

COLORADO STATEWIDE STRATEGY FOR PRESCRIBED FIRE ON NON-FEDERAL LANDS

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Photo credit: Kent Miles, Colorado Fire Camp



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FOREWORD

Prescribed fire is a dynamic, invaluable, and complex societal and resource management issue nationwide. Within the State of Colorado, perception of prescribed fire and awareness of its value range across a particularly broad spectrum. The reasons to manage natural landscapes are many: promote ecosystem health, encourage resilience to future disturbance, improve wildlife habitat, reduce wildfire risk, maintain water quality, and many others. While there are also many ways to manage these landscapes, there is truly no ecological or cultural substitute that can replace fire's unique and natural role.

Although there are certainly risks involved in its application, strategically considered prescribed fire is one of the most effective means of responding to concerns driven by recent dramatic increases in wildfire intensity and frequency, expansion of the wildland-urban interface, rising forest-landscape treatment costs, and dynamic climatic conditions.

The Colorado Fire Commission recognizes the urgency and importance of taking prompt action to deliberately apply prescribed fire in the right places, at the right times, under the right conditions, and with the right resources.

The Commission expresses its gratitude to the many experts statewide that have committed their time and effort as members of the Colorado Prescribed Fire Subcommittee, and to the hundreds of stakeholders that also contributed. Their experience, consideration, optimism, and wisdom are deeply appreciated.

Considering all factors, it is advised that recommendations contained in this strategy be implemented as soon and as comprehensively as possible. Time is of the essence to address the pressing demands that wildfires of today present to Coloradans and the natural resources we all rely upon.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This Statewide Strategy for Prescribed Fire is the product of two years of collaborative work by stakeholders from across Colorado. It began as one idea among many for ways the Colorado Fire Commission could advance the conversation and effort around prescribed fire in our state. It became *the* priority work item for the Commission's Prescribed Fire Subcommittee, resulting in hours upon hours of research, conversation, workshopping, and writing. It represents the wisdom and ambition of prescribed fire professionals and government agencies at all levels throughout the state. It is a roadmap for change.

In order to prepare this document, the Prescribed Fire Subcommittee sought to answer the question: *What is the problem we are trying to solve?* They discussed the need to remove fuels from lands across Colorado—fuels whose abundance allows small fires to become catastrophic events with great ease and shocking speed. While the Subcommittee acknowledged that the need to respond to wildfires will continue into the future, they observed that the opportunity to reduce the cost and destruction of these events through fuels treatment is both real and significant. Though prescribed fire is the most cost-effective and time-efficient way to mitigate this risk, the work that underlies and informed this Statewide Strategy unearthed a surprising reality: Colorado's use of this critical tool is poorly defined and poorly funded, leading to limited and haphazard implementation and benefit.

Through discussion with professionals around the state, the Prescribed Fire Subcommittee identified several primary barriers to increasing the pace and scale of prescribed fire in our state: 1) unclear and difficult-to-obtain **liability** protection for burners; 2) lack of investment in **training and certification**; 3) a complex and time-consuming **permitting** landscape; 4) lack of administrative and financial infrastructure for implementation of **coordinated treatment** projects with partners; 5) insufficient attention to **public and political outreach** to build understanding and support for prescribed fire; and 6) **funding** to create and sustain the expertise, partnerships, and systems for prescribed fire that Colorado will need into the future.

This document identifies **21 total strategies** to address these six barriers, offering **9 opportunities for legislative intervention and assistance** and **12 opportunities for administrative implementation** in the Division of Fire Prevention and Control, the Colorado State Forest Service, and the Colorado Department of Natural Resources.

Both the Prescribed Fire Subcommittee and the Colorado Fire Commission are acutely aware of the budgetary challenges that Colorado is facing. There are a great number of pressing needs for investment in Colorado, of which prescribed fire is but one. However, prescribed fire may be unique in that it offers opportunities for the Legislature to make a significant impact on a high-profile issue that impacts millions of people without spending a dime. Several strategies explored here require legislative action but not additional funding, removing key legal and administrative barriers to prescribed fire use to facilitate safer and more effective prescribed burning across the state. These no-cost legislative opportunities are to:

- Clarify definitions and coverage for existing liability coverage (Liability Strategy L2).
- Establish a legal framework for shared or pooled insurance and liability coverage (Liability Strategy L3).
- Enable qualified agency employees and certified burn managers to plan and implement prescribed fire on non-federal lands (Liability Strategy L4).
- Expand wildfire response and mutual aid funding frameworks to support prescribed fire implementation, management, and contingency needs for State staff and cooperators (Funding Strategy F3).

As Colorado's financial situation improves and resources become less constrained, the Prescribed Fire Subcommittee recommends that the Legislature take action on two high-priority strategies that will fundamentally change the planning and implementation for prescribed fire:

- Establish an annual DFPC budget line item and funding to support expanded prescribed fire planning and implementation by and in cooperation with collaboratives, local agencies, and prescribed burn associations (PBAs) (Coordination of Treatment Strategy C1).

- Appropriate annual, dedicated, and sufficient funding to DFPC, CSFS, and DNR to implement this statewide strategy and support coordinated implementation by partners statewide (Funding Strategy F1).

Additionally, the Subcommittee and the Fire Commission are grateful for and support the ongoing efforts to advance legislation consistent with Liability Strategy L1: Establish a Colorado prescribed fire claims fund that offers a financial backstop for certified burners, qualified burn bosses, trainees, and landowners for prescribed fire on non-federal lands. This item is a critical building block to increasing the use of prescribed fire in our state by qualified individuals. Continued action like this on the other strategies outlined in this document is the only way that Colorado will be able to turn the tide on catastrophic wildfire.

PRESCRIBED FIRE: THE BIG PICTURE

Nature and Scope of the Issue

Current wildfire risks in Colorado are escalating due to forest understory growth, a warming and dry climate, and increased human habitation into the wildland-urban interfaces (WUI). As the 2022 [Colorado Forest Health Report](#) notes, vegetation that is naturally highly flammable has been made more so by tree pests like mountain pine beetle, western spruce budworm, and tussock moth infestations. These pests amplify fire hazards in forest communities, often in close proximity to homes, businesses, and critical infrastructure. Yet this problem is not restricted to our forested lands; grassland communities are also susceptible to fire risks. Colorado's most destructive wildfire event, [the Marshall Fire](#), occurred in highly populated grasslands areas on the Front Range. It became the most costly wildfire in Colorado history and while recovery is still in progress, [insured preliminary damage estimates top at least \\$2 billion](#).



