

Preparing for the Big One: Southern Colorado Community's Efforts Exemplify Effective Fire Mitigation

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TRINIDAD, Colo. – With 325 acres just completed to complement existing fuelbreaks in the community, a mountain subdivision along the New Mexico border has now treated more than 3,000 forested acres – becoming a model for how Colorado communities can band together to reduce wildfire risk.

Santa Fe Trail Ranch covers approximately 17,000 acres in the foothills southwest of Trinidad. I-25 provides primary access to the ranch, which abuts the state line on the south. Treatments to reduce wildfire risk in the community have been ongoing since 2005, when community leaders utilized funding and assistance from the Colorado State Forest Service to stimulate widespread landowner involvement. Nearly 15 miles of fuelbreaks along roads, trails, ridgelines and other focal areas within or adjacent to the subdivision are now established to slow the spread and diminish the intensity of an approaching wildfire.

“Now we stand a chance when the big one hits,” said Dave Skogberg, a community leader who has been a catalyst to collective efforts.

A Community at Risk

Santa Fe Trail Ranch consists of 454 lots on steep terrain – each about 35 acres. Historic fires created a forest mosaic of ponderosa and piñon pine, juniper and Douglas-fir. Beneath the forest canopy, a thick shrub understory composed of Gambel oak, New Mexico locust, mountain mahogany, skunk-bush and chokecherry dominates the landscape.

Fire history studies show that natural, low-intensity fires once burned in this type of ecosystem every 13 years or less. But the vegetation grows dangerously dense in the absence of regular fires, which creates the potential for more intense wildfire events. And in the long run, wildfire in this area is inevitable.

“Having a fire here is not a matter of if, but a matter of when,” said R.C. Ghormley, another resident who has been pivotal to community-wide fire mitigation.

A large, intense wildfire in the area could impact watersheds and cause excessive runoff and sedimentation to Raton Creek and Trinidad Lake. Also, ponds in the area could fill with sediment, compromising the water supply for wildlife and livestock.

Besides lightning-strike fires that occur almost annually on the ranch, large wildfires are common in the surrounding area. The Morley Fire burned 300 acres within the subdivision in 1978. In 2002, three large fires together burned 40,000 acres near the subdivision. Then, in 2011, the 27,000-acre Track Fire was within 3 miles and headed for the ranch before a wind shift diverted it away and across I-25. Mark Loveall, assistant district forester with the CSFS La Veta District, says these events all highlight the need to be prepared before a fire arrives.

“To prevent loss of structures during a wildfire, each landowner needs to take the steps necessary to protect his or her property,” said Loveall.



In 2011, the 27,000-acre Track Fire came within 3 miles of the ranch.

Recent Fuelbreaks Focus on Escape Routes, Fire Spread

Two fuelbreaks, each several miles long and 300 feet or more wide, were completed this summer. Much of the 325 acres treated were located along the Gallinas Parkway Conservancy – land owned by the Colorado-based Greenlands Reserve Landtrust.

The parkway leads to the subdivision entrance off I-25, which is the only major exit route for residents in an emergency.

The other major fuelbreak was created along a four-wheel-drive trail within the community’s southern borders to help prevent fire spread within the community. Volunteer crews from the subdivision used chainsaws to complete smaller fuel reduction areas complementing the major fuelbreaks, and carted off larger logs to become firewood.

“We’re making lines of resistance, to prevent fire from spreading through the community,” said Ghormley.

Ghormley took the lead in applying for \$240,000 in Emergency Supplemental Funds, which are administered by the CSFS, to cover the cost of the fuelbreaks and some mitigation work on private lots. In addition to the \$240,000 they received, landowners personally covered other costs to treat hundreds more acres on their own properties, through agreements with Rue Logging, Inc. – the contractor that created the fuelbreaks.

