

La Plata County, Colorado  
Trip Report  
Toddi Steelman and Devona Bell  
March 10-14, 2003

### **Introduction and Background**

La Plata County is one of five counties in southwest Colorado that are addressing their wildfire risk. Planning efforts have been coordinated by a small group of people and there are clear synergies among the five counties in their efforts to address their wildfire risks. This report focuses on La Plata County, while also mentioning some of the efforts in other counties.

La Plata County is home to 42,506 residents and covers 1.08 million acres. Some 2.7 million acres of public lands are in or abut La Plata County including 1.8 million acres on USFS property, 750,000 acres on BLM property and 156,000 acres in National Monuments (La Plata County Fire Plan, LPCFP, 2002). Median home value is \$183,900, with 11.8% seasonal homes. Median household income is \$41,159 (US Bureau of Census 2000). Approximately 60% of the land is owned publicly or by the Southern Ute and Ute Mountain Indian Tribes with 40% owned privately (LPCFP 2002). The population of La Plata County is growing at an average rate of 3% per year. From 1993 to 1999, 2,895 new lots were created through major and minor subdivisions. Since 1978, over 11,000 residential structures have been placed throughout the county (LPCFP 2002).

The main effort that coordinates the response to the wildfire threat in La Plata County is the La Plata County Fire Plan (LPCFP), which lays out goals and nine recommendations for how to address their wildfire hazard. The development of the Plan was facilitated by the Office of Community Services (OCS) at Fort Lewis State College in 2002 and paid for the by USFS Economic Action Program within Region 2, coordinated by Bob Dettmann (Burns 2003). At the state level, Colorado State Forest Service (CSFS) received \$5.1 million in FY01 and FY02 from National Fire Plan (NFP) funding, under State Fire Assistance monies, for community assistance, but makes limited funding available for community's to access at the local level for wildfire mitigation efforts – for FY01 and FY02, \$97,432 went to CSFS for La Plata County. Small amounts of money for cost-sharing work on private property to create defensible space have been available from CSFS (Ochocki 2003). In 2003, CSFS headquarters capped all cost-share programs at \$50,000 per district (Homann 2002); there are 17 districts in the state covering the 63 counties in Colorado. Consequently, community residents interested in fire mitigation have had to leverage resources from other avenues including private foundations and the United States Forest Service (USFS) and Bureau of Land Management (BLM) Regional Offices. In contrast to the scarcity of financial resources, there are great reserves of cooperation among the many participants and an enormous willingness to collaborate across agency and organizational boundaries to accomplish their goals (Burns 2003; Porter-Norton 2003; Ochocki 2003; Clay 2003).

The Office of Community Service (OCS) at Fort Lewis College is a unique participant in La Plata County's response to wildfire. A part of Fort Lewis College, OCS directs its resources towards projects based on social, cultural and economic inclusiveness, participatory democracy, community ownership and capacity building (Burns 2003). The USFS and BLM have been

notable in its use of OCS to assist in developing community capacity to collaborate and communicate effectively with different agencies and the public through cost-share agreements (Wilson 2003). OCS began working with the USFS and BLM in 1993 on forest planning and restoration work. OCS focused explicitly on “capacity building in both the community and the agencies...to build a lot of skills amongst community members and ourselves” (Wilson 2003). This ten-year effort has provided dividends in the fire mitigation arena since agencies and individuals in the community are eager to work collaboratively to reach their goals of fire mitigation and have the skill base to achieve the goals (Burns 2003). “The capacity [to get things done in La Plata County] comes from the relationships that have formed with county government and municipalities and all kinds of organizations in the area. Then the National Fire Plan came along and fits into our web of relationships” (Burns 2003). Another unique participant in the La Plata County efforts is the San Juan Public Lands Center (SFPLC) – this is the merging of the USFS and BLM in order to give “Service-First” to the public. Additionally, there is the San Juan Mountains Association (SJMA), a non-profit foundation that supports education and outreach. SJMA has been instrumental in funding several educational efforts as part of the La Plata County Fire Plan.

Ten days after the LPCF Plan was released, the Missionary Ridge Fire Complex occurred. The fire ran from June 9 to July 15, 2002, burning 70,000 acres over 37 days and resulted in the loss of 54 structures at a cost of \$40 million dollars (Knowlton 2003). Approximately 2,300 homes/families were evacuated during the course of the fire. The Valley fire happened concurrently. It burned 400 acres in two hours and came within two miles of Missionary Ridge (Knowlton 2003). Since the Missionary Ridge and Valley Fire, it has been difficult to implement or make progress on some facets of the La Plata County Fire Plan because the prevailing mentality shifted from fire prevention to emergency management (Porter-Norton 2003). But homeowners and community residents have been more interested in taking action to protect their homes since the fires. A variety of fire mitigation activities are taking place throughout La Plata County and are documented below.

### **Mitigating Wildfire Risk in La Plata County**

La Plata County prepared their Fire Plan in response to a law passed in 2000 by the Colorado legislature. House Bill 1283 clarified responsibilities for wildfire management in the state and redefined the responsibilities of the Sheriff, State Board of Agriculture, and the State Forester from preventing and controlling wildfires to managing wildfires (CRS 30-11-124). The law also authorized Boards of County Commissioners to cooperate in the management rather than prevention and suppression of forest fires. To encourage better management, the legislation authorizes counties to prepare and implement fire management plans that detail individual county policies on fire management for prescribed burns or natural ignition burns on lands owned by the state or county. The shift from prevention and suppression to management created a need for fire planning on non-federal lands within counties (CRS 30-11-124).

The La Plata County Fire Plan has five goals that guide its efforts in fire mitigation: 1) increase La Plata County’s capacity to identify high risk areas and work to prevent catastrophic wildfire on those lands; 2) improve the effectiveness of fire prevention public education by taking current education efforts to personal, grassroots and neighborhood levels; 3) decrease fire risk in the urban interface by implementing key projects identified in the CFP planning process; 4) increase

the number of homeowners implementing firewise strategies; 5) continue to support the myriad partnerships between communities and local, state and federal agencies to lessen the chances of catastrophic wildfire in La Plata County (LPCFP 2002).