Photo: Private residence downhill of a prescribed burn.
Photo credit: Kent Miles, Colorado Fire Camp

Over the past two decades, catastrophic wildfires like the 2020 Cameron Peak, 2020 East Troublesome, 2012 Black Forest, and the 2002 Hayman have severely damaged community safety, regional economies, and forest health. Although wildfire mitigation efforts like vegetation treatments and prescribed fire are labor-intensive and expensive, defaulting to wildfire suppression and recovery is [even more so](#).

[For example](#), the East Troublesome Fire cost \$20 million for initial suppression. The fire resulted in \$543 million in insured losses, \$27 million to remove debris, and \$136 million to restore damaged watersheds. These costs do not include fire impacts on local economies,

supply chains, tourism, recreation, transportation corridor closures, and water quality of drinking supplies.

Nationwide, decades of fire suppression and vegetation growth have resulted in a “[fire deficit.](#)” a historic lack of fire that leads to a build-up of fuels and an increase in the risk of catastrophic wildfire. In Colorado, application of a [US Forest Service snapshot tool](#) suggests a fire deficit in most of Colorado, as is evident in the map below. [A preliminary analysis of this data](#) by the Colorado Forest Restoration Institute (CFRI) suggests that this fire deficit covers approximately 19 million acres in our state.

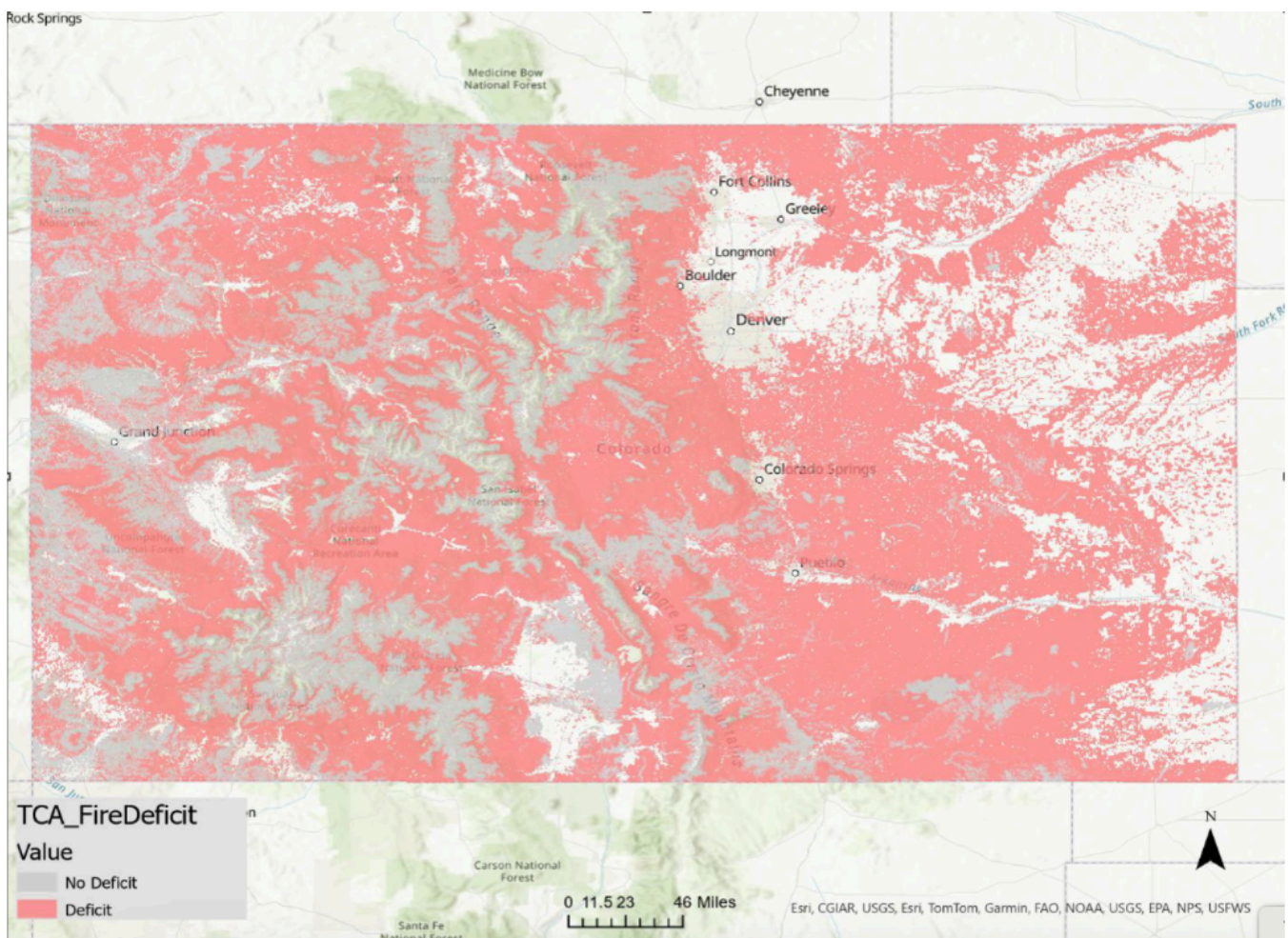


Image: Screenshot of Terrestrial Condition Assessment Colorado Fire Deficit Map.
Image credit: US Forest Service

The [2020 Colorado Forest Action Plan](#) set the state on a new path when it identified prescribed fire as a primary strategy for reducing the risk of uncharacteristic wildfire and for promoting the role of fire in ecological processes. The US Forest Service reiterated their commitment to prescribed fire in a [2023 mobilization strategy](#). [Recent research](#) specific to Colorado's Front Range reaffirmed that prescribed fire remains an effective and advantageous tool for managing vegetation, mimicking ecological fire cycles, and reducing wildfire risks. [Colorado law](#) allows for prescribed fire and outlines when and how it should be used. Despite this enabling legislation, [barriers to the implementation of prescribed fire](#) in our state have been known and reported for years, including [unique challenges for nonprofit organizations](#) trying to be part of the solutions. [Innovative efforts for funding](#) prescribed fire in Colorado have been tried and documented. Yet, the fire deficit persists. The barriers that were documented years ago remain obstacles today. This Statewide Strategy aims to create the change we need in Colorado. The time for action is now.

