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# Colorado Forest Health Council 2024 Annual Report

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September 2023- September 2024

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The recommendations contained within this report are a product of the Colorado Forest Health Council, and should not be construed as recommendations or specific opinions of the Department of Natural Resources.

# Introduction

## Letter from Council Chair

As the Executive Director of the Department of Natural Resources and Chair of the Colorado Forest Health Council, I am pleased to present the Council's 2024 Annual Report to the Governor pursuant to Colorado Revised Statute § 23-31-316. This is the third Annual Report following the establishment of the new Council through SB21-237.

I thank all of the Council members for their thoughtful discussions on forest health and wildfire mitigation challenges and solutions in Colorado this year. I also want to thank the experts and stakeholders who shared their knowledge and perspectives with the Council, with the addition of the Colorado State University Extension.

In this report, the Colorado Forest Health Council recommends several specific actions for improving forest health and wildfire mitigation, with a main focus on increasing the workforce vital to these goals. Legislative recommendations will be presented to the General Assembly through the Wildfire Matters Review Committee. Council members decided not to add any administrative recommendations this year, as some recommendations from the 2023 report are still underway.

The Colorado Forest Health Council thanks Governor Polis for his leadership on forest health issues. I also want to thank our State Forester Matt McCombs for his leadership and support for the Council, which facilitated the development of a Forest Resilience Planning Guide and the 30-year vision for forest health.

I also want to extend a heartfelt thank you to the people of Colorado for their ongoing attention to our forests, and I look forward to working with Council members to develop further recommendations in 2025.

Truly,



Dan Gibbs  
Executive Director, Colorado Department of Natural Resources

## About the Forest Health Council

Forests cover over 24 million acres of Colorado, and provide some of our State's most critical resources. Recreation, wildlife habitat, clean water, and safe and prosperous communities all depend on healthy forests. The Colorado Forest Health Council was established following SB21-237, which was signed by the Governor on June 22, 2021. The Council was re-established within the Department of Natural Resources (DNR) from the preceding Forest Health Advisory Council, which made recommendations to the State Forester.

The Colorado Forest Health Council (CFHC) provides a collaborative forum to advise the governor and general assembly on a broad range of issues, opportunities, and threats with regard to Colorado's forests. The Council's 26 members represent diverse stakeholders and agencies working in forest management across Colorado.

## Voting Council Members

The Colorado Forest Health Council is made of 26 members from across the state representing diverse forest interests.

### Agency Members

Dan Gibbs, Council Chair  
Executive Director, Colorado  
Department of Natural Resources

Matt McCombs, State Forester, Director  
of the Colorado State Forest Service

Mike Morgan, Director, Division of Fire  
Prevention and Control

Former Regional Forester Frank Beum,  
Regional Forester Troy Heithecker or  
former Deputy Regional Forester Steven  
Lohr, U.S. Forest Service Region 2

John Ring, Forestry Program Lead, U.S.  
Bureau of Land Management

Frank Falzone or another NRCS  
designee

### Governor-appointed Members of the Colorado General Assembly

Lisa Cutter, Member of the Colorado  
Senate from the 20th District

Mike Lynch, Member of the Colorado  
House of Representatives from the 65th  
District

### Governor-appointed Members

Samantha Albert, Deputy Director,  
Outdoor Recreation Industry Office, of  
Denver, Colorado, to serve as an  
employee of the Colorado Office of  
Economic Development with a  
leadership role and expertise in  
outdoor recreation;

Christy Belton, Rancher, of Steamboat Springs, Colorado, to serve as an individual who owns a ranch and has grazing rights on public lands;

Ethan Bucholz, Forest Monitoring Program Manager, Colorado State Forest Service, of Fort Collins, Colorado, to serve as a forest scientist or an individual who is employed in a forest research position and has climate science experience;

Christina Burri, Watershed Scientist, Denver Water, of Drake, Colorado, to serve as an individual who is employed by a water supplier, including a municipal drinking water supplier and an irrigation water supplier, east of the continental divide;

Clyde Church, La Plata County Commissioner, of Durango, Colorado, to serve as a county commissioner west of the continental divide;

