

**MEMORANDUM OF UNDERSTANDING FOR COLLABORATION AND COORDINATION TO
IMPROVE FOREST HEALTH AND REDUCE WILDFIRE RISK IN BOULDER COUNTY, COLORADO**

***Questions and Answers
Background and Next Steps
August 13, 2020***

Why are the signatories to the agreement focusing on improving forest health? Isn't the forest already healthy? Why now?

Boulder County is among the top 10 at-risk areas from wildfire in Rocky Mountain Region of the Forest Service

- This rating is based on the high likelihood that a large number of structures (homes) in the county will be exposed to wildfire in the near future as determined recently by the research arm of the USDA Forest Service.
- Rocky Mountain Region includes all of Colorado, most of Wyoming as well as South Dakota, Nebraska and Kansas.

Not only are lives and property at risk in the mountains of the county, but so is the water supply to more than 300,000 downstream residents in Boulder County and beyond.

- Extensive wildfire damage can impair water quality and water supply infrastructure for many years following a fire.
- Tens of millions of dollars has been spent and will continue to be in the watershed above Denver to address the impacts there of high intensity fires in 1996 and 2002 that have caused ongoing excessive run off, stream erosion and sedimentation effects on reservoirs and infrastructure.

Wildfire can significantly damage Boulder County's forests that provide habitat for over 90 species of birds, large mammals, and native plants and the water that flows from them supports thriving freshwater fisheries.

- Wildfire in overly dense forests can leave terrestrial wildlife habitat impaired for many years and in some areas it may never recover.
- Run off after these types of wildfire can be especially damaging to aquatic habitat and the fish and wildlife that rely on it.

Boulder County has a wildfire history that is becoming ever more threatening.

- Since 1989, more than 260 homes (and other structures), burned an area of more than 16,000 acres, and threatened the lives and properties of thousands of mountain residents.
- Wildfires have always been a natural occurrence in Boulder County, but fire suppression over the last 100 years and other land management practices have led to forests in many parts of the county having densities 10 to 100 times their natural state.

- Combine this with factors such as steep terrain, drought, high summertime temperatures, seasonal high winds, and an increased human presence through development and outdoor recreation and the result is an environment prone to extreme wildfire behavior. Climate change further impacts Boulder County's forested lands.

What can these partners do to make a difference?

Strategically treating the forest regardless of boundaries, through collaboration, coordination and sound science, leads to more effective use of government and private sector resources.

- Joint planning by the signatories will help ensure work on the ground is necessary and makes a difference on the landscape as a whole.
- Working with forest property owners to reduce vegetation near homes is critical to protecting lives and property and serves as an important piece of cross-boundary, landscape scale treatment.
- Wildfire does not respect fence lines or other ownership boundaries. Working together across agencies, across ownership boundaries and across landscapes is the most effective way to help ensure the wildfire threat is diminished and the forest continues to provide all the benefits on which Boulder County relies.

How did the Boulder County agreement come about?

In May 2019, Boulder County Commissioners Deb Gardner along with her colleagues Elise Jones and Matt Jones, and Arapaho and Roosevelt National Forests Supervisor Monte Williams convened a meeting between their staffs to consider how the county and Forest Service could work on forest issues in a more coordinated fashion across their shared landscapes.

- They noted an inconsistent history of collaboration and cooperation, but recognized, given the increasing threat wildfire poses, the vital need to align efforts more closely going forward.
- They also noted that in Larimer County, collaboration and coordination between the Arapaho and Roosevelt National Forests and other entities that started in 2017 was leading to increased funding and accomplishments on the ground.

Subsequent meetings added additional crucial partners, and it was agreed that a formal MOU would be valuable to memorialize and carry forward their mutual understandings and set a course for the future.

- Later in 2019, leadership from the cities of Longmont and Boulder, the Colorado State Forest Service, Colorado Parks and Wildlife and Boulder County's Firefighter Association (Mountain Chiefs) joined the conversation.
- The Left Hand Watershed Center, the Boulder County Forest Collaborative and the Boulder Watershed Collective were key participants given the broad participation by communities and other stakeholders in their forest and watershed restoration work.

- A number of Boulder County mountain communities are signing the MOU. They and others are also participants in the forest and watershed collaboratives and are working already to help diminish the wildfire threat to their residents and watersheds.
- Boulder Valley and Longmont Conservation Districts champion locally led natural resources conservation and partner with the federal Natural Resources Conservation Service and the Colorado State Conservation Board to offer technical and financial assistance to private landowners.
- The Colorado Forest Restoration Institute (CFRI) at Colorado State University develops, compiles, translates, and applies locally relevant scientific knowledge to achieve forest restoration and wildfire risk mitigation goals in the Intermountain West by bringing together a diversity of scientists, managers, and stakeholders to examine options and trade-offs.

What happens after the MOU is signed?

The MOU establishes a basis for closer collaboration and coordination going forward.

- With the MOU, there is the opportunity to access funding sources that look favorably on forestry efforts that are collaborative and cross boundaries between landowners and managers.
- All the signatories to the MOU will continue their ongoing individual and joint efforts to improve forest health in Boulder County.

The St. Vrain Forest Health Partnership (led by Left Hand Watershed Center) will work collaboratively to review its partnership vision, mission, and approach.

- Specific action items after the MOU is signed include:
 - Updating www.watershed.center website with current information.
 - Developing an on-line survey to ask partners for feedback.
 - Contacting residents in the St. Vrain Forest Health Partnership planning area to announce the partnership and the opportunity for the community to participate.

The Boulder Watershed Collective (BWC) is working with communities and agencies to improve watershed health in the Boulder Creek watershed.

- For the past year, the Boulder Watershed Collective (formerly the Fourmile Watershed Coalition) has been convening discussions with forest practitioners throughout the county to engage in collaborative, cross jurisdictional planning of forest health and fire mitigation projects, to increase networking opportunities and to leverage resources, funding and expertise to accomplish landscape scale forest resiliency. <http://fourmilewatershed.org/contact/>
- The BWC is looking forward to beginning a 180 acre forest restoration project adjacent to National Forest System lands in 2021. This project will help decrease wildfire risk for the Town of Gold Hill while enhancing ecological benefits of the forest. Partners include private landowners, the Town of Gold Hill, Gold Hill and Four Mile fire districts, the Colorado State Forest Service and the Boulder Valley Conservation District.

- Through the partnerships and commitments outlined in the MOU, BWC anticipates expanding forest related outreach and educational opportunities through the MOU's Education and Communication Team while working to assist communities in refining and implementing their own local goals which contribute to improved forest resiliency throughout Boulder County.

The Arapaho and Roosevelt National Forests, Boulder County, the Colorado State Forest Service and the Colorado Forest Restoration Institute at CSU will work with the collaborative organizations above to expeditiously develop and regularly update a county-wide forest map.

- This information will be used to help facilitate cross boundary forest planning, wildfire management and forest project implementation.
- Project monitoring, adjusting project approaches as indicated by the monitoring, and assisting with public outreach and education will also be aided by this information source.
- A single map of Boulder County, used and relied on by all the signatories to the agreement going forward, is a vital foundational need for collaboration, coordination and effective projects across the forest landscape.
- The first version of the map will likely be completed by the end of 2020.