

Case Study: The History of the San Juan Headwaters Forest Health Partnership

Introduction:

Wildfire is a part of life in Southwest Colorado. It plays an integral role in ecosystem health and management. At the same time it threatens lives, property, and community economics. As a society the initial response has been to suppress fire in an effort to preserve way of life. This response has led to ecosystem responses that have made forests more susceptible to disease, insect, and larger fires.

Initial Need

Differences of opinion regarding the management of mixed-conifer forests surfaced during meetings and field trips for proposed vegetation management projects on the Pagosa Ranger District in 2008. A 2009 report, which synthesized studies of historical range of variability and current conditions of the major forest cover types in southwestern Colorado, noted that mixed-conifer forests are the most variable and complex type of forest in the area and have received little attention by researchers. But there is a great deal of interest in managing these forests because they comprise a good bit of the land area of the Pagosa Ranger District, are largely out of sync with historical fire regimes, and are often located near the wildland-urban interface and key water supply features.

History of Formation

In 2009 a workshop was convened in Pagosa Springs, CO by the Colorado Forest Restoration Institute to discuss the status of mixed-conifer forests in the San Juan National Forest. The workshop included forest managers, scientists, land users, and community members. One of the findings of the workshop was that: *“Forest land managers were encouraged to continue to use a collaborative process inclusive of all stakeholders in planning, implementing, and monitoring treatment activities in order to increase knowledge, share values, and build trust.”* An initial exploratory group called the Mixed Conifer Working Group was formed to identify what a collaborative group might look like and what the objectives of the group might be. In 2012, the Upper San Juan Mixed-Conifer Working Group published the results of its discussions, including the group’s adopted goals, objectives, and operating principles.

During the discussions the group opted to expand its vision beyond the mixed-conifer forest to include the expanse of forest types within the Pagosa Ranger District and nearby private lands. The group realized that there was a direct connection between forest health, water quality, and vital infrastructure servicing the communities within the San Juan Headwaters. In acknowledgement of the expanded focus and more formalized structure the group was re-launched as the San Juan Headwaters Forest Health Partnership in 2013. The organization hired a part-time coordinator and brought in Mountain Studies Institute as the fiscal agent.

In December of 2014 the group reconfirmed its commitment to its mission and goals.

The Mission: The San Juan Headwaters Forest Health Partnership is committed to pro-active, collaborative approaches to improving the health and long-term resilience of communities by

addressing forest and watershed health. The Partnership is focusing on strengthening understanding, sharing knowledge and lessons learned, developing management approaches, initiating high priority projects, and monitoring results using an adaptive framework.

Goals:

1. Strengthen regional communities through a landscape-scale, adaptive approach to addressing forest health and watershed resilience.
2. Work with partners to facilitate the development of and adopt a list of principles, values, and priorities.
3. Enhance regional economic viability and use of forest health products.
4. Implement forest treatments in high risk areas.

The success of the partnership is built around the stakeholders that attend meetings, provide input, and help direct group activities. San Juan Headwaters offers outreach and discussion opportunities with a spectrum of representatives within the community. Since its official launch in 2013 as a community effort, the Partnership has helped secure over 1 million dollars for forest thinning work, contributed over 3000 volunteer hours, provided over 20 community education opportunities (including tours and presentations), developed a citizen science monitoring program, and assessed the wildfire risk to water resources.

In order to plan future projects, San Juan Headwaters has mapped wildfire risk, identified essential water infrastructure, and assessed potential mitigation measures. This work will help to secure clean water for the communities of Archuleta County and protect supply mechanisms. Two of the priority project areas identified in the watershed health wildfire risk assessment process received federal recognition. The Pagosa Ranger District and local Natural Resources Conservation Service office were awarded nearly 1.3 million dollars under the Farm Bill to conduct treatments around water resources in the Fourmile and Turkey Springs areas.

The group identified the Fourmile area as an area of importance because it contains vital water diversion/transport structures (a diversion, and combination of pipeline and open ditch) that supplies water to two primary reservoirs (Hatcher and Stevens Reservoirs) for the communities of Archuleta County. Several small creeks in the area also feed these reservoirs. The wildfire risk and watershed assessment confirmed the importance of the area and infrastructure. The group has worked to protect these critical water resources given the threat of wildfire.

The USFS was able to allocate time from an established long-term stewardship contract for work in the area. This capability was used as a match for Colorado State Forest WRRG grant to expand treatments to private lands along the Dutton Ditch & Pipeline. Treatments have included mechanical and hand thinning. Over 700 acres were treated on private and public lands through this effort. When the Farm Bill was passed requests were made for potential projects in Colorado to fund under the Joint Chiefs (NRCS & USFS) Initiative. Partnership members, including local federal staff, directly assisted in submission of Fourmile as a possible project. The existence of the group, established work relationships, and successful treatment of initial acres made the project attractive for funding.