Patricia Dorsey, Director of Conservation Operations, Mountain West, National Wild Turkey Federation, of Bayfield, Colorado, to serve as an individual employed by or associated with a wildlife organization;

Scott Jones, Vice President, Colorado Off-Highway Vehicle Coalition, of Livermore, Colorado, to serve as an individual employed by or associated with an organization that advocates for motorized recreation;

Abe Laydon, Douglas County Commissioner, of Lone Tree, Colorado, to serve as a county commissioner east of the continental divide;

Paige Lewis, Deputy State Director and Director of Conservation Programs for The Nature Conservancy in Colorado, of Boulder, Colorado, to serve as an individual employed by or associated with a conservation organization;

Katie McGrath Novak, Colorado Forest Collaboratives Network Coordinator, of Longmont, Colorado, to serve as an individual employed or associated with a forest collaborative organization;

Veronica Medina, Archuleta County Commissioner, of Pagosa Springs, Colorado, to serve as a county commissioner west of the continental divide;

Mark Morgan, Owner, Morgan Timber Products, of Fort Collins, Colorado, to serve as an individual employed by or associated with the timber industry;

Amy Moyer, Director of Strategic Partnerships, Colorado River District, of Glenwood Springs, Colorado, to serve as an individual employed by a water supplier, including a municipal drinking water supplier and an irrigation water supplier, west of the continental divide;

Jody Shadduck-McNally, Larimer County Commissioner, of Loveland, Colorado, to serve as a county commissioner east of the continental divide;

Julie Stencel, Assistant General Counsel, Xcel Energy, of Denver, Colorado, to serve as an individual employed by a public utility that owns or operates transmission facilities;

Carole Walker, Executive Director, Rocky Mountain Insurance Information Association, of Denver, Colorado, to

serve as an individual employed by or associated with the insurance industry;

Selwyn Whiteskunk, Vice Chair, Ute Mountain Ute Tribal Council, of Towaoc, Colorado, to serve as an enrolled member of a tribe that has a reservation in Colorado;

Brett Wolk, Assistant Director, Colorado Forest Restoration Institute, of Fort Collins, Colorado, to serve as an individual employed by a research institution and who has forest policy expertise

## Colorado Forest Health Council Administration

### Staff

Alison Lerch, Forest Health and Wildfire Mitigation Policy Advisor  
Colorado Department of Natural Resources  
Council Administrator

Courtney Young, Forest Health and Wildfire Mitigation Program Administrator  
Colorado Department of Natural Resources  
Council Administrator

### Meetings

The Colorado Forest Health Council (CFHC) held four quarterly meetings between September 2023 and September 2024, in addition to a supplementary meeting to develop the 30 year vision for forest health in Colorado, and dozens of Committee meetings. Two quarterly meetings per year are entirely virtual, while the other two are hybrid in-person/virtual meetings. The Colorado State Forest Service covers travel costs for Council members attending in-person meetings.

### Website

<https://dnr.colorado.gov/divisions/forestry/colorado-forest-health-council>

## Legislative Intent

[SB21-237](#), signed into law by Governor Polis on June 22, 2021, established that “[the] mission of the council is to improve forest health in Colorado through an integrated, science-based, statewide approach focused on collaboration among federal, state, and local governments, and private and nonprofit partners, to mitigate wildfire, restore ecological health, safeguard communities and water supplies, mitigate and adapt to climate change, support local economies, and protect recreational settings, as appropriate, across all jurisdictional boundaries.”

The bill and resulting statute also established the powers and duties of the Council, which calls for the Council to engage in at least the following activities (C.R.S. 23-31-316):

- (I) Making recommendations for forest health and wildfire mitigation capacity building and funding;
- (II) Development of, and recommendations for, attaining a thirty-year vision for forest health in Colorado, including developing goals and both annual and multi-year recommendations for actions to improve forest health and reduce fire risk through increased funding and capacity building;
- (III) Landscape-scale planning to identify state-level priorities for forest restoration, wildfire risk reduction, and related management; key barriers inhibiting the achievement of those priorities; and solutions to overcome those barriers;
- (IV) Monitoring trends related to forest ecosystem health, including those related to climate adaptation, and advising on opportunities for state-level action;
- (V) Monitoring and identifying opportunities to support and promote synergy across forest-based collaboratives in the state, including coordinating state funding sources and sharing best practices;
- (VI) Identification of strategies for building sustained capacity to conduct forest restoration and wildfire mitigation work at scale through collaboration across multiple agencies, organizations, and jurisdictions; public-private partnerships; innovative public and private funding vehicles; shared stewardship; and other solutions, with emphasis on leveraging and maximizing the impact and reach of state funding;