Alignment with Other Efforts

In 2021, the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act created the Federal Wildland Fire Mitigation and Management Commission (WFMMC), which was charged with recommending improvements to how federal agencies manage wildfires across the landscape. Its report, [ON FIRE: The Report of the Wildland Fire Mitigation and Management Commission](#) (2023), identified several recommendations for Congress and federal entities to enable prescribed fire. The recommendations included enabling fund distribution with greater ease among all entities for prescribed fire and clarifying liability for non-federal cooperators, among a handful of other prescribed fire-specific actions. Several of these recommendations align with the Colorado strategies outlined in the pages below; this is noted where it occurs.

Several other states are pursuing innovative solutions to overcome barriers to prescribed fire. Oregon and California have implemented liability claim funds to backstop risks for practitioners, while states like Georgia, Texas, and Oklahoma use group insurance plans and prescribed burn associations (PBAs) to coordinate implementation. In Oregon, collaboratives are successfully conducting rapid assessments on private lands, enabling efficient

identification of risks and mobilization of regional resources. Public education initiatives, like Florida's Prescribed Burning Act (1990), aim to build community support for prescribed burning by highlighting its benefits for ecosystem health and wildfire risk reduction. These and other efforts throughout the US demonstrate the growing national commitment to prescribed fire and the need for out-of-the-box solutions tailored to each state's specific context. Some of these efforts also align with strategies for Colorado, and these are identified as appropriate in the pages below.

Colorado's Unique Opportunity

Private landowners, businesses, nonprofit organizations, and public agencies small and large are eager to do their part to increase the pace and scale of prescribed fire in Colorado. Following on the heels of the Federal Fire Commission's outstanding work and forward-looking recommendations, burners are ready to learn from other states' best management practices for Colorado's benefit. Most



Photo: Forested landscape with a valley in the San Juan National Forest.

importantly, Colorado's prescribed fire practitioners are eager to get to work implementing prescribed fire. They know what needs to be done, and they are beyond ready to do it.

This Statewide Strategy identifies what the State of Colorado needs to do to better enable these efforts. There are legislative actions and administrative opportunities outlined here. Some of them will require a commitment of financial resources, while others will only require leadership. Other states across the nation have tried some things. Colorado has an opportunity to try several things all at once. This is a comprehensive strategy that can truly change the

literal and figurative landscape. Colorado can demonstrate what an all-in strategy looks like. Let's get after it.

STATEWIDE VOICES DEVELOPED THIS PLAN

[Senate Bill 19-040](#) established the [Colorado Fire Commission](#) “to enhance public safety in Colorado through an integrated statewide process focused on the fire service's capacity to conduct fire management and use, preparedness, prevention, and response activities to safeguard lives, property, and natural resources, and increase the resiliency of local and regional communities.” In service to this mission, the Fire Commission identified prescribed fire as a new work priority in 2023 and established the Prescribed Fire Subcommittee to explore this topic further and make recommendations about how to proceed. Around this same time, the [Colorado Forest Health Council](#) also expressed interest in pursuing this important issue. Rather than have two parallel efforts addressing the same issue under different State umbrellas, leadership from the Division of Fire Prevention and Control (DFPC) and the Colorado Department of Natural Resources (DNR) agreed that Forest Health Council members should join the Subcommittee and bring their different eyes, expertise, and relationships to bear on the discussion. Staff from DFPC and the Colorado State Forest Service (CSFS) co-chaired the Subcommittee, making it a truly cross-departmental effort.

In addition to representation and engagement by these and other State entities, experts in prescribed fire from nonprofit organizations, private businesses, and local and federal agencies joined the Subcommittee (see Appendix C for members). Early on, this broadly representative group identified development of a statewide strategy for prescribed fire as a uniquely powerful work product that could add value for all stakeholders, for our natural resources, and for the residents of Colorado as a whole. Leadership from DFPC, DNR, and CSFS embraced the intent to return planned fire to Colorado's landscape and worked together to provide a framework and focus for the statewide strategy. Their shared vision (see Appendix F) for this planning effort was to develop a strategy with realistic and achievable actions that

meaningfully increase the pace and scale of prescribed fire in the state. Additional considerations they outlined for the statewide strategy included:

- Strong support for use of prescribed fire “at the right time, at the right place, under the right conditions, and with the right resources.”
- An acknowledgment of the utility of other forest treatments and management tools available for land managers, such as mechanical and hand thinning, grazing, and air curtain burners.
- A focus on actions that non-federal entities can control and implement on non-federal lands, acknowledging that the spirit and tactical outcomes of this plan support and are mutually supported by its federal partners.
- Extensive stakeholder engagement across Colorado from a variety of interests and groups.

With this direction from the sponsoring State agencies, the Subcommittee began its work. Early efforts focused on shared learning among members, all of whom have had different journeys and faced different barriers in working to get prescribed fire on the ground. The Subcommittee prioritized learning about the barriers faced by nonprofit, private, and government burners in order to get a sense of how practitioners are experiencing the current policy landscape. These discussions elevated training, liability, permitting, public and political outreach, and funding as having the greatest opportunity for change that would result in getting more prescribed fire on the landscape.

Following these foundational discussions, the Subcommittee hosted four in-person workshops across the state, as well as two virtual workshops. Registrants for workshops completed a pre-event survey to identify strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats of the current prescribed fire policy context in Colorado. They also shared their highest-priority concerns and ideas for inclusion in this Statewide Strategy. During workshops, participants brainstormed and discussed proposed strategies for changes for the topics outlined above. (To view workshop outcomes and summaries, see Appendix D.)

The Subcommittee crafted strategies based on the ideas generated during the six workshops. Subcommittee members sorted strategies according to the perceived degree of importance and their anticipated level of impact, and the most important and most impactful strategies are those outlined below. (Additional strategies considered are captured in Appendix E.) The Subcommittee shared preliminary strategies with both the Colorado Fire Commission and the Colorado Forest Health Council prior to developing implementation tactics and finalizing the Statewide Strategy. The Subcommittee has made every effort to honor the diverse voices that informed this plan, while also applying their unique expertise and knowledge to this critical issue for Colorado's future. Meeting summaries that offer insight to the Subcommittee's process are available in Appendix F.