The origins of the La Plata County Fire Plan reach back to 2001 when Dr. Bill Romme, formerly with Ft. Lewis College, now at Colorado State University, and his colleagues began the Wildfire Hazard Assessment and Map project. The map was an initial strategic planning tool to help Fire Departments, federal fire management officers, and La Plata County officials identify areas at high risk from wildfire (Wilson 2003). At the end of the mapping process the key challenge was how to put into action the needed activity indicated from the risks identified. The County Fire Plan emerged from this concern. Bob Dettmann (USFS R-2, Economic Action Plan) funded \$75,000 to OCS for the development of the La Plata County Fire Plan as well as the four additional plans for the remaining southwestern counties (Montezuma, Archuleta, San Juan, and Dolores) (Burns 2003; Porter-Norton 2003). OCS contracted with Marsha Porter-Norton to help facilitate the development of the La Plata County Plan. OCS also contracted out for the development of the plans in the four adjoining counties. In May 2002 there was a workshop to roll out the County Fire Plans. Different aspects of each Plan were featured. Since then new mapping techniques, namely the polygon approach, have been adopted to facilitate fire planning.

A Fire Council was one of the nine recommendations from the La Plata County Fire Plan. Initially Marsha Porter-Norton, the lead facilitator in the La Plata County Fire Plan, thought that the Fire Council would be the main way to organize the effort to implement the County Fire Plan. She thought they might follow the model that has been used in Prescott, AZ, where the Council is located within county government offices and the Fire Chief is the lead organizer, but there has been resistance within the county to a formalized arrangement. The county doesn't want to house the group and it is unclear who would fund the Council or how it could be funded. After the FIREWISE workshop, as part of the month-long activities in April 2003, they hope to try to pull together the most interested and key players to figure out how to organize themselves (Porter-Norton 2003).

In the meantime, interaction among the various participants is best described as informal (Burns 2003). There is no formal organization that brings them together on a regular basis. There is a loose network of people interested in doing different aspects of wildfire mitigation. Subsets of this network come together in ad-hoc ways to accomplish certain goals and then disband. For instance, there is the Potsie's Agenda Group. This group continues to meet at a local restaurant called Potsie's to discuss how to keep the implementation of the La Plata County Fire Plan moving (Porter-Norton 2003). This group consists primarily of CSFS District Forester Dan Ochocki, San Juan Public Lands Center's Allen Farnsworth, Durango Fire and Rescue Authority's Assistant Chief Clay, and OCS Contractor Marsha Porter-Norton. The Potsie's group will be important to keep the Fire Plan vision alive.

Implementation of the County Fire Plan has taken place in two phases so far. Phase I Implementation, summer-fall 2002 and winter-spring 2003, included the Community Wildfire Information Series, web page, demo projects, and the hiring of an education person to assist CSFS Durango District with outreach about defensible space. Phase II implementation has yet to begin (Porter-Norton 2003). The group needs to meet to assess their current progress and create

a Phase II implementation document. Educational efforts clearly have been emphasized, while fuel reduction and slash disposal need greater attention (Porter-Norton 2003). Goals for the current education work include encouraging people to treat more acres and promoting wildfire as a natural part of the ecosystem. The Missionary Ridge fire has hampered implementation on some projects. Post fire work has taken budget and time that might have been available for some of the other activities. Money from USFS, through Bob Dettmann, remains and will be used to help with continued implementation of the County Fire Plan.

Goals for Phase II Implementation include maintaining and strengthening community education efforts and moving forward with the demonstration plots (Porter-Norton 2003; Ochocki 2003). However, more residents will need to step forward to emphasize more demonstration projects. On the education front, the key participants would like to have more money to hire people to work with people in the community, and they would like to see the counties adopt the Fire Plans.

***Improve Wildfire Prevention and Suppression – Firefighting Readiness & Prevention Through Education***

- Improve firefighting capability/readiness to protect communities.
- Reduce incidence of injury to life and property resulting from catastrophic wildland fire.
- Expand outreach and education to homeowners.
- Develop a consistent preparedness model among partners.

The Durango Fire and Rescue Authority (DFRA) has a total of 55 paid employees, including administrative staff and about 120 volunteers. They cover 385 square miles. DFRA has a good cooperative arrangement with the USFS on fire attacks. DFRA also has been proactive in its outreach to homeowners and subdivisions. They work in conjunction with CSFS to go out to subdivisions and meet homeowners. The cooperative aspect, both with CSFS and the USFS, makes La Plata County unique in the context of Colorado, according to Allan Clay, Assistant Fire Chief.

DFRA has found it more effective to target subdivisions and homes where they can engage people one-on-one, instead of group settings like a fair or show. DFRA has been going out to homes and subdivisions since 1993. DFRA also has been engaged in wildfire mitigation plan reviews. If a developer wants to come in and build a subdivision, or an individual wants to build a home in the county wildland urban interface, DFRA has the opportunity to review the wildfire mitigation plan. Enforcing the use requirements for mitigation that DFRA sets in the Plan has been problematic in the county, but this could be changing. Ten years ago planners did not pay attention to the wildfire mitigation plans, but after some of the fires, the plans have gotten more attention (Clay 2003). Generally, DFRA asks for mitigation in terms of defensible space, road widths, driving surfaces for the fire fighting equipment, etc... There continues to be some resistance from the county building officials for these regulations (Clay 2003). The county actually has adopted the 1985 uniform fire code and national standards for wildfire mitigation, but does not always enforce them. The DFRA does not have enforcement power, which rests with the county. The county has been more reluctant to enforce with individual private property

owners than in subdivisions. Mostly the county officials are worried about additional costs to the homeowners (Clay 2003). In spite of this resistance, some subdivision developers now are creating defensible space on the property before they put the lots up for sale. They clear out the unhealthy trees, leave the good ones and make it beautiful before any houses are even built. The developers are finding they can sell the lots more quickly and for more money because of the defensible space (Clay 2003).

