



Colorado State Forest Service
5060 Campus Delivery
Colorado State University
Fort Collins, CO 80523-5060
(970)491-6303; FAX (970)491-7736
<http://www.cfs.colostate.edu>

NEWS

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Contact: Kathryn Hardgrave

970.217.6850

kathryn.hardgrave@colostate.edu

American Recovery and Reinvestment Act Grant Improves Emergency Evacuation Routes

COLORADO SPRINGS, Colo. – Last week, the El Paso County Sheriff’s Department completed a 145-acre fuels reduction project in the Southwest Highway 115 Fire Protection District. The project was funded by an American Recovery and Reinvestment Act sub-grant from the Colorado State Forest Service.

The sub-grant focused on residential roads off Highway 115. In 2008, the fire protection district experienced a wildfire that proved resident evacuation to be difficult at best on the narrow roads. Visibility and access are limited by vegetation that hugs shoulderless roads. The county’s goal was to create thinned road corridors 200 feet wide. Actual width was dependent on landowner participation and topography.

Knotty Pines, Inc., was awarded the contract to implement the project; Knotty Pines then hired Tall Timbers Tree and Shrub Service, a Colorado Springs-based business to perform the labor. Tall Timbers has been in business since 2000, and works on landscaped and native vegetation. “The El Paso County project made it 100-percent easier this winter,” said Dave Carpenter, owner of Tall Timbers. “Instead of employing two to three people this winter, I was able to employ 10.”

In order to finish the project before the rush of spring residential work, Anderson Tree and Stump Removal was hired to assist. Kyle Anderson began his Colorado Springs-based business in 2005. One of the reasons he finds the work gratifying is because the accomplishments can actually be seen on the ground, rather than just on paper. Anderson had a crew of five with him, along with his new piece of equipment, a remote-controlled chipper on rubber tracks. “The chipper has made a big difference in productivity,” said Anderson. “We used to average half an acre a day doing fuels mitigation work, now it’s closer to 1.5 acres.”

During the last few weeks of the project, progress was hampered by high winds and low humidity. The contract administrator, David Mann of Kiva Dog Enterprises, kept close tabs on weather conditions. “Equipment and chain saw operators need to take special precautions when vegetation is so dry,” said Mann, “The last thing we wanted was to spark a fire when our purpose was to reduce the negative impacts created by wildfire when it burns through unnaturally thick vegetation.” It was a good learning experience for the crews.

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The dozen or so people that made the project a reality feel pride and relief now that the physically demanding project is complete. Tall Timbers received thanks from landowners in the form of refreshments, and Mann received a letter praising the professionalism and work ethic of Anderson's crew.

As the new look wears off and becomes the norm, the hope is that residents will continue to work on restoring the health of the forest they call home. All residents, including two-legged, four-legged, winged and rooted, will benefit from these efforts.

To learn more about community wildfire protection, visit <http://csfs.colostate.edu>. The ARRA high-priority forest restoration and fuels mitigation grant was awarded to the CSFS by the U. S. Forest Service.

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