

September 1, 2021

RE: Wildfire Matters Review Committee – Recommendations to Address Barriers for Wildfire Recovery

Dear Wildfire Matters Review Committee Members,

Denver Water has significant, long-term experience in wildfire recovery and investments in forest health in and around our watersheds. Through the challenges experienced after wildfires have occurred, we have learned several lessons and identified opportunities for efficiency as well as proactive investments that we would like to share with the committee.

Denver Water has learned that recovery is a long process. It has been more than 20 years since the 1996 Buffalo Creek Fire and almost 20 years since the 2002 Hayman Fire. Neither of the burn scars from those events have recovered. The unfortunate reality is that resources need to be dedicated to long-term recovery, and more resources will be needed when additional fires occur while areas are still recovering from previous events. Additionally, it is important to invest in the different phases of the Emergency Management cycle: 1) Mitigation (Pre-Fire) and Planning, 2) Response, and 3) Recovery, as most entities will be in all three of these phases at a given time. We have learned it is always more cost-effective and efficient to be proactive in planning toward capacity and investments for watershed health.

Based on Denver Water's experience with post-fire recovery, we recommend the following:

- **Defining clear roles and responsibilities for post-fire recovery engagement at the state level;**
- **Creating a statewide spatial tool for coordinating collaborative projects and resources;**
- **Maximizing workforce capacity-building opportunities for post-fire recovery; and**
- **Making sustainable, long-term funding investments with high flexibility for the use of funds.**

Defining clear roles and responsibilities

The first opportunity for improvement is defining clear roles and responsibilities for post-fire recovery engagement at the state level. Several state agencies are engaged with water utilities following a fire, and it is not clear who is responsible for what and what services are available. For example, during the Williams Fork Fire recovery, Denver Water coordinated with the Colorado Department of Public Safety, Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment, Colorado Department of Natural Resources, Colorado State Forest Service, Colorado Water Conservation Board, Colorado Department of Agriculture, and Colorado Division of Fire Prevention and Control. While coordination has been beneficial, some efforts by the agencies are duplicative and unclear. One solution for this could be establishing an agreement for post-fire recovery that is modeled on the Shared Stewardship Agreement, a memorandum of understanding between the State of Colorado and the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Doing so could be an initial step toward facilitating the agencies' efforts to define roles and responsibilities. Additionally, the U.S. Forest Service has the Burned Area Emergency Response (BAER) teams for post-fire technical assistance on the National Forest. It would be beneficial for the state to have something similar for technical assistance on non-federal lands.

Statewide spatial tool

Another solution to support greater collaboration is creating a statewide spatial tool for tracking accomplishments and identifying priorities. In addition to the many state agencies involved in post-fire recovery, there are now many county-led wildfire/forest health councils and partnerships. There is a need

for coordination among the counties and with the state agencies. A statewide spatial tool could be a way to coordinate efforts and co-plan projects and resources. One option could be to build upon the Colorado Department of Natural Resources' Colorado Decision Support System (CDSS) to add data, such as burn severity maps, debris flow predictions, groundwater wells, structures, culverts, roads, infrastructure, and values-at-risk.

Maximizing workforce capacity building

Staff resources and capacity constraints are also a challenge for post-fire recovery efforts. Denver Water has been successful engaging the Youth Corps as a creative way to build capacity for post-fire recovery implementation. Counties are beginning to build capacity by creating county-led wildfire councils. For example, Denver Water is a participant in multiple county wildfire and forest health partnerships, such as with Boulder, Douglas, Grand, Jefferson, and Summit counties. There are likely efficiencies to be explored at the state level by collaborating with these local county task forces.

Making sustainable, long-term funding investments

Lastly, funding always arises as a challenge. However, it's not just the amount of funding but also the flexibility for the use of the funds and the consistency of the funding source that could alleviate some challenges for post-fire recovery. Denver Water owns only 2% of their watershed, while over 50% is National Forest. Therefore, we strategically make investments on federal lands because we have learned how costly it can be when we are reactive rather than proactive. It would be beneficial to have flexible state funds that could proactively be used on federal lands, and it would save money for taxpayers in the end, rather than facing the high costs of reacting to post-fire impacts.

In addition to funding flexibility, consistency is important for proactive planning and investments. An option for a consistent funding source for Colorado could be establishing a State Revolving Fund (SRF), such as what is used in Ohio, where the interest collected could be redirected toward watershed and water supply improvement and protection projects. Using the SRF interest, Ohio has been able to fund \$15 million per year in watershed and water supply protection projects.

Thank you for your time and consideration. I would be happy to discuss these recommendations and opportunities at any time. If you have questions, please call 720-935-6448 or email christina.burri@denverwater.org.

Sincerely,



Christina Burri, Watershed Scientist
Denver Water