In neighboring Archuleta and Montezuma County, things are a bit different. Subdivisions in Archuleta County are required to follow CSFS recommendations for wildfire mitigation plans. Archuleta County has been more open to these requirements because of the recent growth and new people that are moving in. There are big differences among the five counties in terms of their attitudes toward government involvement. Rural attitudes favor less government involvement; new comers aren't steeped in these traditions and have a fresher attitude. "There isn't much we can do about existing subdivisions, but we'd better not be creating new problems." Montezuma County now requires fuel hazard mitigation assessment and planning on any subdivision before it is approved by the County Commissioner (Preston 2003). Since it is impossible to go back to require existing subdivisions to do this work, Montezuma County is talking about placing a plaque at the end of a defensible space driveway noting that the property is defensible for fire fighting (Preston 2003). La Plata is getting there and it needs to get there (Ochocki 2003).

A new position has been created at the San Juan Public Lands Center to work on the goals and projects identified in the National Fire Plan and is funded jointly by USFS and BLM. Allen Farnsworth currently occupies this position and his role is to get out mitigation information and promote defensible space to the public. He works with Fire Departments doing training, coordination and helps through a cost-share program to do equipment purchases. There is great support from the Fire Chiefs for the training (Farnsworth 2003). He works with Park Service, Ute Mountain and Southern Ute tribes, various fire departments, and has overlap with Dan Ochocki, CSFS District Forester, in assisting with home mitigation assessments and mitigation education and outreach. Farnsworth also is trying to get a Fire and Ecosystems class introduced into the local high school curriculum.

La Plata County Emergency Management (EM) has engaged in a number of activities to reduce incidence of injury to life and property resulting from catastrophic wildland fire. 140 homes remain in at risk areas vulnerable to flooding after the Missionary Ridge and Valley Fires (Knowlton 2003). La Plata County had a reverse 911 system that they had borrowed from Boulder County for the Missionary Ridge Fire. Since then La Plata County has purchased its own reverse 911 unit, that is operational and serves all of La Plata County except the far southeast corner which is on a different telephone system (Knowlton 2003). The county has installed 12 rain gauges to tell how much rain is falling in the watershed and it is all hooked up to a computerized system to warn about erosion, flooding and slide hazards. EM has placed hazard warning signs to warn of flood hazards that can be made to flash with a cell phone and will close roads. The county works very closely with National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration weather forecasters. A consortium in La Plata County funded a transmitter that provides specific weather information on the La Plata County. If people have a special radio, then Emergency Management can press a button and call all radios to notify of pending disaster.

There have been four education and outreach efforts implemented from the LPCFP thus far. First, they have put together a web site at <http://www.southwestcoloradofires.org/>, which was established after the fire. The goal is to inform citizens, government agencies and leaders, and any interested people about current efforts to prevent unwanted damage from wildfire on private and public lands. The web site is also an information center about on-going efforts to rehabilitate the land in the aftermath of the Missionary Ridge and Valley fires in southwest Colorado. The site was funded by the BLM through NFP money. OCS, CSFS and the San Juan Public Lands Center (SJPLC) all worked on it. Second, OCS, CSFS and SJPLC did the Community Wildfire Information Series, which consisted of a series of 25 articles that ran in local papers, e.g. Durango Newspapers and Cortez Journal. The Community Wildfire Information Series is sponsored by the San Juan Public Lands Center, CSFS and OCS. The articles are designed to provide timely information regarding the prevention of wildfires and the rehabilitation and recovery from the fires in 2002. The articles dealt with policy issues, success stories, *Ips* beetle infestation, etc. Third, San Juan Mountains Association, OCS, CSFS, DFRA, and SJPLC have planned the Wildfire Prevention and Education Month (April 2003). This is a month long effort to promote awareness and educate residents about risks of wildfire. Included in the programmatic activities are a National FIREWISE workshop, "After the Fire" video, tours of demonstration sites of subdivisions, community fuels reduction projects, post-fire recovery site, defensible space treatments, revegetation management workshop, community meetings, and the "Missionary Ridge and Valley Fires" video. The events are sponsored by San Juan Mountains Association, CSFS, Durango Fire and Rescue Authority, Firewise Program, Local Fire Departments, National Forest Foundation, OCS, and San Juan Public Lands Center. The San Juan Mountain Association (SJMA), through a grant from the National Forest Foundation, funded the April month of events. To get the money, SJMA needed a match, which was obtained through OCS and in-kind donations of time and resources from other agencies and organizations. Fourth, with OCS taking the lead, are beginning a Neighbor-to-Neighbor education effort. The goal is to build networks of neighbors reaching out to neighbors in subdivisions and residential areas in an effort to promote awareness about wildfire risk and encourage action to address these risks. San Juan Mountain Association has been very effective in helping support education efforts.

An additional educational and outreach effort has been the preparation of demonstration plots featuring defensible space and thinning on homeowner property. The classic demonstration site currently is Falls Creek Ranch. CSFS thinned and burned 21 acres on this site. Fire came up the hillside and when it hit the treated area it fell to the ground and saved a bunch of homes (Ochocki 2003). Other demonstration areas have been held up because CSFS has not found an appropriate site. CSFS Durango District Dan Ochocki wants a place that is highly visible and is next to an untreated area so people will get a chance to see it. Ideally Ochocki wants to have an untreated area next to a treated areas where there is high visibility. "I want to dispel the notion that it will look bad if their trees are removed. I want people to drive by and say, 'that looks good, I should do that to my land'" (Ochocki 2003).

