the health of Colorado's forests at the local, State, and federal levels. • Current resources are not being spent on proactive treatments and management tools. • Government processes, procedures, and staffing can slow or impede forest treatments. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop sources of revenue such as voluntary fees or self-imposed use taxes similar to the Pitman-Robertson Act or the Colorado lottery. • Use local government policy and regulations to mandate forest management before development in urban-interface acres, thus shifting fiscal responsibilities to those who will benefit from the development and sale of the properties. • Streamline governmental processes to maximum amount of money spent on the ground for management activities and minimize administrative costs.
<i>USFS Permitting and Culture</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The USFS permitting system for treatment is arduous and time consuming. • The USFS permitting system discourages timely action. • The USFS permitting system is internally and externally inconsistent. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encourage the USFS to improve agency culture and make policy changes that support a more realistic permitting process. • Encourage collaboration as a way to streamline the treatment process. • Encourage landscape-scale permitting when appropriate.
<i>Outreach and Education</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Many public officials do not adequately understand the issue and urgency of forest health. • The public is not often aware of the unhealthy state of Colorado's forests, and they misunderstand the necessary actions that must be taken to move closer to historical conditions. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide continuous and interactive education opportunities, rather than static resources, particularly for newly elected officials at all levels. • Educate the public in the forested areas they most often use for various recreation activities. • Foster a more complete understanding of the role of fire in the ecosystem.

<i>Challenge</i>	<i>Barriers</i>	<i>Opportunities</i>
<i>Timber Industry</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There is no consistent approach to fuel mitigation and forest restoration harvesting to meet the needs of timber companies. • The cost of biomass removal or utilization per acre is very high due to market inefficiencies and access challenges, particularly in Colorado's more rural and remote areas and in wilderness and roadless areas. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encourage agencies to prioritize creating a consistent, long-term timber harvesting program across the State. • Utilize and incentivize the timber industry as part of the solution to decreasing the cost of treatment, rather than the cause. • Improve and expand use of Good Neighbor Authority to facilitate forest treatments.
<i>Scientific Research</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The scientific community within Colorado does not have the funding or capacity to meet all research needs. • Current scientific efforts do not provide all the answers to land management issues. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify additional resources for research efforts that are focused on answering management-based questions. • Encourage the scientific community to releasing best-available science to inform decisions, even if it is not perfect.
<i>Water Quality</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Forest health and watershed health are directly related to water quality. Water quality, snowpack and snowmelt, and timing of water release are negatively affected by poor forest health. • Many headwaters are in remote areas with poor access and low-value timber. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Incentivize and fund forest management activities that are necessary to alter landscape-level forest health improvement in valuable headwaters and watersheds of Colorado. • Apply existing watershed protection best management practices to implement sound forest health and restoration projects. • Focus treatments on highly-erodible soils.
<i>Residential Development in the Wildland Urban Interface (WUI)</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Homeownership in the WUI comes with inherent risk, but WUI developers and homeowners do not directly bear the cost associated with this risk. The cost of fire response is born by all taxpayers, even those who do not live in the WUI. • A commitment to local control impedes the development of building codes to minimize fire risk. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work with the Department of Local Affairs (DOLA) to ensure that the draft/proposed resiliency code sufficiently addresses wildfire risk mitigation. • Work with local governments to develop local codes based on other resiliency models. • Develop educational program with realtors for realtors to ensure that WUI homeowners are making informed choices. • Expand recognition of wildfire councils through education and outreach.