BARRIERS AND STRATEGIES FOR CHANGE

Liability

Limitations of Current State Statute

Engaging in prescribed fire is not without risk, and while third party damages resulting from prescribed fire activities are rare, concerns about being found liable for unintended impacts is understandably prevalent among practitioners. Individuals who are certified burners in the State of Colorado receive some liability protection through [Colorado Revised Statute \(CRS\) 24-33.5-1217\(3\)\(b\)\(II\)](#), which states:

A private landowner or the landowner's designee who is certified by the division as a Certified Burner or qualified by NWCG standards as a prescribed burn boss *is not liable for any civil damages for acts or omissions made in good faith resulting in damage or injury caused by fire or smoke resulting from prescribed burns they conduct on their own property and in compliance with applicable state laws and local ordinances, unless such landowner's or designee's acts or omissions are grossly negligent or willful and wanton. (Emphasis added.)*

While some certified burners may take comfort in this, many report serious concerns about the degree of coverage provided by this statute. Because it has never been tested in court, there is no case law to offer clarity about the specific legal interpretation or potential limits of its proposed protections (e.g., what would constitute “grossly negligent” action?). For this reason, many certified burners burning on their own land seek additional liability coverage to ensure that their homes and additional assets are not at risk when they engage in prescribed burning. Such insurance is quite expensive, often prohibitively so.

Additionally, there are many certified burners employed privately or by nonprofit organizations who are invited or hired to burn on private land they themselves do not own. CRS 24-33.5-1217 references “the landowner’s designee,” which suggests similar coverage that is available to the landowner would be extended to a certified burner they hire or request to burn

on their property. However, this, too, has never been tested in court, and small businesses and small or large nonprofits are reluctant to presume liability coverage. For this reason, these entities also routinely seek additional insurance to cover their prescribed fire activity, and such insurance is difficult to find and extremely expensive.

To become a certified burner, individuals are required to conduct three training burns in compliance with burn plans that they prepare. Training burns can occur on their own land or on land owned by someone else, and CRS 24-33.5-1217 offers *no* protection to *anyone* during these required training burns—not the trainee, the certified supervisor of the burn, or the landowner. Some individuals enrolled in the certified burner training reach this stage and then discontinue their certification out of fear of civil or criminal liability if a training burn escapes.

It is also critical to note that CRS 24-33.5-1217 refers only to civil liability and makes no reference to potential criminal liability, further muddying the waters regarding available protections and potential risk to the burner. Funders, third-party burners, and landowners are confused about who may be held liable for prescribed fire escapes. Private landowners who offer their land for training burns are also unclear about who is responsible for an escape. Burn bosses are unclear whether they would be civilly or criminally liable for an escaped prescribed fire. Many private landowners and organizations offering prescribed fire as a service to others lack legal literacy or in-house legal

Case Study: Private landowners on land adjacent to the largest underground operating coal mine in the State of Colorado tried to coordinate a prescribed fire treatment with two federal agencies who had plans to treat on their respective public lands. The treatment aimed to improve wildlife habitat on a few hundred acres that connect with public lands. The landowners were asked to sign a State of Colorado liability form, which potentially put them at risk for unlimited liability if something unforeseen occurred. Given the economic and social value of the neighboring coal mine, they did not sign it. Then, still hoping to implement prescribed fire, the landowners identified a potential opportunity through a Wyden Agreement with a federal agency. The federal agency initially agreed to shoulder the liability costs before rescinding its commitment and suggested that private landowners search for coverage through a different agency instead. Seeing no feasible liability options, the landowners declined and stopped pursuing the project. To this day, that land is left untreated. The bottom line is that private landowners and government land managers cannot and will not conduct prescribed fires while risking unlimited liability.

expertise to navigate insurance requirements and liability nuances. This becomes a significant deterrent to implementation of prescribed fire. **Strategies L1** and **L2** are targeted at removing this significant deterrent.

Innovations in Other States

To address a similar legal context, both Oregon and California are exploring state-sponsored liability claim funds. Oregon has implemented a liability claims fund that covers claims for damages from an escaped prescribed fire if certain conditions are met. California is currently testing a similar idea under a five-year pilot project. California's pilot project is already [creating meaningful change in the insurance market](#),



Photo: Dead trees leaning over trail in a wilderness area. Vegetation cover and additional logs are built up along the trail, preventing understory plants from growing and providing more fuel to future fires.

as at least one insurance company is now offering customized liability policies for burners who have enrolled their projects in the state's claims fund. While the impact of these efforts on enabling or increasing prescribed fire is yet to be determined, the Oregon and California efforts have been generally well received by practitioners in both states and are creative efforts to address very real concerns that are known to limit prescribed fire implementation. **Strategy L1** aims to leverage these programs to create new momentum for prescribed fire in Colorado.

Some states use prescribed burn associations (PBAs), which are groups of individuals or organizations who come together to plan and implement prescribed fire. Members of these groups often share information and pool resources (including both equipment and human work capacity) to help one another complete burns without any single person or group having to

own all the equipment and do everything themselves. Although PBAs do not currently exist in Colorado, nothing precludes their creation. However, even if PBAs were established here, they would face the same liability challenges outlined above. **Strategy L3** is focused on enabling these types of groups to share not just expertise and equipment, but also liability coverage. Colorado does have a Prescribed Fire Council. The Council would be a logical point of contact for potential PBAs to help inform and educate them and provide technical support. The Colorado Prescribed Fire Council has members from contractors, private, NGOs, local, county, State, and federal entities. It has tremendous potential to be a powerful voice for education, coordination, and implementation of prescribed fire, though funding limitations currently preclude it from achieving its full potential.

All Hands / All Lands

Wildfire does not respect land ownership boundaries and cares little for distinctions between local, state, and federal government entities. Wildfire risk mitigation efforts must be similarly agonistic, allowing maximum flexibility for implementation of prescribed fire and other tools by whoever is willing and able wherever the treatment type is needed and appropriate. As was

Case Study: Forest project managers in Northern Colorado have collaborated with landowners for years to implement forest treatments and wildfire risk reduction projects. A recommended method for disposing of slash from the forest treatments is piling it for later burning. Yet, the capacity to implement prescribed burning combined with challenges in finding and securing affordable prescribed fire insurance represent significant barriers to completing pile burn projects. Hundreds of slash piles have been built as part of these projects, but with no clear options for burning, landowners are now forced to manually remove and dispose of the slash, which is a costly and difficult task that can only be done on properties with sufficient access. Additionally, insurance inspectors have cited sitting piles as a potential reason to cancel homeowner policies.

stated above, the groundbreaking federal statutes establishing [Good Neighbor Authority](#) and the opportunity for [Wyden agreements](#) allow for work by non-federal entities on federal land and for federal employees to work on non-federal land, respectively. But these authorities are about what is permissible for federal employees to do and what is permissible on federal land. The State of Colorado does not provide similar pathways for enabling work across non-federal lands. To complete the all hands / all lands ethos in Colorado, legislation is needed to allow any qualified burner to work

on non-federal lands here. This is within Colorado’s authority to decide and is reflected in **Strategy L4**.