The Durango Interagency Fire Dispatch Center is staffed by USFS, BLM, BIA, Mesa Verde National Park and CSFS. It is located in the San Juan Public Lands Center. The Durango Interagency Fire Dispatch Center helps to coordinate quick and effective fire response. The

USFS Columbine Ranger District has one engine with a crew of five and a new nine-person fuels reduction crew. A new air tanker base was completed at the La Plata County airport in 2002 and will improve the firefighting capabilities in the region. A new 20 member San Juan Interagency Hot Shot Crew stationed in Durango had their first season in 2002 and were certified as a Type I Hotshot Crew the following season – therefore, will work across the nation.

Coordination for a big fire runs from local to national response. The Missionary Ridge Fire Complex, June 9 - July 15, 2002, began on private land, but both Durango Fire and Rescue and USFS responded. It burned at 1,000 acres per hour and grew to 6,800 acres the first day. As the fire grew, it moved from a local fire, under control of the sheriff, to Ron Klatt (FMO-SJPLC), who became incident command. Klatt activated their Type III team on that Sunday afternoon. The conditions were perfect for a fire – low humidity, high temperatures and lots of wind. At that time the Forest wasn't closed, and they had people at risk in the forest. They activated a Type II response team. 6,500 acres burned by 8 PM that evening, and they handed it over to a Type I team from Oregon. The fire burned 70,000 acres and resulted in the loss of 54 structures. Drought was the primary factor for the fire; density of trees was secondary to the drought. Risk for fire might be less in 2003. The fire burned for 37 days and cost \$40 million. They evacuated 2,300 homes/families. The Valley fire happened concurrently on June 26, 2002. It burned 400 acres in two hours and came within two miles of Missionary Ridge. This fire was contained quickly because the Type I resources were immediately available since they were on site for the Missionary Ridge fire. This saved many homes from destruction.

***Hazardous Fuel Reduction – Prioritize hazardous fuels reduction where negative impacts are greatest***

- Reduce acres at risk
- Ensure communities at risk receive priority
- Incorporate public health concerns

The main program to address private land risk is the CSFS Wildland Urban Interface Fuels Reduction Program. Dan Ochocki, CSFS Durango District Forester, has targeted subdivisions at risk because these areas give him greater return on the money spent. Indian Camp Ranch is one site where they treated using the 50/50 homeowner match money. Los Ranchitos was another subdivision that was treated and the homeowners worked together. There has been major work with the public to identify areas of high risk on private land and coordinate these efforts with hazardous fuel reduction on adjoining public lands. CSFS Durango District treated 404 acres in the wildland interface in 2001 and 1,183 in 2002. Ochocki expects trends to continue upward in 2003.

One problem with the homeowner match money has been delays in allocating the money in 2002. People submitted their applications in September 2002 but they still haven't heard if they are funded. This means that they are reluctant to do the work themselves because they don't know if they are in the program or not (Farnsworth 2003). Since so little money is available to

do the work on private land, Ochocki has really been a proponent of encouraging people to get out there and do it themselves (Porter-Norton 2003).

To ensure the right areas receive priority within the County, the fire chiefs have undertaken an effort to move to the polygon classification system of land at risk from wildfire threat. This is a mapping process that helps prioritize areas for treatment. The fire chiefs played a big role in identifying areas that need treatment in the WUI. There are four classifications of polygons. A-polygons are areas where wildland fire is highly undesirable. A-polygons are often wildland urban interface or intermix communities or neighborhoods. Concentrated FIREWISE and related preparedness education and hazard mitigation efforts will be directed to those areas. B polygons are areas where wildland fire is undesirable under current conditions. Fire prevention and suppression efforts will be aggressive in these areas. The potential for catastrophic fire is significant, appropriate fuels management programs may permit restoration of fire-adapted landscapes in which wildland fire is acceptable or desirable. C-polygons are areas where wildland fire is acceptable and often desirable. Prescribed fire might be used regularly to maintain fire-adapted conditions and achieve management objectives. D-polygons are areas where wildland fire is acceptable or desirable and where the potential for damage is insignificant. Prevention and fuels treatments will be relatively uncommon in these areas. The BLM regional office, under the direction of Ron Hodgson, is helping fund \$25,000 for the Polygon project through the OCS.

Colorado is engaged in an innovative and unique approach to dealing with their cross-boundary wildfire issues. They have Good Neighbor Agreements between USFS and CSFS. Legislation passed in 2001 allows CSFS to act as an agent for the USFS on a 200-foot buffer of USFS land that abuts private land. In essence, CSFS solicits the contracts and administers them. The USFS pays CSFS who then pays the contractor. This is the only place Good Neighbor Agreements are happening in Colorado (Ochocki 2003). They are prioritizing areas where private property owners are doing thinning, so they can create a seamless boundary on public and private land (Ochocki 2003). Currently they have two agreements in effect and are working on public and private lands. The agreement gives CSFS legal authority to treat public lands. Saul's Creek mechanical treatment is 4 miles east of Bayfield bordering the Deer Valley subdivision. Saul's Creek entails 108 acres of thinning ponderosa pine and mowing Gambel oak. The contract is in place and work began March 1, 2003. The contract is for \$60,000. The second Good Neighbor Agreement is the Falls Creek Fuels Reduction Project, in the Falls Creek Ranch area north of Durango. The goal here is to thin ponderosa pine and mow Gambel oak on 40 acres of USFS and 35 acres of private property. Implementation will begin in the spring or summer of 2003. The focus for Good Neighbor Agreements is small projects that can be covered under a Categorical Exclusion, not big volume projects. "One of the reasons that it is working so well is the respect, personalities and the trust that we have working with the partners down here" (Ochocki 2003). The aim of the projects is more service than product. Tammy Tyner at Timber Tech has been the main contractor on these agreements because the quality of her work is so high and she is reliable (Ochocki 2003).

The USFS treats between 8-15,000 acres per year on the San Juan National Forest and they are trying to accelerate treatment to 20-30,000 acres per year (Johnson 2003). Currently they treat about 90% of their fuel by burning and 10% through mechanical thinning. It will take

approximately 30-50 years for the USFS to treat all the fuels in the WUI (Johnson 2003). BLM treats 4-5,000 acres per year and would like to treat 10,000 acres per year. It would take BLM 10-15 years to do all their WUI work (Johnson 2003).