(VII) Identification of workforce development challenges and opportunities, as well as potential regional and statewide economic benefits, associated with a significant increase in wildfire mitigation and forest restoration activities;

(VIII) Development and support of solutions to manage and utilize woody material produced by mitigation work, including consideration of climate change and ecological impacts;

(IX) Development of legislative and regulatory recommendations for policies that could support wildfire mitigation and forest restoration goals; and

(X) Providing technical expertise and recommendations to inform the general assembly, the executive branch, and federal and local agencies on forest health and wildfire mitigation issues.

At a minimum, the Council is statutorily required to annually brief the Wildfire Matters Review Committee (legislative interim committee) and submit an annual report to the Governor. The Council's statutory authorization will be reviewed prior to potential sunset and repeal on September 1, 2026.

## 2024 Recap

The full Council discussed the following over their four full-council meetings from September 2023 to July 2024:

- Conflict of interest training, Colorado Attorney General's Office
- Actions and recommendations from the Committee on Leveraging Resources and Legislative Committee
- 2025 Colorado legislative session updates
- Organizational Assessment of State Wildfire Mitigation Efforts in Colorado, Department of Natural Resources Executive Director's Office
- Presentation of the Colorado's Outdoors Strategy, Keystone Policy Center
- Presentation on the impacts of wildfire and forest health on water systems and providers, Denver Water
- Presentation on, and updates from, the Colorado Forest Tracker, Colorado Forest Restoration Institute and Colorado State Forest Service
- Development of 30 year vision for forest health in Colorado



## 2024 Travel

The Council meets in person twice a year for members to strengthen relationships and deepen their understanding of forest health challenges and opportunities across the state.

### January 2024

In January 2024 the Council met in Aurora at the Colorado Water Congress. To complement the Council meeting, members of the Council convened in the morning to participate in, or listen to, a workshop: *Wildfire Crisis Strategy in Action! Creating Healthy Watersheds for Clean Water Supplies Through Active Forest Restoration*. This joint event allowed Council members to learn more about the work of the water resources community and for water professionals to interact with, and learn more about, the Colorado Forest Health Council.



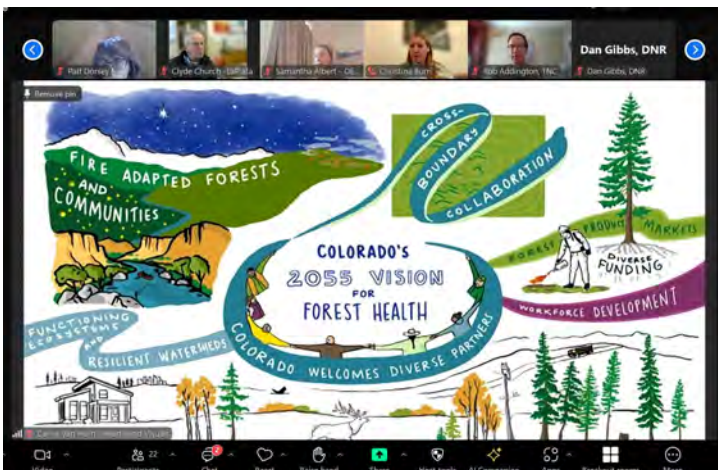
### July 2024

The Council met in Glenwood Springs in July of 2024. Prior to the meeting, the Council members heard from the Roaring Fork Wildfire Collaborative and their recently awarded Wildfire Ready Watersheds grant. The Council then learned about the post-fire impacts from the Grizzly Creek fire on the City of Glenwood Springs' water supply. The Council met Public Works Director, Matt Langhorst at the City's No Name Creek water intake and heard about the City's immediate actions to mitigate their water security issues such as additional armoring on their intake and building a pre-sedimentation system inside No Name Cave. The Council also heard from Paula Stepp, Executive Director of the Middle Colorado Watershed Council, who discussed the water quality and precipitation information network to address immediate needs in the year following the fire.