Strategies for Change

L1: Establish a Colorado prescribed fire claims fund that offers a financial backstop for certified burners, qualified burn bosses, trainees, and landowners for prescribed fire on non-federal lands. *Legislation required.*

L2: Clarify definitions and coverage for existing liability coverage. *Legislation required.*

L3: Establish a legal framework to allow for shared or pooled insurance and liability coverage. *Legislation required.*

L4: Enable qualified agency employees and other certified burn managers to plan and implement prescribed fire on non-federal lands. *Legislation required.*

Relevant Federal Fire Commission Recommendations

Recommendation 10: Congress should advance legislation to support a compensation or claims fund for burn damages to third parties that can quickly provide financial relief in instances when burn practitioners adhere to identified best practices.

Recommendation 11: Congress should consider and clarify the extent to which the Federal Tort Claims Act provides protection to Tribes and non-federal cooperators burning on federal lands.

Training and Certification

It is widely accepted that safe and beneficial prescribed fire begins with effective training. Most individuals and organizations engaged in prescribed fire in Colorado seek and obtain quality training to guide their efforts. However, there is significant confusion regarding the training levels that are available in the state, as well as which training level is required for which people and which entities. Because the type and level of training achieved drives what kind of prescribed fire someone is authorized to do (piles and/or broadcast), as well as guiding implementation planning efforts (see below), the lack of clarity and understanding creates significant friction and impedes growth in the number of prescribed fire practitioners in the state.



Photo: Training crew briefing after conducting a prescribed burn on grassland in Southwestern Colorado.
Photo credit: Kent Miles, Colorado Fire Camp

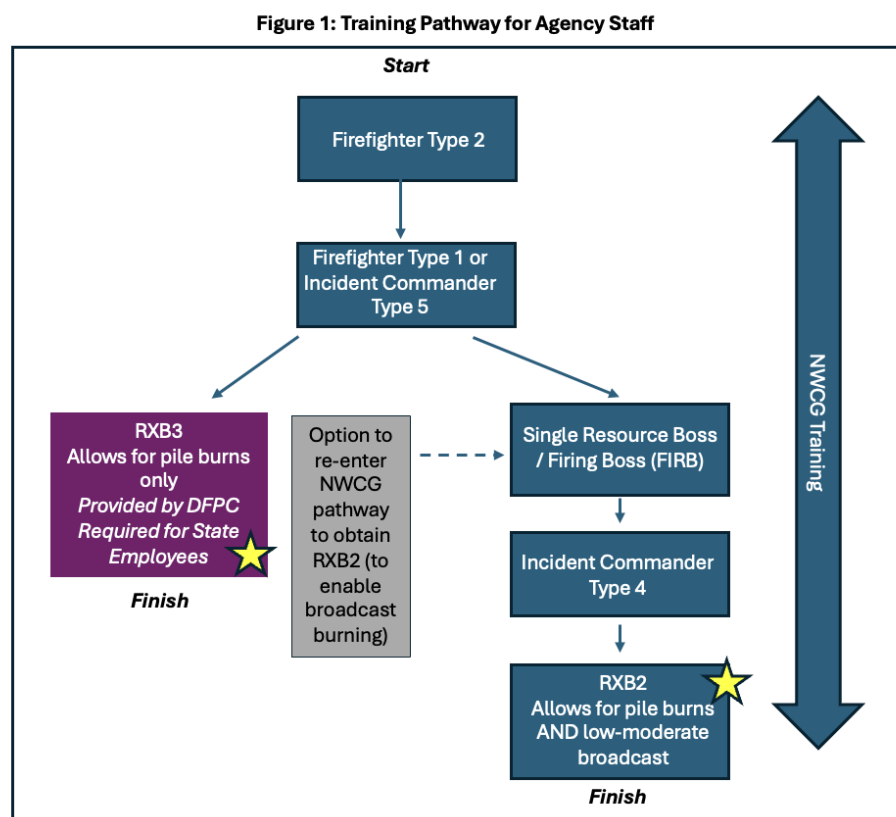
In Colorado, generally speaking, there are two training pathways for prescribed fire certification: a simplified pathway for private landowners and a rigorous pathway for employees of public agencies, some non-profit organizations, and contractors. This secondary and more extensive pathway is founded in the training provided by the [National Wildfire Coordinating Group](#) (NWCG), the national inter-agency body that guides fire management in the US. NWCG training begins with wildfire response training (i.e., firefighter training) and then progresses to prescribed fire training. Following the complete NWCG prescribed fire training pathway results in certification as an Prescribed Fire Burn Boss 1 (RXB1), which allows for pile burning and for broadcast burning at the highest level of scale and complexity. Most NWCG certified burners in Colorado are certified as a Prescribed Fire Burn Boss 2 (RXB2), but the observed fire deficit in Colorado will necessitate more RXB1 certified burners. The State of Colorado provides training and certification for Prescribed Fire Burn Boss 3 (RXB3), which only allows for pile burning. All

State employees *must* complete RXB3 as a matter of policy even if they choose to proceed through the NWCG pathway and obtain RXB2 certification. Any public sector employee may complete RXB3 and not pursue additional training, allowing them to engage in pile burning but not broadcast burning. Nonprofit organizations engaged in prescribed fire in Colorado generally adopt policies to follow NWCG training guidelines and adhere to their standards. This training pathway is outlined in Figure 1.