In La Plata County, the USFS was able to treat 1,614 acres in FY2001. This was on three separate projects – Falls Creek (14 acres thinning), Saul's Creek (1,300 acres burning) and Raven Ridge (300 acres hydromowing). In FY 2002, USFS treated Logchute a 2,027 acre burning project. The Missionary Ridge fire curtailed additional action and resulted in 70,000 acres burned. So far in 2003, the USFS has implemented several projects in La Plata County. Log Chute 608 (burning), Falls Creek (40 thinning), Little Bear Creek 180 (thinning), Vallecito 200 (thinning) and the HD Mountains 923 acres (hydromowing).

BLM was able to treat approximately 360-460 acres on two projects in FY 2001. Durango Hills was 60 acres of thinning and Grand View was 300-400 acres of hydromowing. In FY 2002 BLM treated 1,207 in the Mayhan (525 hydromowing), Forest Lakes (640 thinning) and Edgemont (33 thinning). In 2003 to date, BLM has implemented the 400-acre Pering Peak Project, which entails hydromowing and thinning. Additional projects planned for the BLM in 2003 include a 200-acre hydromowing and thinning project called Florida/Edgemont, 400 acres in Kernan Canyon, 400 acres in Stinking Spring, and 300 acres in Cash Canyon. Additional projects for the USFS include Electra Lake (2,246 thinning), Sawmill Canyon (3,126 burning), Deep Creek (650 burning), Hermosa (13,153 burning), Mitchell Lakes (1,616 burning) and Wickenson Mountain (896 burning).

The SJPLC had prioritized the work it needed done prior to the National Fire Plan. What they realized through this work was that they need additional staff to facilitate the work in hazardous fuels reduction. When the National Fire Plan passed, SJPLC was ready to hire people at the District level to facilitate the work that needed to be done on the ground. When additional money started to come for fuels reduction, they had the person power to accomplish their goals. Currently, they need more people to oversee timber contracts and mechanical thinning work. Their track record on the forest is good for getting work done, so the Region has been very supportive of getting them money. They have good working relationships with the Timber Management Authority, BLM, and the FMO to get the work they need done on the forest.

There is a long history of being able to do prescribed burning on lands in this area. Prescribed burning began back in 1980 and they do a good job of notifying the public, according to Ron Klatt. They send out flyers and notify people about smoke; the County has helped to identify who would be affected by smoke. They use the polygons to print labels and do mailings (Klatt 2003). Smoke is the biggest problem with prescribed burning because it directly affects people. The USFS/BLM use a programmatic document to do prescribed burning. This programmatic document was prepared in the 1990s for wildland fire use (Johnson 2003; Wilson 2003). Basically it said that if lightning strikes then it could burn within established constraints and guidelines. This document then was extended to prescribed burning (Johnson 2003). It is a forest wide document that covers everything related to prescribed burning and allows them not to do full NEPA work every time there is a prescribed burn. Threatened and endangered species work and archeological work still need to be done, but the programmatic document covers everything else.

For mechanical thinning they are using individual NEPA documents. They are individual documents, but are fairly large in scope. BLM uses umbrella Environmental Assessments (EA) to cover 2-3 years of work and projects. They will analyze 10-15,000 acres and approve it for mechanical treatment for 8-10 projects (Johnson 2003). To accelerate their current work they would put out private contracts for NEPA work. They also would do more work through the private sector by giving thinning or hydromowing contracts to private entities. They will retain prescribed burning. The Bush administration has set goals to contract out 50% of mechanical thinning and 25% of prescribed burning. Folks at the San Juan Public Lands Center are increasingly frustrated with the ability to get their planning and NEPA work done in the past years. For the most part, the work they have been getting accomplished has come off the shelf. Since they are trying to increase the amount of work done on the ground, this means they need to speed up their planning and NEPA work (Wilson 2003).

The USFS San Juan National Forest is using stewardship contracting on two projects – 1) the Beavers Meadow Restoration Project in La Plata/Archuleta County; and 2) the Pine Zone Project (also known as the Ponderosa Pine Partnership) in Montezuma County. The Beavers Meadow Restoration Project is testing how to blend timber sales, hazardous fuels reduction, road closure, building fire lines and watershed protection all in one package. The project began as a normal USFS timber sale in 1997. The analysis area comprises 7,500 acres. The Environmental Assessment was completed in 1997 and approved a clear-cut harvest of 300 acres of aspen and intermediate treatments on about 1,500 acres of mixed conifer (Crawford 2003). However, as they proceeded with the timber sale, they became concerned with the changing market conditions and the willingness of their limited number of local loggers and mills to buy mixed species sales. So they split 300 acres of the aspen out of it and sold it separately. That left the intermediate harvests as a poor proposition for a stand-alone timber sale. When Stewardship Contracting pilots started they saw an opportunity to package the timber sale with other projects. The Beaver Meadows Restoration Project is a service contract with an embedded timber sale. The timber sale involves the purchase and removal of the merchantable white fir and aspen. Much of the other activity normally part of the timber sale process including tree cutting, slash treatment, erosion control on landings and skid trail are treated as service items. The contract includes bid items for cutting trees, slash treatment and erosion control on each cutting unit; for construction of clearing fire lines and fuelbreaks for the anticipated prescribed burning, maintenance of the roads used by the project during the performance of the contract, decommissioning of some old roads and reconstruction of roads used for the projects. As of March 2003 the USFS were still evaluating proposals and were hoping to award the contract at the end of the month (Crawford 2003). It has taken a lot of time from the Region all the way down the chain of command to the contract representative and timber sales to get the ok for what they wanted to do. Breaking this ground took a lot longer than anticipated (Johnson 2003). The Beavers Meadow Project is the guinea pig for the rest of the nation.

