



For IMMEDIATE RELEASE
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Southwest Colorado and Northern New Mexico offer an expanse of recreational opportunities and beautiful vistas. We are drawn to this area because of the mountains, the forests, and the rivers. But, like everywhere else, living in these wild places comes with challenges presented by the natural environment, and wildfire is one of those. While we tend to think of wildfire as threatening, wildfire is a critical component of forests health; it has determined what our forests have looked like and what wildlife they support for thousands of years.

Until recent times, fires burned regularly in our forests—at different time intervals in different forest types, but regularly. For example, Ponderosa pine forests burned approximately every 5 to 20 years. Historically, fires likely burned somewhere in the forest semi-annually. These fires removed accumulations of shrubs and small trees, favored certain tree species over others, and maintained gaps between trees and large meadows. And, because they were so common, fires were less intense, allowing mature, established trees to survive their course.

But times have changed. As people settled in the West, growing populations and concern for life and property resulted in a reduction of fire on the landscape, and the forest responded. Without the regular occurrence of fire, oak and other shrubs build a dense understory, and there is an increased presence of fire-prone species. These changes make forests more susceptible to beetles and disease. And when wildfires start now, they burn hotter and more extensively because there is more fuel available and the type of fuel allows fire to move more readily from the forest floor to tree crowns. Once in the crowns of trees, these high-intensity fires can spread from tree-to-tree more quickly.

Although we originally misunderstood the role of fire and believed it was destructive to forests, research and time have helped us to better understand the critical role fire plays in forest health, and the role it can play in protecting and preserving human lives and values.

But when forests are out of sync, wildfires can be very destructive and expensive to fight, and recovery can take decades or longer.

So, what can we do?

Fortunately, we have tools accessible to our land managers that can help reduce the risk of high-intensity, large-scale wildfire, but there are challenges: the vast quantity of land that needs to be managed presents a challenge in terms of both human and financial resources, and no single one of the tools available will work across an entire landscape. In order to reduce forest density and decrease the risk of wildfire as efficiently and effectively as possible, an entire suite of tools must be employed. Land managers, landowners, and local non-profits are in ongoing conversations—sharing lessons learned and new technologies—to improve our response across the landscape.

Tools such as mechanical harvesting, hand thinning, and mastication (mowing of shrubs and small trees) can help reduce forest densities across the landscape and around homes and vital infrastructure, but the extent of their application can be limited by terrain, time, and cost. The proactive management of our forests using fire as a tool can help us avoid large-scale destructive wildfires and manage forest conditions across large acreage of inaccessible terrain.

There is no single fix that will help us improve forest health and minimize the impact of wildfires—all of these tools are necessary if we are going to protect our communities, residents, and resources.

Even when all of these tools are applied effectively across the landscape, fire and smoke will always be a part of southwest Colorado. The hope is that, through the application of appropriate treatments, we can decrease the prevalence and impacts of widespread and destructive wildfires, protect our communities, improve the health of our beloved local forests, and make vital resources (like water infrastructure) more resilient when a fire does occur.

Finally, we need a community approach. By working together and talking together, we can address challenges and identify opportunities for improving forest health and increasing the resilience of our community. The San Juan Headwaters Forest Health Partnership brings experts to our region to help inform our decisions, and we will continue to keep the public apprised of learning opportunities.

For more information, contact Aaron Kimple, the San Juan Headwaters Forest Health Partnership coordinator, at akimple@mountainstudies.org or (970)387-5161.

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