The yellow stars in Figure 1 note two significant barriers to training that exist in Colorado and emphasize the need to address these challenges. The first barrier relates to the RXB3 training provided by DFPC. As noted above, this is a required training for *all* employees of the State of Colorado who engage in

prescribed fire. The RXB3 training requires significant hands-on training with live fire and is staff-intensive. Because of staffing limitations and other factors, RXB3 training opportunities are not as common as would be optimal to achieve the number of prescribed fire professionals needed in the state. **Strategy T1** aims to address this

issue. Additionally, the time and resources needed to obtain RXB2 certification are significant, as this generally requires out of state training requirements, such as attending a 3-week training course at the National Interagency Prescribed Fire Training Center (NIPFTC), and obtaining prerequisite wildland fire qualifications (e.g., [Incident Commander Type 4 \(ICT4\)](#) and [Single Resource](#)



[Firing Boss](#) (FIRB)). This whole process can take years and thousands of dollars to complete (as shown in the graphic in Appendix G). State agencies have limited resources to support the travel, base salary, and overtime needed to complete this training, resulting in few individuals becoming certified as RXB2. If Colorado is truly going to increase the pace and scale of prescribed fire, more RXB2 and, likely RXB1, certified burners will be needed, so **Strategy T2** targets this issue.

While it is possible and legal to engage in prescribed fire in Colorado on one's own land without training or certification, doing so is risky. An individual burning without training or certification lacks the understanding of fire behavior, safety, and emergency mitigation that comes from training programs. Additionally, the landowner foregoes the liability coverage that comes with being certified, increasing their financial and legal risk. For these and other reasons, some private landowners seek training. For these individuals (as well as for some nonprofit organizations and some private, for-profit contractors), DFPC offers [Colorado Certified Burner Program \(CCB\)](#) training at regular intervals. The CCB training content is largely consistent with the training provided by NWCG, though it does not include the training modules focused on wildfire response, firefighting, and incident command. While NWCG

Case Study: A long-serving State agency employee's Burn Boss Type 2 qualifications have lapsed. He struggles to find time and supervisory support to recertify. He strongly believes that his problem and that of many other formerly certified prescribed fire practitioners could be addressed through changes to the CCB program. His specific suggestion is to adopt a practice of recognizing prior experience in CBB training to facilitate recertification or ease maintaining certification. This could be similar to the NWCG system, which allows for experience in prescribed fire to compensate for lapsed training or to fulfill unmet training requirements. While this specific tactic is not named in this Statewide Strategy, the challenges faced by this State employee who is interested in implementing prescribed fire further illustrate the need to improve our systems in many big and small ways.

training is technically open to anyone, meeting the prerequisites for enrollment can be difficult for individuals who do not work for NWCG sponsoring organizations (i.e., private and some nongovernmental burners who choose not to pursue NWCG training). By contrast, CCB training is open and accessible to anyone, further expanding the pool of potential

students. For these reasons and due to the growing interest in prescribed fire across Colorado, there is consistent interest and enrollment in CCB training.

Despite its popularity, there are improvements that could be made to the CCB program to increase enrollment and ease of maintaining certification, such as increasing the number and geographic distribution of training opportunities and allowing for “recognition of prior learning” to satisfy some ongoing training requirements for those who have been previously certified through CCB or NWCG classes. Training certification reciprocity with other states could also increase the number of certified burners in Colorado, by allowing state-level certification from outside Colorado to expedite certification here.

One unique effort that would help inform future training opportunities is reflected in **Strategy T3**. This strategy is focused on the curious and frustrating reality that while many people enroll in and complete CCB training, the number of prescribed fire practitioners is not commensurate with the number of CCB program graduates. DFPC estimates that only about 18% of private landowners who begin the CCB program have completed it, and while it is hard to tell how many are actually practicing, that number is thought to be less than 10. Something is precluding individuals from completing the certification process and is also precluding those that are certified from implementing prescribed fire on the ground. While there is substantial anecdotal evidence that several of the liability challenges outlined above drive the decision not to burn, Strategy T3 aims to definitely answer this question through intentional and methodologically sound research.

If the above issues are addressed and Strategies T1, T2, and T3 are successfully implemented, Colorado would expect to see more people emerging from training programs and seeking to implement prescribed fire. However, even for individuals who are fully trained, prescribed fire is a skill best maintained through regular execution. Confidence and competence both come with practice, and Colorado can expedite this journey by providing resources to support mentorship and oversight for the nascent and growing community of prescribed fire practitioners. **Strategy T4** targets this need for ongoing support.

Strategies for Change

T1: Increase the number and frequency of CCB and RXB3 training opportunities and develop reporting metrics to demonstrate annual number of CCB and RXB3 certifications.

Administrative action.

T2: Send no fewer than two State of Colorado personnel per year to attend NIPFTC or equivalent RXB2 training (supported with sufficient funding for travel, base pay, and overtime for those employees for the duration of training) and develop associated reporting metrics.

Administrative action.