***Restore Fire Adapted Ecosystems – Rehabilitation, Restoration, Using Science and Information, Monitoring***

- Perform burned area stabilization and rehabilitation work in emergency areas
- Restore burned areas and repair and improve lands unlikely to recover
- Place priority on at risk watersheds
- Promote establishment of native seed and other plant material
- Promote research of effective restoration practices
- Research interactions between fire, land management and other actions

Montezuma County has the most impressive example of restoration in the five county area, the Ponderosa Pine Partnership. A group of county government officials, national forest managers, university researchers, loggers and local folks, emerged out of gridlock on the National Forests in 1992 to demonstrate that rebuilding forest health can support a commercially self-sufficient timber program. The objective is forest restoration where historic ponderosa pine stands are replicated. The goal is to do mechanical thinning and prescribed fire and to keep prescribed fire in the forest. Openings with groups of ponderosa pine are recreated. The prescription tries to appreciate the natural variability within the system and approximates 40-60 trees per acre, clumped with large tree components. There is no diameter cap, but a 16-inch log is a real plum (Preston 2003). Controlled burning is allowed to reintroduce fire into the ecosystem. The USFS retained the responsibility of the post-harvest burning, but to date they have not done so well on keeping up with the burning needs, but Phil Kemp, project manager, says it will get done (Kemp 2003).

In 1995, pilot projects on 550 acres SJNF land and 300 acres private land were thinned to pre-1870 reference conditions and followed by controlled fire (Preston 2003). The timber sale was contracted to Montezuma County for \$9,999 for research and demonstration. The county resold timber to local loggers for \$30,000 and used profit to fund ecological and economic research. The first timber sale resulted in an economic loss for the loggers, so the group had to figure out a way to make the Partnership work economically for the loggers. The second sale came closer to allowing the loggers to turn a profit. The goal is to keep approximately 900 acres per year under the restoration prescription and fashion sale opportunities to meet the needs of existing local industry while monitoring vegetation responses on all restoration activities. Since the first sale the Partnership has offered 12 timber sales ranging from 15 to 1,480 acres (Preston 2003).

As of 2003, the Ponderosa Pine Partnership has restored 3,650 acres of ponderosa pine forest, with a total of 8,000 acres under contract to be treated. The first contract was let beginning in 1995 and the most recent was let in 2002. One of the problems is that under these contracts, the contractor can delay the cutting (Kemp 2003). The cutting began for the demonstration site in 1996, but the majority is just now (2003) being cut. There have been nine different contractors used. The two main contractors are Ragland and Sons and Intermountain Resources LLC. On

average, 1,000 acres per year are being contracted out (Kemp 2003). The USFS is trying to put up sales on a regular basis to give industry a pipeline of work. The bid price for trees is up, as are the number of bidders. None of the projects have been litigated. The by-products had been going to the Louisiana Pacific Mill in Olathe for small diameter house logs (9-14 inches), but last year the Louisiana Pacific mill stopped taking the small diameter material. They had been utilizing the wood at a loss because of the high transportation costs due to distance to site. Ragland and Sons in Montezuma County now has emerged to take small diameter material and is turning it into landscape mulch. They are also composting some of the by-product.

In 2003, San Juan Public Lands Center will receive \$1.9 million for rehabilitation of the Missionary Ridge Fire. About 13,000 acres of Missionary Ridge Fire area were burned severely, causing erosion and debris flows. In 2002 SJPLC received \$4.5 million to complete a Burned Area Emergency Rehabilitation (BAER) plan. About half of that money was spent on emergency stabilization to prevent additional damage and minimize threats to life and property (LPCFP web site). BAER projects planned for 2003 include continued operation of early-warning weather stations, landslide assessment monitoring and mapping, erosion control efforts on trails in the burned area, culvert installation on Missionary Ridge and Pine River Roads, reseeded of up to 18,000 acres of severely burned land and reconstruction of log-erosion barriers. Other treatment for long-term rehabilitation included in the \$1.9 million for 2003 include removal of hazardous trees along Missionary Ridge Road, work to make other roads in the burned area safe for travel, invasive plant treatments, insect and disease control, project to restore water developments for wildlife and livestock, fence repair, seed collection and planning for reforestation and rehabilitation of fire lines (LPCFP web site).

***Promote Community Assistance – Increase Local Capacity, Incentives, Biomass Utilization***

- Reduce losses to communities from wildland fire
- Promote markets for traditionally underutilized wood
- Promote opportunities to continue and enhance sustainable livestock grazing as part of restoration strategies
- Increase incentives for private landowners to address defensible space and fuels management needs on private property
- Promote local government initiatives through fire-sensitive land use planning
- Promote public knowledge and understanding of wildland fire, including risks and the role of fire in natural ecosystem processes.

Harold and Doug Ragland are the partners in Ragland and Sons thinning business. Stonertop Lumber is owned and operated by Doug Ragland's brother. They work with the Ponderosa Pine Partnership to rework their traditional logging operation. Stonertop Lumber adopted more efficient ways to harvest small trees and develop new products including posts, poles and specialty beams for the small trees, compost, lay ground cover and cement additive for the chips.

The Ragland's creativity has created new local markets. This allows the mill owners to avoid transportation costs and helps to keep the money in the community (Little 2003).

The Four Corners Sustainable Forestry Initiative, operated out of Montezuma County, is a cooperative effort among federal, state and local government agencies, non-profit groups, and forest industry representatives to address forest health and economic development issues across the Four Corners area (Colorado, New Mexico, Utah, Arizona). The goal is to address utilization and marketing of small diameter and previously under-utilized timber. The Four Corners Initiative was given five years of funding through Congress to assess the supply potential from critically needed forest restoration activities, evaluate technology, product and market development potential for small diameter timber, replicate the process in other areas with similar problems, and initiate a small grants program for community-based restoration oriented projects. In 2003, Four Corners is on its 5<sup>th</sup> year of money. Grant awards will be made for this final year in April 2003. They give out \$750,000 over four states each year. There is an extra million for administration and \$500,000 for a revolving loan fund. Every year \$50,000 goes to promotional activity, \$200,000 for administration and coordination and \$750,000 for grant proposals. They have changed philosophy over the years in terms of what they are funding. Initially they were funding mom and pop operations, then moved to larger operations, then to machinery. Ragland and Sons in Montezuma County have been recipients. Money also has gone to Denny Lynch and Kurt Machis at CSU to research harvesting costs, product development, small chips in concrete, biomass energy production and the use of wood fiber in animal bedding. Tim Reider is a CSFS Durango District employee who also is funded out of this money.

