

**WORKING DRAFT**

# Upper San Juan Mixed Conifer Working Group Communication Plan

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(This document is a living plan and will be updated and refined)

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## BACKGROUND

Mixed-conifer stands are the most complex forest type found in Southwestern Colorado. In southwestern Colorado it typically is found between lower-elevation, ponderosa pine-dominated forests and higher-elevation spruce-fir forests. Mixed-conifer forests generally occur at elevations from 7,500 to 10,000 feet. At lower elevations and on warmer aspects the dominant tree species are ponderosa pine, white fir, and Douglas-fir. At higher elevations or on cooler aspects, white fir, aspen, blue spruce, and Douglas-fir are present; slightly cooler/higher still, Engelmann spruce and subalpine fir begin to be observed. (Southwestern white pine bridges the gap – it is found at higher elevations but on warm, sunny aspects.) There are approximately 250,000 acres of mixed conifer on the San Juan National Forest, mostly located on the Pagosa Ranger District. Timber harvest is thought to be feasible on about 45,000 of these acres.

Due in part to the exclusion of fire, mixed-conifer landscapes that were once open and dominated by fire-tolerant species have become densely forested by small shade-tolerant, fire-susceptible trees. Most of the lower-elevation mixed conifer (termed warm-dry mixed conifer) is considered to be outside its historic range of variation. The Forest Service has been limited in its ability to shift current conditions back to more desired conditions due to a lack of markets for wood products coupled with a lack of funding to affect management actions.

Local forest stakeholders and the Pagosa Ranger District of the San Juan National Forest (SJNF) have formed the collaborative **Upper San Juan Mixed Conifer Working Group** for the purpose of sharing diverse stakeholder perspectives and developing priorities for management of mixed-conifer forests over the next 2-10 years. A stakeholder-based effort was initiated in 2009, beginning with a “state of the science” workshop hosted by the Pagosa Ranger District of the SJNF and the Colorado Forest Restoration Institute (CFRI). Eighty-two local and regional stakeholders participated in the two-day workshop in October 2009. It was a significant step forward to focus on the mixed-conifer zone because the majority of collaborative work over the past 15 years has addressed ponderosa pine.

Building on the workshop, a core group of participants is in the process of formally initiating a collaborative Upper San Juan Mixed Conifer Working Group to invite broader stakeholder participation and seek to develop shared priorities for future management in the mixed conifer forest type. Specifically, they are interested in:

- Sharing and strengthening our understanding of appropriate methods of maintaining and increasing health and resiliency in the mixed-conifer landscape;
- Broadening our knowledge of current conditions, conservation needs, and opportunities;
- Developing a set of restoration approaches, actions, and projects;
- Initiating projects that address high priority needs and opportunities for restoration.
- Establishing follow-up monitoring methods to guide adaptive management.

## COMMUNICATION GOALS AND OBJECTIVES

The primary goals of this communication plan are to provide information to the public about the ecological importance and unique characteristics of mixed conifer forests in southwest Colorado, share information on the current state of forest conditions after over a century of fire suppression, inform the public about measures necessary to protect ecological integrity, and invoke understanding and a desire on the part of the visiting public to support these protective measures. The communication goal includes providing information to internal Forest Service audiences and stakeholder groups.

The objectives used to meet these goals include the following:

- Educate about the unique qualities and historic range of variation of conditions of mixed conifer forests;
- Create awareness that current forest conditions are not in a natural state;

- Communicate that future trends indicate that current state of the forest and trajectory towards unmanaged wildfire could be catastrophic for local communities and economies;
- Prepare communities for and increase awareness of forest resilience and what actions are necessary to move towards a condition of resilience;
- Generate discussion and dialog regarding potential actions and treatment options and;
- Activate volunteer groups to aid in education for resource management and monitoring.

## THEMES AND KEY MESSAGES

**Theme 1. Mixed conifer forests in southwest Colorado are a treasured forest environment for this area with valuable wildlife, scenic vistas, and recreation resources. Mixed conifer forests include a complex system of characteristics that are challenging for land owners to understand and manage. The following key messages describe some of these complex and diverse characteristics.**

### **Key Messages:<sup>1</sup>**

- 1.1 Mixed conifer forests have the greatest diversity of tree species of any major forest cover type in southwest Colorado. The understory vegetation found there also has a similarly wide range of diversity.
- 1.2 The diversity of the plant and forest types sets the stage for an equally diverse range of disturbances to affect forest structure over a range of scales across time and across the landscape. These forests are adapted to disturbances such as forest fires, wind, heavy snow damage, and beetle infestations.
- 1.3 Management options, such as thinning and prescribed burn prescriptions, are diverse as well.
- 1.4 SJNF staff have delineated mixed conifer into two forest types – warm-dry and cool-moist – in order to capture key structural and compositional differences on either side of the mixed conifer continuum.
- 1.5 Warm-dry mixed conifer typically has a strong ponderosa pine tree component, and a Gambel oak understory component, reflecting adaptation to fires that were relatively frequent and of low intensity.
- 1.6 Cool-moist mixed-conifer often has minimal ponderosa pine and no Gambel oak. These forests were historically characterized by relatively infrequent fire, of highly variable intensity and severity.