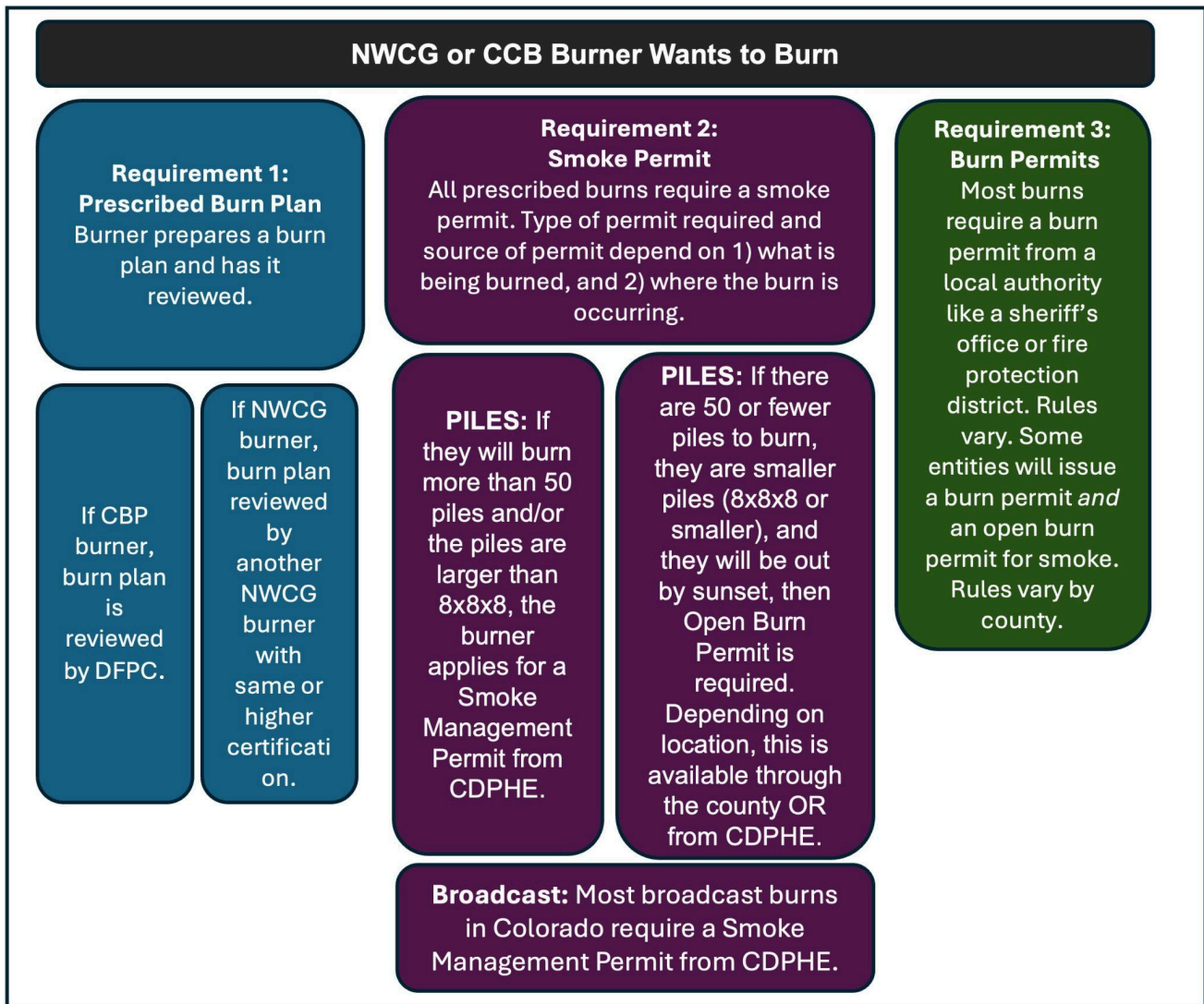
T3: Establish a research program to identify why people do or do not engage in prescribed fire burning efforts after they have attended the CCB class. *Administrative action.*

T4: Create a system and associated resources to provide mentorship to CCB and trainees, agency administrators, and emerging NWCG-qualified professionals who need additional support as they pursue prescribed fire training and implementation. *Administrative action.*

Permitting

With the exception of burning done as part of agricultural practices, prescribed fire in Colorado requires two types of permits: a permit to burn and a permit to create smoke. The specific permit needed for a given prescribed burn varies depending on the type of burn planned and the location of the event. While experienced practitioners usually understand the permitting landscape and associated requirements, this information can be cumbersome to acquire and difficult to understand for newcomers to the field. Additionally, most (but not all) prescribed fires

Figure 2: Getting Plans and Permits for Prescribed Burns



Note: Air curtain burner permits follow a separate pathway exclusively through CDPHE.

in Colorado must be guided by a Prescribed Fire Plan (also known as a “burn plan”), and these must be reviewed by someone with appropriate knowledge and expertise. There is also confusion about who needs to prepare a burn plan, what it should entail, and who needs to review and approve it. Figure 2 provides a high-level overview of the requirements.

Burn Plans

Every trained and certified burner is required to complete a burn plan for every prescribed burn they initiate. This is true whether the individual is qualified through NWCG or certified through DFPC’s CCB or RXB3 processes. NWCG burners typically use an NWCG template for their burn plans and are required to have their plans reviewed by another NWCG burner who is qualified at a similar or higher level. State-certified individuals prepare burn plans based on a template provided by DFPC (also based on the NWCG template); these plans must be submitted and reviewed by DFPC or another knowledgeable professional. Failure to prepare a burn plan and have it reviewed by an appropriate individual is a significant violation of both NWCG and State standards and puts certification at risk. While all private landowners burning as a CCB must have a burn plan,

Case Study: In 2019, two private burners in a Front Range subdivision association started the nonprofit organization NoFloCo (North Florissant, Colorado) Fire Mitigation Posse in Teller County after recognizing their neighbors’ interest in learning about their regular use of prescribed fire. Its mission is “to assist private property owners residing within the wildland urban interface (WUI) with fire mitigation, fire awareness and forest health; to institute and follow the tenants of the US Forest Service National Cohesive Strategy; reduce fuel, improve properties, and have fun.” The group has recruited over 600 volunteers in assisting private landowners in mitigation efforts, including pile burning, for the past five years. Within the last year, county-level pile burning permit requirements changed. Now only the individual whose mail is delivered to the address is allowed to burn on that property. This inhibits a landowner from burning on additional properties they own and does not allow other burners to aid in burns. As a community group that has grown and thrived with each other’s support and shared resources, this new regulation has reduced the opportunity for private burners to collectively reduce fuel loads and risk of wildfire. The bottom line is that NoFloCo Fire Mitigation Posse is unable to share resources and support private landowner pile burns due to changes in local permitting regulations in Teller County.

private landowners burning their own land independent of certified burner status are not required to prepare a burn plan. They assume more risk and will not be covered under enhanced liability protections.

Smoke Permits

All prescribed burns require *smoke permits*, but the type and source varies depending on the type and location of the prescribed burn. Generally speaking, if the burn includes more than 50 piles and/or the piles are larger than 8 feet by 8 feet by 8 feet, the burner requires a Smoke Management Permit from the Colorado Department of Public Health and the Environment (CDPHE). But, if the burn has fewer than 50 piles, the piles are small (8 feet by 8 feet by 8 feet or smaller), and the fire is expected to be out by sunset, the burn requires an Open Burn Permit. Depending on where the burn is occurring the Open Burn Permit is issued by either the county or by CDPHE. Experienced professionals know which counties have pass-through authority to issue Open Burn Permits and which do not, and this information is available on the [CDPHE website](#). However, even for trained and certified burners, this is not always clear and it certainly is not intuitive.

Case Study: Some local fire protection districts are spending more time filing paperwork to permit a slash pile burn than they spend implementing burns. This has created a shift in their behavior: instead of burning, staff are hauling biomass to their local landfills because it is easy and fast. This inadvertently displaces the problem to the county. However, Montezuma County has invested in growing a compost program over the past 10 years. The landfill diverts woody biomass by grinding it, mixing it with other biosolids, and turning it into a marketable product that it sells back to the community. Montezuma County has implemented a solution that has great potential to continue to assist with biomass utilization in the future, but it was established in response to a barrier to prescribed fire that slows progress today.