Piper Timber Products in Bayfield, La Plata County, was funded \$17,600 in 2002 from Four Corners. The purpose for this project is to expand a local timber business to utilize small diameter pine to build a post and beam multipurpose pavilion in Bayfield Park. This prototype pavilion will market small diameter beams to be used for construction in the four corners area. In 2001, \$25,000 was given to the non-profit Colorado Timber Industry Association to sponsor Restoration Forestry and Stewardship Education. This emphasized education in sustainable forestry and management practices for elected officials and their staffs and the expansion and addition of other educational initiatives. In 2000, La Plata County was funded for \$30,000 for OCS to evaluate the Four Corners Sustainable Forests Partnership demonstration projects. Montezuma and Dolores counties also have received funding through the Four Corners program (Four Corners web site).

Under the CSFS Wildland Urban Interface Fuels Reduction Program some private homeowners have been incentivized to take action to mitigate their risks. 22 grants were submitted for a total of \$142,000 in 2002. Three of those grants were funded for a total of \$54,700 for all five Southwest Counties (Ochocki 2003). In 2003 CSFS received applications totaling \$459,000. They have not been able to fund any of these requests so far because of the budget holdups in Washington, DC. Out of this \$459,000, 18 subdivisions requested \$439,000 and 18 individuals requested \$42,000 (Ochocki 2003). The NFP money CSFS Durango District receives goes mostly to the treatment of subdivision. "My preferable way to go is to work with a subdivision and not an individual landowner because we can get a more bang for the buck" (Ochocki 2003). Overall Ochocki downplays the availability of money. He doesn't want to advertise funding for homeowner defensible space work because he doesn't have enough money to take care of

everyone. Ochocki has an idea of what subdivisions he wants targeted and he knows where the capacity is. "It makes sense to devote your funding and energy where there are more concentrated blocks of people – hence subdivisions" (Ochocki 2003). There are hundreds of requests for homeowner inspections. Allen Farnsworth, SJPLC, has helped Ochocki do some of the inspections. Farnsworth also helped get CSFS some money through the BLM to do inspections. The landowners submit a plan and it is approved by CSFS. The landowner can get reimbursed for \$11.32/hr for their work in their 50/50 match. The main prescription is to remove 40% of ponderosa pine and leave 12-15 inches between the crowns, chip the oak and limb. There is a one-page form for reimbursement after CSFS signs off on it. It takes 2-4 weeks to get reimbursed.

The cost-share application is three pages and it is advertised in the papers and Ochocki gives the application to subdivisions at high risk that he keeps on record. Ultimately it is up to the homeowners to contact CSFS and get the grant application. Applications are due in September and awards typically are made by January 1. Applications are reviewed by a state committee in Ft. Collins. Dan is the final evaluator of whether the project meets specification. Once the homeowner has completed the defensible space work, they fill out a form, submit it and it takes between 2-4 weeks to get reimbursed from Ft. Collins. Since the USFS budget was put on hold because of the 2002 fire season expenditures, no monies have yet been released. This is holding up progress, because people won't do the work until they know the status of their application.

CSFS keeps a list of contractors to do thinning work on their web site to facilitate homeowners finding people to do work. According to Ochocki they don't have enough contractors to meet demand. They need more contractors. It costs between \$600-1000/acre from soup to nuts to thin an acre of land (Ochocki 2003).

Timber Tech is a forest restoration/rehabilitation company owned and operated by Tammy Tyner. They started in 1996. Initially it was difficult to get people interested. They did Right of Way clearing. In 1999 they started increasing the amount of work they were doing in Archuleta County. Archuleta County is growing very quickly and they require subdivisions to do defensible space work before building. In 2001 they started to see a change in attitudes toward thinning because of the drought. After the 2002 Missionary Ridge fire they haven't been able to keep up with the demand for work. Homes that were treated prior to the Missionary Ridge fire were not lost to wildfire, so people began to see the value in defensible space work. Timber Tech has seven people at work during the winter months – four main workers, two floaters that do some field work and office work and Tammy. In the summer they will have three crews for a total of 13 people. All of Tammy's workers are locals. She hires from the Youth Corps, who are very well trained. In the past they have had trouble hiring people, but not so much now. Dan Ochocki helps with prescriptions on the land they treat. He will come out and do an assessment to make sure everything is ok. Most of Tammy's work is on private lands, with about 15 percent on public lands. With the public lands work they end up creating a 200-foot buffer around subdivisions. Timber Tech is not as interested in the larger acreage projects, but they do like the smaller projects of 100-200 acres. The contracts allow for treatment of the slash. Timber Tech has a chipper hooked on the front of one of their small front end loader that can be driven over a property to mulch the slash. Right now they are working on the Deer Valley Estates project – 107-acre project where they are chipping oak brush and doing some tree thinning and chipping.

This is a 200-foot buffer on USFS lands that is adjacent to a subdivision. The work is possible through a Good Neighbor Agreement between the CSFS and USFS.