## 30-year vision for Forest Health in Colorado

Fire Adapted Colorado was hired to facilitate the creation of the 2055 Vision for Forest Health in Colorado. The vision and supporting goals and actions will be available in early 2025. Funding for the 30-year vision development is provided by the Colorado State Forest Service.



## Committee Actions

Three committees support the directive and work of the Council; the Legislative Committee, Committee on Leveraging Resources, and the Prescribed Fire Subcommittee (a joint committee with members from the Colorado Forest Health Council and the Colorado Fire Commission).

## Legislative Committee

Committee Chair: Larimer County Commissioner Jody Shaddock-McNally

The Legislative Committee considered forest health challenges from across the state, hearing from stakeholders with diverse backgrounds and expertise. The Committee presented legislative recommendations to the Forest Health Council, which were ultimately voted on and presented to relevant decision makers.

## Recommendations for the 2025 Legislative Session

The Forest Health Council unanimously voted to present these five legislative concepts to the Wildfire Matters Review Committee. They also recommend these legislative concepts for consideration by Governor Polis:

- 1. Additional Capacity Support for Forest Restoration and Wildfire Risk Mitigation (FRWRM)**

Appropriate \$1 million specifically for capacity building through FRWRM for at least one year, subject to available appropriations thereafter. The Forest Restoration and Wildfire Risk Mitigation (FRWRM) grant program funds two types of projects: fuels and forest health projects (implementation on the ground) and capacity building. Language for capacity building projects in the original legislation allowed for applicants to purchase equipment for project implementation. In 2021, SB21-258 was passed which made several changes to the FRWRM grant program. These changes included expanding eligibility for Capacity Grant projects to those providing local governments, community groups, and collaborative forestry groups with the resources and staffing necessary to plan and implement forest restoration and wildfire risk mitigation projects. Other eligible capacity building costs include collaborative capacity, personnel capacity, partner outreach and engagement, identifying priority project areas, prescription planning and acquiring community equipment for use by landowners. FRWRM's Capacity Grants currently are funded with up to 25% of the total FRWRM funds available, and the program has an annual appropriation of \$8 million. This proposal would add an additional \$1 million

per year specifically for capacity requests for at least one year, in addition to the 25% of existing FRWRM funds. In total \$3 million would be available for capacity support, up from \$2 million.

## **2. Expand the Colorado State Forest Service Internship Program**

Expand, and fund, the Colorado State Forest Service (CSFS) internship program to higher education programs located close to CSFS field offices.

Due to increasing forest health challenges, it is vitally important for the Colorado State Forest Service (CSFS) to invest in comprehensive training of the future workforce by permanently funding the CSFS Internship Program established in 2018. In Senate Bill (SB23-005), Colorado identified a need to find qualified and trained employees for the state's timber, forest health, and wildfire mitigation industries. The legislation recognizes that students who wish to pursue careers in these industries face barriers to entry, such as lack of access to training programs and internship experiences that would provide real-world work experience.

The CSFS Internship Program provides opportunities for student interns to seek permanent positions within the agency and with CSFS partners across Colorado and beyond. The internship program's two major goals are to increase professional development opportunities for students in forestry-related fields of study and to provide expanded seasonal staffing to CSFS projects and activities. Since its inception in 2018, the CSFS Internship Program has expanded from 5 interns enrolled as undergraduates in the Warner College of Natural Resources (WCNR) at Colorado State University to 21 interns in 2024.

## **3. Forestry career pathway awareness for students**

Expand forestry career pathway awareness in middle schools and high schools.