The SFTR fuelbreaks are considered “shaded fuelbreaks,” which means that tree stands and understory vegetation are only selectively thinned. Many larger, more fire-tolerant trees are left standing in the broad fuelbreaks, along with clumps of oak brush and some smaller trees, which are retained for wildlife habitat and aesthetic purposes.

Loveall says the fuelbreaks encourage approaching wildfires to transition from catastrophic crown fires to less-intense ground fires. Because of the reduced fire intensity and open canopy, the fuelbreaks also can serve as effective locations on which pilots can focus aerial retardant drops during a wildfire.

Using five pieces of heavy machinery, loggers reduced tree densities in the fuelbreaks from approximately 300 trees per acre to between 30 and 80 trees per acre – a more natural tree density. Skogberg says that when the contractor was brought in, residents requested additional work on individual lots while the machinery was still on site.



Machinery ground most of the woody material into mulch.



More than 3,000 forested acres have been treated on the Santa Fe Trail Ranch.

Approximately 3,000 acres have now been treated within or along the edge of the subdivision, or nearly 20 percent of the land area.

Loveall says the organizational skills of Ghormley and his wife, Mary, were key to the overall success of the recent projects.

“They kept constant track of grant funding available through the CSFS, assembled groups of residents to assist foresters with layout and mapping, and allowed their home to be used as a planning and meeting headquarters,” he said.

Community Wildfire Protection Plan Vital to Success

In order to meet CSFS funding requirements, the subdivision needed to have an approved Community Wildfire Protection Plan in place. CWPPs were authorized and defined by the 2003 Healthy Forests Restoration Act, with the intention of bringing together local communities and government agencies to address wildfire preparedness and fuels reduction in the wildland-urban interface. Approved CWPPs are required to compete for many federal grants to implement forest treatments. The Santa Fe Trails Ranch CWPP is one of 200 plans now completed in Colorado.

“The progress made over the years at Santa Fe Trail Ranch clearly points to the value of CWPP development as the critical starting step,” Loveall said.

Top priorities laid out in the Santa Fe Trails Ranch CWPP include implementation of a universal street-addressing system (to make navigation easier for responding firefighters), creating defensible space around structures wherever possible, and creating maps for use by firefighters during an incident. Another priority defined in the CWPP was making the Gallinas Parkway – addressed by this year’s fuelbreaks – into a safer emergency route for evacuating landowners and arriving firefighters.

CSFS Funding Pivotal to Implementation of Past Work

The 2012 fuelbreaks are only the latest in a series of projects Santa Fe Trail Ranch has implemented to protect the community from wildfires. From 2005-2009, the community applied CSFS-administered State Fire Assistance grants and Colorado Forest Restoration Pilot Program funds to help create defensible space around homes and create earlier fuelbreaks. Thousands of hours of landowner labor were used to help match this grant funding. In 2007, a large fuelbreak was completed along the southwestern boundary of the community, with matching funding coming from the Vermejo Park Ranch where much of the fuelbreak is located. And in 2009, another fuelbreak partially funded by CSFS grants was completed along the southern border of the community near the state line.

The community has held many weekend volunteer parties where members get together to do work and put wood chippers owned by residents to use. Residents also have created the non-profit Forest Health Coalition to extend their mission beyond the community and educate other forested communities in southern Colorado.

“It’s a pretty active group,” said Skogberg. He says that an added benefit to the community is that past fuelbreaks have become the favored habitat of many animals, including elk and turkeys.

Loveall and C.K. Morey, CSFS La Veta District forester, have made frequent trips to the subdivision to guide the property owners through the steps needed to create effective fuelbreaks and obtain grant funding. Loveall says that heavy involvement by residents like Skogberg and the Ghormleys has been pivotal to making the subdivision safer.

“I am confident that the work done in this community will aid firefighters in keeping most fire starts from destroying structures and threatening public safety,” Loveall said.

For more information about Community Wildfire Protection Plans and grant funding for fire mitigation, go to <http://csfs.colostate.edu>.