**Theme 2. Existing conditions of mixed conifer forests are considered to be outside of their historic range of variation. The past 130 years of forest management has prevented and excluded wildfire from the landscape. Predictions for the future put mixed conifer forests at continued or potentially even greater risk at being outside of historic range of variation. This trend is likely to include uncharacteristic disturbances – particularly damaging wildfire and/or extensive insect epidemics.**

### **Key Messages:**

- 2.1 People have noticed changes in mixed conifer forests in our area and are concerned about the further changes that might result from large, intense fires, insect infestations, and smoke associated with wildfires.
- 2.2 Fire suppression and other past management practices have excluded wildfire from the landscape and have resulted in large areas outside of the historic range of variation—known as HRV—in terms of structure, composition and disturbance regimes, especially fire.

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<sup>1</sup> This information was sourced from primarily *Mixed Conifer Working Group* publications, published by multiple authors including Colorado Forest Restoration Institute, Colorado State Forest Service, Dr. Julie Korb, Dr. Bill Romme, and others, 2001-2011.

- 2.3 Managers are concerned about the current age-/size-class distributions, where forests consist of more older and fewer younger trees of traditional pine species, with resulting increased susceptibility to insect infestations.
- 2.4 Managers are concerned about the increase in trees of shade-tolerant species in the understory, like white fir or blue spruce, that are adapted to dense forested conditions but are susceptible to fire or insects and disease.

**Theme 3. The Upper San Juan Mixed Conifer Working Group was formed to foster collaboration as a tool to share diverse perspectives and develop priorities for management of the mixed conifer forests.**

**Key Messages:**

- 3.1 The way forests are managed affects our entire community. Forest management supports the values and resources that we identify with mixed conifer forests.
- 3.2 San Juan National Forest managers invited input from users, landowners, interested publics, and other entities in how mixed conifer forests should be managed for a diversity of uses and outcomes.
- 3.3 The Upper San Juan Mixed Conifer Working Group develops cooperation in a variety of ways to foster management, including providing information about forest conditions, processes, or potential management actions; potential consequences resulting from management actions; developing monitoring and evaluation methods to promote adaptive management; and finding neighboring landowners to work in concert with in implementation of acceptable treatments.
- 3.4 The Mixed Conifer Group is open to anyone who is interested in forest health and forest management. The group's goal is to collaboratively craft a plan and provide guidance that will assist the USFS in their decision-making related to the mixed-conifer forests for years into the future.

**Theme 4. Some members of the public and land owners are interested in sharing information about forest ecology and management options and wish to participate in the collaborative dialog and to manage their forest resources. The Forest Service and their partners will work to educate users in forest management strategies.**

**Key Messages:**

- 4.1 Despite scientific uncertainties, stakeholders have identified a shared interest in maintaining and improving the health and resilience of mixed-conifer stands to future disturbance and climate change.
- 4.2 Just as the forest environment is dynamic, and new research or project evaluation has the potential to reveal new information, education of stakeholders needs to be ongoing, up to date, and participatory.

**Theme 5. The Forest Service needs assistance and support from partners, community leaders, chamber's of commerce, and the media in developing and fostering stewardship and protection activities in the Pagosa Springs area.**

**Key Messages:**

- 5.1 The Forest Service's stewardship work is most successful when supported by a coalition of partners and volunteers. Volunteers provide a valuable resource to the Forest Service and can assist in education and monitoring through participation in a variety of projects. Volunteer opportunities include working on forest monitoring programs and educating community members. If interested in volunteering, please contact **Steve Hartvigsen** at the Pagosa Ranger District at 970-264-1513.

## **COMMUNICATION TOOLS AND STRATEGIES**

The Forest Service and its partners will use a variety of methods to communicate Key Messages. Each tool will be formatted and directed at specific audiences. The Forest Service will also present Key Messages at special activities and events, as possible, throughout the next several years. The basic set of communication tools and special events are outlined below.

### **General Outreach Communication**

- Press release about current problems, management changes, new regulations, and request for volunteers;
- Briefing paper about current problems, management changes, and new regulations;
- Public affairs programming about current problems, management changes, new regulations, and request for volunteers;
- E-mail announcements and general updates with information on management changes, new regulations, and request for volunteers;
- Powerpoint presentation for speakers bureaus and stakeholder groups outlining current problems, management changes, new regulations, and request for volunteers;
- Stakeholder group meetings (participation/presentation);
- Interagency meetings (participation/presentation);
- Update/Contact Websites (USFS, CPW, Recreation user groups, conservation organizations); and
- Update San Juan National Forest and partners Websites with regulatory information, press releases, briefing paper, and powerpoint presentation.

