

Wildfire Matters Review Committee

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Jake Niece

Ouray County Commissioner & former Wildland Firefighter

jniece@ourayco.gov

970 318 8204

Baldy Mountain Landscape Resiliency & Habitat Improvement Project (Baldy Project)

<https://www.fs.usda.gov/project/?project=58554&exp=overview>

The Baldy Project is a collaboration between the USFS, BLM, Mullins Ranch, CPW, Ouray County, CSFS, [West Region Wildfire Council](#) (WRWC), & other private landowners. It is located just southeast of Ridgway along HWY-550 and includes 3,839 acres in WUI to be treated with mechanical thinning and prescribed fire in selected areas.

Ouray County is actively supporting this project and assisting in communication with the public. In the past, some local governments and residents have opposed prescribed fire in WUI because of smoke impacts and fear of escape. The Baldy Project partners are working in unison to reverse that trend by holding field trips and town halls to explain the benefits of prescribed fire that include resiliency against unplanned and uncontrolled wildfires in the future, and habitat improvement for big game.

Simultaneously the West Region Wildfire Council is working with private property owners to perform wildfire mitigation on their properties. They are using state and federal funds to subsidize and perform mitigation services in subdivisions that abut the Baldy Project.

Ouray City-County Lands Wildfire Mitigation

https://ouraycountyco.gov/DocumentCenter/View/18504/Ouray-Project_SBF-Silvicultural-and-Project-Discussion-Points_732023

Ouray County and the City of Ouray own parcels of land surrounding the City of Ouray that are steep, rugged, and contain many dead trees, totaling 96.8 acres. The local governments are asking residents to mitigate their properties, so it is only right that that we mitigate the land we own. The County and City have shared the cost of contracting a local forester to develop a written assessment of the project area, mark trees, and solicit quotes from logging companies to perform a treatment. This assessment is currently in process (summer 2023). The timber cleared from this project on difficult terrain will not generate a profit so the work must be subsidized. The County and City are planning to apply for grants this fall and in 2024 to execute this project.

The USFS GMUG Ouray Ranger District is interested in dovetailing with this project on the USFS lands surrounding the City of Ouray to create a much larger cross-boundary landscape-scale mitigation project. Ouray District Ranger Dana Gardunio expressed that when local governments take initiative and invest local funds, it makes a very strong case for attracting BIL and IRA funds.

The State of Colorado can help this effort by creating/funding grants to perform this mitigation work as soon as 2024.

Ouray County Wildfire Mitigation Regulations

<https://ouraycountyco.gov/391/Wildfire-Mitigation-Regulations---Sectio>

Ouray County has comprehensive wildfire mitigation regulations built into our Land Use Code based on recommendations from the National Institute of Standards and Technology and National Interagency Fire Center.

West Region Wildfire Council (WRWC)

<https://cowildfire.org/>

WRWC is a non-profit that operates in Ouray, Hinsdale, San Miguel, Montrose, Gunnison, and Delta Counties. They focus on helping private landowners identify wildfire risks on their homes and land, and connect them with funds and contractors to execute the necessary work. They are also extremely effective at developing partnerships to plan and execute wildfire mitigation work. Ouray County financially supports their operation on a yearly basis, and the return on investment is immeasurably high.

Recent WRWC mitigation project in Ouray County: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zzwOAGLGDt8>

The State of Colorado should financially support WRWC and others like it across the state so they can expand their capacity to take advantage of BIL and IRA funds for mitigation.

Suggested State Action #1: State Mitigation Crews

The Problem:

- Wildfires are always funded because they are emergencies, resulting in slashed federal budgets for fuels reduction and prescribed fire.
- Federal government is under-compensating “Forestry Technicians” (wildland firefighters). Attrition is high & recruitment is low. Congress must pass the Wildland Firefighter Pay Protection act (S.2272) and Tim’s Act (H.R. 5631/S.1505) in order to prevent catastrophic attrition that will result in understaffed wildfires.
- Existing private foresters and loggers do not have the capacity to implement fuels reduction on the scale necessary. High cost of insurance for operating in WUI near expensive houses is a barrier.
- Foresters and loggers understandably focus on areas that are profitable. WUI areas are often not profitable for timber harvesting, but they are the most important to mitigate for human and property safety (resiliency). Timber harvesting also leaves behind slash that is a fire hazard and difficult to suppress when ignited. Profitable logging does not necessarily equal effective wildfire mitigation, though they are not mutually exclusive.
- Colorado needs an organization that will focus on performing mitigation in unprofitable WUI.

Possible Solution:

- Develop a state-run mitigation crew program under DFPC, CSFS, or other existing agency.
- 10 to 20 person hand crews that are focused on “project work.”
- Offer competitive pay, benefits, and stability to attract disgruntled federal wildland firefighters.
- Offer year-round and seasonal employment models.
- Combine experienced firefighters who are ready to leave “active duty” suppression with new recruits who are seeking training and experience.
- Hire formerly incarcerated people who worked on the State Wildland Inmate Fire Team (SWIFT). They are not hired by federal agencies because they have criminal records. [Colorado Sun Article on this topic](#)
- Use SWIFT crews for mitigation in addition to suppression.
- Build state-owned housing for seasonals and let them live in it at no cost while employed.
- Urge passage of federal legislation:
 - [The Wildland Firefighter Paycheck Protection Act of 2023 - S.2272](#)
 - Tim’s Act - [S.1505](#) & [H.R. 5631](#)

Suggested State Action #2: Engage Insurance Companies

Providing insurance of last resort is a bad idea ([HB23-1288](#)). It incentivizes building houses in hazardous areas. Colorado has not learned from the gulf states' experience with flood insurance that pays to rebuild houses destroyed by hurricanes multiple times.

Instead, Colorado should work with insurance companies to incentivize mitigation around homes and home hardening. This will be made easier once the new Wildfire Resiliency Code Board ([SB23-166](#)) implements statewide codes and standards. It would be wise to include insurers in the development of the new codes so that if a house meets these standards it will not be denied insurance. Homeowners that do more hardening and mitigation should receive lower rates.

References

- Tim's Act: <https://www.grassrootswildlandfirefighters.com/tims-act>
- Grassroots Wildland Firefighters: <https://www.grassrootswildlandfirefighters.com/>
- West Region Wildfire Council (WRWC): <https://cowildfire.org/>
- National Forest Foundation (NFF) Baldy Page: <https://www.nationalforests.org/regional-programs/rocky-mountain-region/baldy-mountain-landscape-resiliency-and-habitat-improvement-project>
- USFS Baldy Description: <https://www.fs.usda.gov/detail/gmug/news-events/?cid=FSEPRD1000773>
- USFS Baldy Details: <https://www.fs.usda.gov/project/?project=58554>
- Ouray City-County Lands Wildfire Mitigation Project: https://ouraycountyco.gov/DocumentCenter/View/18504/Ouray-Project_SBF-Silvicultural-and-Project-Discussion-Points_732023
- Colorado Sun Article on SWIFT: <https://coloradosun.com/2022/07/12/no-former-prisoners-have-been-hired-by-the-state-to-fight-wildfires-since-a-law-passed-to-help/>