A nearby area, Turkey Springs, was also identified as an area of interest during the wildfire risk watershed assessment and was identified during group discussion as an area that would benefit from

fuels reduction and forest restoration measures. Units were identified in Turkey Springs that would be best treated through mastication. Through discussion with the San Juan Headwaters, this area was selected for submission to the Joint Chiefs as a project of interest. Treatment would protect the wildland-urban interface and Archuleta County's largest homeowner residential area (Pagosa Lakes).

The goal of these projects is to protect significant values at risk – i.e., a primary water source for Archuleta County and primary residential area -- from a severe fire. The potential for a fire will still exist but the hope is to reduce the amount of damage from a fire and limit the extent of secondary damage associated with heavy rains and runoff.

The San Juan Headwaters is exploring opportunities for pre and post monitoring in the new project areas to make sure that the goals of thinning are achieved and to inform future management decisions.

Through open dialogue and trust, the San Juan Headwaters Forest Health Partnership has been able to advance treatment in the Pagosa Ranger District and adjacent private lands and secure the reliability of essential community resources. By bringing land managers, businesses, community members, and environmental groups together to discuss project needs, locations, goals, and impacts before the projects are initiated, San Juan Headwaters has been able to address concerns and build support for projects that are determined to be relevant and important. The group is locally built, is driven by the local communities, and looks to advance the local economy and health.

Organizational Structure

Members of the group identified the need for an informal structure. Anyone who attends a meeting has a voice in the discussions. There is no voting. There is a financial review committee that oversees budgets, expenditures, and payments and makes recommendations to the group on whether or not the costs presented by the fiscal agent are legitimate. Sub-committees are established around special needs.

Program Assessment

The San Juan Headwaters has conducted annual reviews of program achievements. The assessments evaluate outreach opportunities offered, number of community members involved, educational value, acres treated, and pre and post monitoring. Participants in the evaluation process are encouraged to document where the group has had success and identify areas that need improvement. Overall the results have been positive. The group is exploring methods for assessing changes in community perception and opinion.

What's next?

This success of the group has been recognized within Colorado. It is being presented as a model for collaborative efforts to proactively address wildfire and forest health concerns. The story of the San Juan Headwaters Forest Health Partnership offers one example of how to bring together multiple interests to advance landscape-level management of resources to secure resilient communities. Over time, through the development of respect and trust, the group has been able to discuss complicated issues in a

transparent manner. As a result, the group has been able to identify areas where forest treatment would be effective in protecting community resources, secure funding for treatments, educate the public on the needs and concerns, and implement and/or assist with treatments on federal, private, county, and municipal lands.

The Partnership hopes to inspire the development of partnerships in other areas. Partnerships need to build from the communities that they are developed to serve, and the Partnership's story could offer one road map to the establishment of new partnerships.

Barriers/Challenges:

Time and capacity constraints of community groups and citizens to be involved with discussions and group meetings can restrict involvement.

Financial support for proactive work is often hard to secure. Our society primarily responds to emergency and catastrophe. More support is needed for work up-front work designed to mitigate the potential impacts of fire.

Work to increase forest health and reduce wildfire risk has to happen across boundaries on a **landscape scale**. To make this happen we need to bring the full spectrum of land managers, decision makers, and citizens.

Funding opportunities for collaboration and discussion is also hard to secure. More often funding is designed for work on the ground. Proper planning and discussion helps put work on the ground in the right places using the most effective methods.

Lessons learned:

If you are going to include the community, meetings and discussions need to be held when the **community can participate**.

Collaborative process cannot be rushed. It takes time and energy to build trust.

Efforts need to be built around community needs. Not all communities will identify the same issues. If you want community/ local leader involvement you need to the community to feel that the issues relative to them are being addressed.

Identify and employ the **mode and frequency of communication** local groups are most familiar with and likely to use. Let the community members help direct meeting schedules and identify the avenues that work best for communicating with the public.

Involve local schools and **Students**. Students have influence over multiple generations.

Identify local champions that can carry your message to the public. These should be people that are trusted and respected in the community.

This is one of a series of case studies written by scientists and community members responding to a survey in advance of the forum, [Community Connections: Bringing Together Scientists and Local Voices](#), held in Houston, TX on September 26, 2015 by the Center for Science and Democracy at the Union of Concerned Scientists. For more information, visit ucsusa.org/scientistsandcommunities.