

Upper San Juan Mixed Conifer Working Group
Meeting 6, January 21, 2011
Pagosa Community Center
Meeting Notes

This sixth meeting of the Upper San Juan Mixed Conifer Working Group focused on understanding the Community Wildfire Protection Plans for Archuleta and Hinsdale Counties. The group also began the process of examining smaller landscapes within the Upper San Juan mixed-conifer forests in more detail, starting with the Middle Fork/Williams Landscape.

Attendees: Larry Lynch, Jerry Archuleta, Tim Reader, Dan Wand, Doug Ramsey, Ryan Borchers, Drew Peterson, J. R. Ford, Beverly Warburton, John Taylor, Ryan Bidwell, Christina Schmidt, Bob Frye, Sam Burns, Thurman Wilson, Scott Wagner, Kevin Khung, and Steve Hartvigsen.

Sam Burns facilitated (Marsha was out of town). Sam gave a brief overview of the [Healthy Forests Restoration Act \(HFRA\)](#), including their direction for developing Community Wildfire Protection Plans (CWPPs). He handed out copies of [Fire Science Digest Issue 5 - Community Wildfire Protection Plans: Reducing Wildfire Hazards in the Wildland Urban Interface](#) and suggested that people look at the [CWPP Quick Guides](#) for more details about developing CWPPs in a collaborative framework.

Most of the federal funding for fuels reduction work is focused on the wildland-urban interface (WUI), so how the WUI is defined and mapped in relationship to the mixed-conifer forests has a strong influence on how much work the US Forest Service can do there. The WUI is the area where "urban" lands meet or intermix with public lands. Two or more houses per 40 acres are enough to qualify as urban under the HFRA definition. HFRA has default mapping rules for the WUI but communities can define it more specifically in their CWPPs. Both Archuleta and Hinsdale Counties did.

Drew Peterson, Emergency Manager for Archuleta County, gave an overview of the [Archuleta County CWPP](#) that was originally developed about 8 years ago and was recently updated. Archuleta County established this localized definition of the Wildland Urban Interface in collaboration with the USFS, CSFS, local fire protection districts and homeowners associations:

- 1) An area extending 1/2 mile from the boundary of a Community of Concern or;
- 2) An area within 1 1/2 miles of a Community of Concern, including any land that:
 - a) has a sustained steep slope that creates the potential for wildfire behavior endangering the community at risk;
 - b) has a geographic feature that aids in creating an effective fire break, such as a road or ridge top;
 - c) is in condition class 3 (areas where fire frequency has departed from historic condition by multiple return intervals, or the risk of losing key ecosystems is high), or
 - d) is adjacent to an evacuation route for a community at risk.

The group looked at maps of the WUI that Drew provided. The WUI covered a large area due to the County using the two or more houses per 40-acre rule and including evacuation routes. A concern was expressed that the WUI might be too large to help with prioritizing fuels treatments. It was noted that organizations could elaborate on priority levels within the WUI.

Goals of the Archuleta County CWPP include:

- Reducing the risk of destructive wildland fires in the wildland-urban interface.
- Increasing the number of fuels reduction projects on the San Juan Public Lands in the WUI and in other priority areas.
- Work with ranches and rural landowners to promote healthy watersheds, forest and range ecosystems along with wildland fire mitigation.
- Reduce ignitability of structures.
- Increase public involvement in wildland fire awareness.

Drew explained that the County usually updates plans such as the CWPP about every 5 years. Periodic updates will be used to add new subdivisions and to keep current with CWPP development guidelines. There hasn't been much interest yet in developing subdivision-level CWPPs, as is beginning to happen in La Plata County, but some groundwork has been started in Arboles.

Archuleta County is about 1/3 private land. The largest private land wildfire in recent years was about 12 acres with houses all around it, but it was controlled before any homes burned. However recent modeling indicates the potential for much larger fires with serious consequences. For instance, a fire start near Keyah Grande could potentially grow to 7,000 acres depending on wind direction. Aspen Springs is one of the most likely subdivisions to run into wildfire trouble.

Subdivisions and homeowners should be encouraged to work with Firewise Communities to improve defensibility of their properties to complement fuels reduction work on nearby public lands. People can contact Christina Schmidt (970-759-3638) with the Archuleta County Sheriffs Office or Pam Wilson (970-385-8909) with Firewise Communities of Southwest Colorado for more information on the Firewise program.

The CWPP explains how the various organizations work together to respond to fires and share resources. Drew would like to work on a plan that would address allowing fires to burn on private land when certain conditions were met (a checklist of allowable responses to various conditions). Currently they suppress all wildfires.