Developers hire Timber Tech to do thinning/restoration work prior to the sale of lots. This is prevalent in Archuleta County where it is required. Developers build the cost of defensible space into the sale price of the lot, just like they would any other infrastructure cost (water, sewerage, defensible space). Timber Tech does about 15% of her work on public lands, 50% for developers on subdivisions, and 35% on private land. 60% of her work is in Archuleta County, 30% in La Plata County and the remainder is elsewhere. There is a tacit agreement among contractors that they will work in certain areas and not in others. For instance, another area contractor, Fire Ready, is working mainly in Montezuma County. Timber Tech has no problem keeping work in the pipeline. Workers compensation is expensive, approximately \$10,000 per employee, per year. Timber Tech did 602 acres for 52 landowners in 2002. In 2001 they treated about 600 acres. Company revenue has increased from \$10,000 in 1997 to \$350,000 in 2002. One of Timber Tech's clients, Joe Machock, owns the \$30 million Timber Ridge Development near Pagosa Springs. His three-acre lots at 7,000 feet altitude sell for \$75,000 and \$225,000. Machock estimates the value added to the lot is twice what he pays Timber Tech for the service. The subdivision has 100-foot firebreaks along roads and fire hydrants every 1,000 feet.

Fire Ready, began in 2000 under the ownership of Ryan Borchers. They have quadrupled business since 2001. It costs \$500 to \$3,000 to treat an acre depending on what the homeowner wants. Fire Ready works with small-acreage property owners, subdivision Homeowner Associations, and large clients, such as Fort Lewis College and the Durango Silverton Narrow Gauge Railroad to reduce the threat of wildfire risk. Fire Ready treated 412 acres in 2002 for 158 landowners and did the Right of Way for the Silverton Rail Road. Approximately 5% of Ryan's work is for developers, 90% is for private individual landowners. They did the Silverton RR right of way, which was 3.5 miles, for \$15,000 in 3 weeks – they did 50-100 feet on each side of railway. They also did work at Ft. Lewis College. Two months of work for \$48,000, 30 acres of mostly pinyon and juniper. They will work for a daily rate or a fixed rate. They determine their own prescriptions depending on what the homeowner wants. They currently have a backlog of about three weeks work. In the summer they have a backlog of two months.

Fire Ready did work in the Los Ranchitos subdivision prior to the Missionary Ridge fire. The subdivision in Los Ranchitos formed a fire prevention committee to take a subdivision wide approach, including tree thinning and evacuation plans under the direction of George and Aurora Rose, residents. The residents talked to Dan Ochocki in 2001 who told them they should be concerned about the threat of wildfire. The group received a 50-50 matching grant for \$12,000 to help offset some of the costs for thinning. About two-thirds of the property owners participated. Ryan Borchers and his crew worked on the Rose's property, finishing it the day before the Missionary Ridge fire broke out. The fire came through the subdivisions and the defensible space worked. Ryan is extending franchises into Pagosa Springs, Boulder and Telluride. A 12-person crew costs \$1,200 a day, depending on what needs to be done. During the Missionary Ridge fire they received 25 calls a day to create defensible space. After the fire was out, many cancelled their plans.

Slash is being treated in a variety of ways right now. Some is burned. The City of Durango mulches. Subdivisions get together and decide what to do with it, some gets taken to the dump.

Lyle Lafferty at Triangle Custom Cutting outside of Pagosa Springs takes smaller diameter timber. He is also taking some of the salvage timber from the Missionary Ridge fire. Ron Cromwell, president of Affordably Built Cabins and Barns helps market the finished lumber from Triangle. Triangle has a knack for taking wood from trees killed by fire or insects that many larger sawmills won't touch. The company also mills smaller diameter trees cleared for developments that wouldn't be cost effective for bigger sawmills. Lafferty bought the sawmill in 2002 with his sister and brother. The sawmill tripled their output in 2002 to 250,000 board feet. He hopes to double that in 2003. A local custom builder, Paul Hudson, is one of Triangle's regular customers. He builds log homes. Wood that is killed by beetles has a faint bluish tint, which makes it a specialty item for custom homes.

## Citations

Borchers, Ryan. 2003. In person interview with Devona Bell and Toddi Steelman. Durango, Colorado. March 13.

Burns, Sam. 2003. In person interview with Devona Bell and Toddi Steelman. Durango, Colorado. March 11.

Clay, Allan. 2003. In person interview with Devona Bell and Toddi Steelman. Durango, Colorado. March 12.

Dettmann, Bob. 2003. In person interview with Devona Bell and Toddi Steelman. Durango, Colorado. March 11.

Farnsworth, Allan. 2003. In person interview with Devona Bell and Toddi Steelman. Durango, Colorado. March 12.

Four Corners web site. Available from the World Wide Web: <http://www.fourcornersforests.org/> accessed on 3/28/03.

Johnson, Michael. 2003. In person interview with Devona Bell and Toddi Steelman. Durango, Colorado. March 13.

Klatt, Ron. 2003. In person interview with Devona Bell and Toddi Steelman. Durango, Colorado. March 13.

Knowlton, Butch. 2003. In person interview with Devona Bell and Toddi Steelman. Durango, Colorado. March 12.

Little, Jane Braxton. 2003. "A Light in the Forest." American Forests, Winter. Ppl 29-32.

LPCFP, 2002. La Plata County Fire Plan, received from the Office of Community Services, Ft. Lewis College. On file with authors.

LPCFP web site. Available from the World Wide Web: <http://www.southwestcoloradofires.org/WhatsNew1.htm> accessed on 3/28/03.

Ochocki, Daniel. 2003. In person interview with Devona Bell and Toddi Steelman. Durango, Colorado. March 13.

Porter-Norton, Marsha. 2003. In person interview with Devona Bell and Toddi Steelman. Durango, Colorado. March 11.

Preston, Michael. 2003. In person interview with Devona Bell and Toddi Steelman. Durango, Colorado. March 14.

**La Plata County Trip Report March 10-14, 2003 Toddi Steelman and Devona Bell**

Tyner, Tammy. 2003. In person interview with Devona Bell and Toddi Steelman. Durango, Colorado. March 12.

U.S. Census Bureau. 2000. General Housing, Population & Income Characteristics: 2000, La Plata County, Colorado. In *American Fact Finder* [online]. 2000 [cited February 2003]. Available from the World Wide Web: <<http://factfinder.census.gov/servlet/BasicFactsServlet>>.

Wilson, Thurmann. 2003. In person interview with Devona Bell and Toddi Steelman. Durango, Colorado. March 12.