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NEWS

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Lory State Park and Redstone Canyon Fuels Mitigation Help Firefighting Efforts

FORT COLLINS, Colo. – As the High Park Fire bore down on the northwest corner of Lory State Park on June 11, foresters who'd spent three years thinning out a 375-acre fuelbreak in the area held their breath wondering if it would work.

The fire roared through the treetops, pushed by winds and devouring an unbroken canopy of dry, highly flammable pine needles. But when it hit the thinned area, it could no longer jump from tree to tree, so it dropped to the ground, just as foresters hoped it would.

Later inspection revealed that the flame front became a much more benign ground fire as it burned through the thinned area, occasionally torching individual trees or patches of trees until it hit a control line established by retardant drops. And there it was stopped, sparing not only the park, but a big chunk of the watershed for Horsetooth Reservoir.

"So many variables affect fire behavior that it's difficult to point to one factor and say that this is what stopped that portion of the fire," said Diana Selby, assistant district forester for the Fort Collins District of the Colorado State Forest Service. "But we can say that the fire behaved like we wanted it to and that firefighters took the opportunity to stop the fire using retardant drops."

High-severity fire did not occur within the treatment areas and as a result, the watershed for Horsetooth Reservoir currently is not significantly threatened by post-fire runoff, Selby added.

For the past decade, Colorado Parks and Wildlife has been working in tandem with the Colorado State Forest Service to actively manage hazardous fuels, including beetle-kill, in 20 state parks. The Colorado State Forest Service provides technical forestry assistance and helps plan and implement treatments.

The Lory project was funded by a \$250,000 FEMA pre-disaster mitigation grant from the Colorado Division of Emergency Management, matched by \$120,000 from Colorado Parks and Wildlife through Great Outdoors Colorado. Treatments included shaded fuelbreaks on ridge tops, which firefighters used for retardant drops during the High Park Fire. The fuelbreaks also helped prevent erosion in the area from the recent monsoon rains.

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“The value of fuels mitigation treatments at Lory State Park during the High Park Fire underscores the successful partnership that Colorado Parks and Wildlife and the Colorado State Forest Service have developed over the decade since the Hayman Fire,” said Matt Schulz, forest management coordinator, Colorado Parks and Wildlife.

Complementing the fuels mitigation implemented in Lory State Park is work done by landowners in neighboring Redstone Canyon. Community members met every Saturday for four months to thin trees along community roads, creating a shaded fuelbreak and safer driving conditions. The group’s sweat equity reduced the cash cost of the overall project, resulting in more areas being treated. During the High Park Fire, Redstone Canyon fuelbreaks also were used for retardant drops and fire perimeter work.

“In addition to protecting Lory State Park, Redstone Canyon and surrounding communities from wildfires, the fuelbreaks also established safe zones for firefighters to battle the blaze,” said Selby. “These treatments would not have been possible without the partnerships, funding and collective will of everyone involved – and they are a testament to the importance of coordinated efforts to mitigate hazardous fuels.”

The Lory State Park and Redstone Canyon fuels mitigation projects are part of a larger effort aimed at reducing hazardous fuels, mitigating the impacts of mountain pine beetles and restoring forest health in an area stretching from the lower Poudre Canyon south to Masonville.

“Although the 375-acre fuelbreak was dwarfed by the 87,200-acre High Park Fire, which exhibited extreme fire behavior due to high temperatures, heavy fuels and wind conditions, it underscores the benefits that can be achieved with partnerships and well-placed fuels treatments that help keep a large fire from becoming even more damaging and dangerous,” Schulz said.

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