Drew also explained that Archuleta County is one of the few in the State that will assist private landowners with prescribed fire, including plans, permits, and fireline work. They are partnering with Upper Pine Fire Protection District to share resources. They hope to help on burns that include National Forest System lands and private lands – burning across boundaries.

Ryan Borchers then presented the [Hinsdale County CWPP](#), focusing primarily on the [Piedra Palisades](#) area (the main populated portion of Hinsdale County that overlaps with the Upper San Juan Mixed Conifer Working Group's area). Their CWPP was prepared under a contract with Jim Webb, retired Rio Grande Forest Supervisor. Ryan represented Hinsdale County on the Interdisciplinary Team and is currently working for the County to help implement the Plan. Ryan has also assisted many homeowners with fire mitigation through his business, Fire Ready.

Hinsdale County is 95% public land, about half of that Wilderness. It includes portions of the Rio Grande, San Juan, and Grand Mesa, Uncompahgre, and Gunnison National Forests, as well as lands managed by the BLM. It also contains portions of three Colorado State Forest Service Districts.

Hinsdale County has a number of physical and vegetative features that limit the spread of wildfire. It includes the most alpine tundra in the lower 48 states. The population is 790 with just over half of the residents living in Lake City.

The development of the CWPP included a good bit of interaction with residents through stakeholders meetings. They also mapped all of the structures in the County and produced maps showing which structures would be likely to survive a wildfire. They estimated that 43% of the structures in the Piedra/Palisades area were likely to survive. Their definition and mapping of WUI is similar to what was described earlier for Archuleta County. Some suggested boundary changes for the WUI in the Piedra/Palisades were given to Ryan by members of the Working Group.

Hinsdale County CWPP priorities include:

- awareness and education;
- developing wildland firefighting capacity (many places currently have a 2-3 hour response time); and
- fire mitigation projects.

The next step for the County to implement the CWPP will be working with homeowners on education. Ryan has been funded ¼ time from Hinsdale County's [Secure Rural Schools](#) Title III funds for this purpose. The other four counties that make up the West Region Wildfire Council (Montrose, Delta, Ouray, and San Miguel) took a different approach, pooling money to hire a CWPP Coordinator.

The Piedra/Palisades area receives the most lightning strikes in Hinsdale County because of storms building against the mountains in the Weminuche Wilderness. CWPP recommendations for the area include:

- mitigation around structures;
- developing an MOU with the Pagosa Fire Protection District (Drew suggested that it should probably be the Sheriff's Office); and
- continuing to implement planned fuels reduction projects.

Scott Wagner discussed how the Pagosa Ranger District had worked with the counties in mapping their wildland-urban interfaces and developing the CWPPs. Scott said he viewed the CWPPs as more of a process than a product. They are a good tool for education and interaction. Scott and Kevin stated that the CWPPs are a good way for them to look at larger polygons and prioritize fuels treatment projects. Scott likes how La Plata County has gone on to subdivision-level CWPPs to add detail.

Sam described the process that we will be using for a number of meetings to look at smaller landscapes (probably 6 to 8) within the mixed conifer in more detail. Steve Hartvigsen presented a map of the landscapes to orient the group. Then he started with the first landscape to be discussed – Middle

Fork/Williams. See the handout titled *Treatment/Project Area: Middle Fork Williams* for more detail. He also briefly discussed a handout titled *Pagosa District – Project Prioritization Criteria* that was used about 10 years ago to prioritize areas for treatment that still seemed relevant.

Dan Wand showed the group a new publication from the Colorado State Forest Service titled *Colorado Statewide Forest Resource Strategy* that along with last year's *Colorado Statewide Forest Resource Assessment* was developed as directed by the 2008 Farm Bill (State and Private Forestry Redesign Initiative). For more information, see the [CSFS website](#). Several Working Group members participated in a community discussion about the assessment and strategy in a Durango public meeting about a year ago. We should give some thought to using those tools in our process. We should also ask Dan and Jerry Archuleta of NRCS to discuss some work they are doing on the Stollsteimer Watershed to see how it potentially overlaps.

Sam mentioned that Jimbo had wanted to talk about opportunities for bio char. It was also noted that we need to discuss establishing a “public outreach committee” that would be involved in coordinating a springtime socioeconomic forum, as our group had discussed at the 12/17/2010 meeting. Sam handed out a working draft outline for a final report for the Working Group from Marsha. Thurman handed out some definitions of terms and stated that they were a work in progress that the group could add to and change as it evolves. We will also continue to update the mission statement as needed and develop a set of working principles for management of the Upper San Juan mixed-conifer forests.

The next meeting will be Friday, February 18, from 9:00 to 12:00 in Pagosa, location to be determined.