

2021 Action Essential to Protect Forest/ Wildfire/ Watershed Health

Our current approach to addressing the Western wildfire crisis is not working, and most experts believe things will get worse without a new strategy.

Colorado had its three largest wildfires in history this year; California, Oregon and Washington suffered similarly. Every year there is another “record fire season” – with staggering costs. Suppression costs alone exceeded \$10 billion for western fires in the past two decades. Not accounted for in these numbers are property losses, impacts on communities, damage to natural resources such as water, wildlife, soils, infrastructure damage, rehabilitation and recovery, mudslides, human health effects, greenhouse gas emissions, loss of life and human suffering. If accounted for, these additional costs would generate a number well over \$100 billion. To address this challenge requires a paradigm shift that engages support across many interests and by the innovative layering of funding from state, local and federal sources.

More than one hundred years of uncontrolled vegetation growth in Western forests, when coupled with changing climate conditions, have created a problem that cannot be fixed by simply buying more firefighters, fire engines, and firefighting aircraft. The root of this problem is the current forest conditions across millions of acres of national forest lands in the west. In 1999, over 20 years ago, the General Accounting Office reported: **“The most extensive and serious problem related to the health of national forests in the interior West is the overaccumulation of vegetation which has caused an increasing number of large, intense, uncontrollable, and catastrophically destructive wildfires.”**

Colorado Forest & Water Alliance (COFWA) is a non-partisan, non-profit organization that was born out of a need to both recognize the critical relationship between resilient forests and the clean water they provide – and to advocate for significantly accelerating the pace and scale of forest restoration to alter fire behavior and protect our national forest headwaters. The devastating 2020 fires have added even more urgency to our mission.

Many hard working, place-based forest collaborative groups exist in Colorado today – doing their very best to protect communities and subdivisions from the threat of wildfire. This work is critical and addresses those areas closest to key infrastructure. The much bigger problem, however, remains unaddressed – creating resilient, healthy forests across the very large acreages that constitute our drinking water sources.

Both of the two largest fires in Colorado’s history -Cameron Peak (204,000 acres) and the East Troublesome (193,000 acres)- burned predominantly on national forest lands not directly adjacent to homes. Yet, the damage to the Colorado River headwaters, wildlife, scenery, recreation, roads and trails, etc. is staggering. **Who is speaking for those acres?**

COFWA believes it is time for a new conversation and action to deal with our unhealthy forests in Colorado. We believe it is time for a focused, comprehensive, and proactive approach involving state, federal and local entities to bring together the right people and develop a real plan to address this issue. This plan may mean changes to existing national forest land management plans and will require investments – and the private sector – in order to succeed. We urgently need to help our forestry professionals by providing them both political support and funding – or face yet another “record fire season.”

Submitted by:

COFWA is an alliance of four Colorado organizations – Colorado Water Congress, Colorado Timber Industry Assoc, Club 20, and Watershed Health Investment Partners- that join together for mutual assistance in advocating at state and federal levels about policies, funding, and programs that support meaningful and measurable improvements in forest health and watershed resiliency benefitting Colorado. See www.cofwa.net.