### **"On the Ground" Outreach Communication**

- Educational pamphlet for distribution on-site and at key locations;
- Homeowners guide to what to expect for forest ecology, fire regimes, and forest management
- Interpretive signs at project on-site locations.

### **Special Activities and Events**

- Public Lands Day
- Solicit community groups adopt a monitoring project
- Interpretive walks/tours in mixed conifer forests, including treated areas

## KEY AUDIENCES

Diverse user groups and land owners in the mixed conifer zone create a wide variety of communication audiences and messages. The variety runs from the general public recreation users, agency personnel, land owners, and stakeholders who are intimately familiar with the area. The table below lists specific audiences targeted by the Forest Service to receive communications on mixed conifer management issues. It includes specific audiences and the communication tools and messages targeted at that audience.

Audience		Communication Tool	Key Message Themes*
<b>Internal</b>			
Forest Service employees on the San Juan national forests, including line officers, Renewable Resources, Lands and Recreation staff, Public Affairs officers, Special Use administrators, law enforcement officers, and front line administrators.		Briefing paper, Powerpoint presentation	Theme: 3, 4, 5
Regional Directors of Renewable Resources, Wilderness, Recreation, and Public Affairs.		Briefing paper, Powerpoint presentation	Theme: 2, 3, 5
<b>External</b>			
Pagosa Springs, Archuleta County residents		Press Release to local media, Public affairs programming, tours	Theme: 1-5
Local Governments & Organizations of Influence			
	Pagosa Springs Archuleta County	Press Release, Briefing Paper, email, powerpoint presentation, tours	Theme: 1-5
	Pagosa Area Water and Sanitation District	Press Release, Briefing Paper, email, powerpoint presentation, tours	Theme: 1-5
Businesses & industry organizations			
	Real estate agents Colorado Timber Industry Association	Pamphlet distribution point, Flyer/Poster highlighting lessons for homeowners, powerpoints, tours	Theme: 1-5
Conservation organizations			
	Rocky Mountain Wild San Juan Citizens Alliance San Juan RC&D	Press Release, Briefing paper Powerpoint presentation, Group Meetings, tours	Theme: 1-5
Recreational user groups			
	Day users: equestrians, ATVs, hikers, anglers, hunters	<b>On-Site</b> Kiosks, Interpretive Signs, Pamphlet, Flyer <b>Off-site</b> – Flyer/Poster/pamphlet at local retail and USFS contact stations	Theme 1-3, 5
	Recreational organizations	Briefing Paper, email, powerpoint presentation, tours	Theme 1-3, 5
	Campers: all of above	<i>Same as above,</i>	Theme 1-3, 5
Home Owners Associations		Pamphlet distribution point, Flyer/Poster highlighting new regulations, powerpoints	Theme: 1-5
			Theme: x

\*Theme numbers refer to Key Message Themes presented above.

## **ACTION PLAN**

The Action Plan is currently under development and will be fully explored in 2012-2013. See Spreadsheet for identified audiences, messages, and interests that will be further developed into a set of strategies, objectives, and actions over the course of the next year.

## UPPER SAN JUAN MIXED CONIFER WORKING GROUP COMMUNICATION TEAM

Agency Spokesperson: Steve Hartvigsen, Silviculturalist or Kevin Khung, Pagosa District Ranger- Phone: (970) 264-2268; FAX: (970) 264-1538

Executive Lead:

Program Manager:

Technical Expert:

Communication:

### APPENDIX A: MEDIA CONTACTS

Name	Contact	Phone	Email
Pagosa Sun	Lindsey Bright	970-264-2100	<a href="mailto:lindsey@pagosahun.com">lindsey@pagosahun.com</a>
Durango Herald	Dale Rodebaugh	970 375-4564	<a href="mailto:daler@durangoherald.com">daler@durangoherald.com</a>
Cortez Journal		970 565-8527	<a href="mailto:news@cortezjournal.com">news@cortezjournal.com</a>
Pine River Times		970 884-2331	<a href="mailto:prt@pinerivertimes.com">prt@pinerivertimes.com</a>
KSUT Radio		970-563-0255	<a href="http://ksut.org/">http://ksut.org/</a>

### APPENDIX B: STAKEHOLDER LIST

Name	Contact	Phone	Email
Firewise Communities of Southwest	Pam Wilson	970 385-8909	<a href="mailto:chamisa02@earthlink.net">chamisa02@earthlink.net</a>
San Juan Mountain Association			
Colorado State Forest Service	Kent Grant	970 247-5250	
Bureau of Indian Affairs	Jim Friedley	970 563-4571	
Southwest Water Conservation District			
Pagosa Area Water & Sanitation District	Ed Winton (Gen Manager)	970 731-2691	
Mountain Studies Institute	Marcie Bidwell	970 382-6908	<a href="mailto:marcie@mountainstudies.org">marcie@mountainstudies.org</a>
Fort Lewis College	Julie Korb	970 247-6905	<a href="mailto:korb_j@fortlewis.edu">korb_j@fortlewis.edu</a>