Colorado State University Extension serves all of Colorado's 64 counties with non-credit programming for audiences from youth to older adults. This proposal addresses the need identified by the Colorado Forest Health Council to reach youth and young adult audiences with education and career skills and provide workforce exposure and opportunities. Specifically, we want to catalyze and grow youth engagement and career opportunities in the areas of forestry, wildland fire, and natural resources in select counties within two targeted Colorado regions - the Front Range and the Mountain. It is envisioned that this project will take place over a 3-year period beginning July 2025 and ending

June 2028. Primary focus will be in 5 Front Range counties (along the mountain backdrop area) and 5 Mountain Region counties.

#### 4. Colorado Community Navigator Program (Adapted from HB24-1006, Assist Rural Community Wildfire-Related Grant Application.)\*

Direct the Colorado State Forest Service to create the “Rural Grant Navigator Grant Program” a (competitive or other) grant program which will provide grant money for NGO’s providing outreach and technical assistance, including grant writing assistance to rural communities seeking to apply for federal or state grants related to wildfire mitigation and preparedness. Bill could create the grant program and encourage CSFS to consult with other departments on effective uses of money and successful outcomes to avoid duplicative efforts. The CSFS will submit a report summarizing the program to the Wildfire Matter Review Committee or the House and Senate Agriculture committees.

*\* This recommendation was not sent forward because HB24-1006 passed*

## Committee on Leveraging Resources

Committee Chairs: Christina Burri and Katie McGrath Novak

In 2024 the committee on Leveraging Resources primarily focused on developing the Forest Resilience Health Planning Guide as well as support for the Colorado Forest Tracker.

The Colorado Forest Tracker, is intended to provide a transparent and comprehensive resource for communities, natural resource and fire managers, policy makers, and researchers with a better understanding of completed forest management locations across Colorado. The Colorado Forest Restoration Institute (CFRI) and the Colorado State Forest Service, both housed at Colorado State University, have partnered to leverage the unique expertise of each organization to build the Forest Tracker. This inventory will enhance CFRI’s previous Colorado Interagency Treatment Database and be integrated with the CSFS Colorado Forest Atlas to facilitate the reporting, application and science of forest management activities across all land ownerships throughout the state. The committee on Leveraging Resources served as a sounding board for the CFRI and CSFS Forest Tracker team to provide feedback on data and metrics that would be most useful to Council members and the constituencies they represent. The committee and full council also considered future applications of the Forest Tracker to support other leveraging resources activities.

## Forest Resilience Planning Guide

Through listening to the needs of communities and forest health professionals, the Committee on Leveraging Resources identified the need for a planning resource for forest resilience. With support from the full Council, the Committee on Leveraging Resources hired CDR Associates to develop the Colorado Forest Resilience Planning Guide (Guide) using input from the Council members as well as stakeholders from across the state. Funding for the Guide is provided by the Colorado State Forest Service and the Colorado Forest Restoration Institute.

The Colorado Forest Resilience Planning Guide is designed for local agencies, large landowners, and place-based collaboratives to improve coordination in forest management strategies and effectively leverage resources.

The guide emphasizes the importance of collaboration, community values, and data resources in shaping forest management planning. It presents 15 actions, adapted from the *Collaborative Stages of Readiness*, to foster and maintain forest resilience and adaptation, particularly concerning wildfire risk in Colorado. By implementing actions outlined in this guide, stakeholders have a roadmap for developing a Forest Resilience Plan that is tailored to the specific needs and contexts of the forest managers, communities, and collaborators involved.

The purpose of the guide is to assist with positioning all areas and communities in Colorado to better leverage resources, knowledge share, and be competitive at receiving funding to achieve effective forest health management and resiliency.

The guide serves as a starting point on how to access science-based modeling, existing resources and technical capacity, and statewide priorities to improve existing processes in pre-fire planning and forest health efforts. By articulating actions that support robust forest resilience planning and collaborative adaptive management processes, the guide will also aid program managers and funding agencies to better align their resources with the planning needs across Colorado.

## Joint Prescribed Fire Subcommittee

In 2023, members of the Colorado Fire Commission extended an invitation for members of the Colorado Forest Health Council to join forces in a joint Prescribed Fire Subcommittee. The Subcommittee now includes members of both the Colorado

Fire Commission and the Colorado Forest Health Council, as well as other statewide leaders in prescribed fire, fuels mitigation, and forest health. The purpose of the Prescribed Fire Subcommittee is “to better prepare Colorado’s fire service and communities for prescribed fire and to develop a stronger understanding of how Colorado’s fire service views and communicates with the public about prescribed fire.”

In 2024, the Colorado Fire Commission asked the Prescribed Fire Subcommittee to prepare a statewide strategy for prescribed fire. The Subcommittee, in partnership with Peak Facilitation, hosted five workshops to gather ideas from forestry and fire professionals across Colorado about policy, permitting, training, funding, and other needed changes. Ultimately, the strategic plan will shape near- and long-term recommendations for statewide impact to the Colorado State Legislature, the Division of Fire Prevention and Control, the Colorado State Forest Service, and the Colorado Department of Natural Resources.

The Prescribed Fire Strategic Plan is expected to be finalized in late January 2025.

## Progress Towards 2023 Administrative Recommendations

The Colorado Forest Health Council identified four administrative recommendations in the 2023 Annual Report. Below are updates on the administrative recommendations.

*1. The Legislative Committee asks CSFS to convene a forum or meeting around adaptive silviculture, Vapor Pressure Deficit changes, and how this impacts the future health of our forests and what measures for mitigation actions we should consider.*

Update: Parties and experts to convene have been identified and coordination is underway to plan to enact the forum. Parties identified include: Higher Education personnel, Federal Government Agency personnel, State Government Agency personnel, and non-profit personnel.

*2. The Legislative Committee recommends, as part of the interagency Colorado Fire Commission Prescribed Fire Subcommittee, the CSFS, DFPC and other agencies and/or stakeholders convene an informational session(s) to increase awareness and facilitate participation in prescribed fire and slash disposal policy development in Colorado. In*

*particular, tribal voices and perspectives shall be included to raise awareness of historic tribal cultural practices and expertise in prescribed fire. Core issues to be addressed should include: liability, smoke management and resource capacity. The agencies will have 12 months from full Forest Health Council approval to Convene.*

Update: With the extensive work of the Joint Prescribed Fire Subcommittee (described on page 13) and the statewide strategy for prescribed fire underway, the Council has deemed that this legislative recommendation is satisfied. Liability, smoke management and capacity are being considered in the statewide strategy. The Colorado Department of Natural Resources values and continues to commit to supporting the meaningful development and deepening of its sovereign-to-sovereign relationship with Tribal Governments, as it relates to continued stewardship of natural and cultural resources throughout the State.

*3. The Legislative Committee recommends DNR and CSFS work with USFS to negotiate the ability for NGOs and state agencies to reforest USFS lands under Shared Stewardship or Good Neighbor Authority-type agreements. Also, state agencies lobby federal partners to expedite NEPA for post-fire reforestation projects.*

Update: DNR and CSFS have begun conversations and are working to organize around shared stewardship and completing work on federal forested lands.

*4. Development of a Pre-fire and Forest Health Planning Guide. The Committee on Leveraging Resources recommends the creation of a planning guide to complement or be included as a chapter within the existing Post-Fire Playbook.*

Update: The Forest Resilience Planning Guide (described on page 12), is in process to be completed in fall 2024 and will be approved by the Council in early 2025.



# Appendix A: Committee Members

## Legislative Committee

Samantha Albert  
Christy Belton  
Christina Burri as proxy for Matt McCombs  
Patt Dorsey  
Alison Lerch as proxy for Dan Gibbs  
Katie McGrath Novak  
Commissioner Veronica Medina  
Mark Morgan  
Commissioner Jody Shaddock-McNally  
Julie Stencil  
Selwyn Whiteskunk

## Committee on Leveraging Resources

Christina Burri  
Commissioner Clyde Church  
Vaughn Jones or Kirk Will as proxy for Mike Morgan  
Katie McGrath Novak  
Amy Moyer  
John Ring  
Commissioner Jody Shaddock-McNally  
Selwyn Whiteskunk  
Brett Wolk

## Joint Prescribed Fire Subcommittee

Alison Lerch as proxy for Dan Gibbs  
Katie McGrath Novak  
Commissioner Jody Shaddock-McNally

\*Other non-Forest Health Council Members also sit on the joint subcommittee