Burn Permits

Finally, all non-agricultural prescribed burns require *burn permits*, and obtaining these permits is not generally difficult or time-consuming. Because Colorado is a home rule state, burn permitting and the power to delegate who can issue burn permits rests with county sheriffs. The specific local issuing authority can vary, with fire protection districts providing permits in some areas, while sheriffs or municipal fire staff do so in others. Burn permits in all these contexts are generally issued quickly

and with little difficulty, based on local requirements for weather conditions, safety precautions, and reporting. And, in some places, these entities can also issue Open Burn Permits (which are focused on the creation of *smoke*) simultaneously with burn permits (which are focused on the creation of *fire*).

Consistent and widespread confusion and misinformation about burn plan, smoke permit, and burn permit requirements are significant barriers to increasing the pace and scale of prescribed fire in Colorado. Additionally, the persistence of this problem puts public health and safety at risk by obfuscating the planning and permitting efforts needed for safe prescribed burns.

Strategy P1 aims to address the complicated planning and permitting landscape head-on by promoting the development of clear, consistent, and comprehensive guidance at the State level. **Strategy P2** takes a more targeted approach with a focus on inviting local entities to be part of the solution as well.

Air Curtain Burner Permits

Air curtain burners (sometimes called air curtain destructors) are large, industrial machines that allow for woody biomass to be incinerated on site while reducing the particulate matter that is released into the air. Air curtain burners are a unique and useful tool whose use does not technically fall under prescribed fire regulations, but growing interest in their utilization and overlap with aspects of fire management makes them a critical component in prescribed fire planning and implementation in Colorado. Many forest and fire management professionals view air curtain burners as a powerful tool in the fuels management toolbox, as they allow for high-volume burning of logged slash and other hazard fuels with significantly reduced impacts to public health and the environment. Additionally, air curtain burners can be

Case Study: The non-profit organization Colorado Fire Camp has found workarounds to increase workforce capacity and operational improvements in Chaffee County with the help of the Colorado Strategic Wildfire Action Program Workforce Development Grant. Colorado Fire Camp received grant funds due to its efforts to train crews in alignment with the Chaffee County Community Wildfire Protection Plan (CWPP), local fire protection districts, and other non-profit priorities. The entity's major challenge was the time it spent writing burn plans. Colorado Fire Camp would benefit from DFPC offering burn plan templates for various project scales.

used under broader weather conditions, adding needed flexibility to prescribed fire and fuels management efforts. Instead of having to stack piles and wait for particular weather and control conditions, the material can be cut and immediately burned on a more consistent basis.

CDPHE has different processes and requirements for issuing permits for air curtain burners than those for pile burners or even broadcast burns, requiring more time and resources to apply and making these permits much more difficult to obtain. The increased difficulty in obtaining air curtain burner permits over pile burn or broadcast burn permits is counter-productive, given that air quality permits aim to limit additional pollutants into the air and air curtain burners reduce the amount of particulate matter that is released. **Strategy P2** includes consideration for air curtain burners to help unblock use of this tool.

Strategies for Change

P1: Create and publicize State guidance for preparation of burn plans, smoke permit applications, county/local burn permits, and air curtain burn permit applications to facilitate and expedite application and approval while protecting public health and safety. Establish methods for tracking and reporting turnaround time for burn plans and smoke permits in a public-facing, transparent way. *Administrative action. Legislation only required if, after one year, this work product is not complete.*

P2: Encourage all government entities in Colorado who issue burn permits for prescribed fire to provide applicants with information about smoke permit requirements. *Administrative action.*

P3: Develop a separate pathway and approval process for air curtain burners when used for wildland fuel reductions. Establish methods for tracking and reporting turnaround time for air curtain burner permits in a public-facing, transparent way. *Administrative action. Legislation only required if, after one year of tracking, reporting indicates that the turnaround pace has not increased.*

Coordination of Treatment

Plans and Agreements

In order to make efficient use of resources (including burn and smoke permits) and to maximize benefits on the ground, many prescribed fire practitioners seek to coordinate projects. This can include neighbors coordinating burns on their own private lands, as well as municipalities, counties, and federal entities coordinating with one another and/or with private landowners. Many practitioners seek to coordinate treatments and report that there are significant barriers to doing so. A primary barrier is the need to develop formal plans and agreements that specify implementation responsibility, as well as funding and liability coverage. It takes significant time, money, and legal expertise to develop formal agreements that are ready to scale up with burning efforts, ensure public safety with careful coordinated planning, and protect all parties. While government entities at all levels have legal support of their own, they do not necessarily have staff capacity to develop plans and review agreements. Private burners and nonprofit organizations of all sizes struggle with resources of all kinds—staff to develop plans, lawyers to write agreements, and local teams to implement and oversee it all. **Strategies C1 and C2** aim to address these issues.



Photo: The Upper South Platte Partnership collaborative members attending a field tour of Meyer Ranch Park Open Space in Jefferson County, post-wildfire risk reduction and forest health treatment.

Capacity to Increase Pace and Scale

Once the pathway to developing burn plans and agreements for cross-boundary burning is cleared, there is substantial opportunity to further prepare Colorado for more prescribed fire. Currently, prescribed fire is a relatively slow and reactive process, with practitioners planning burns, applying for permits, and waiting for conditions to be right. The scope and scale of prescribed fire is further limited by the lack of on-the-ground resources available. Very few

entities have the capacity to scale up their prescribed fire efforts, even if liability, training, and permitting barriers did not exist. If Colorado wants to truly get ahead of the wildfire problem and increase the pace and scale of prescribed fire, more resources are needed. In order to make most efficient use of resources, the State could develop resources to share with other burn partners at cost and/or be mobilized by the State itself as a rapid-response task force when burn conditions and resource availability align. **Strategy C3** aims to raise the bar of Colorado's engagement in prescribed fire by addressing this need head on.

Case Study: The 2015 prescribed burn at Ben Delatour Scout Ranch is a notable success story in northern Colorado. It involved burning 60-70 piles as part of a larger effort to reduce wildfire risks in the area. This project leveraged a preexisting burn agreement, which integrated federal, state, and private lands, highlighting the importance of cross-jurisdictional collaboration.

Initial treatments focused on broadcast burning while ensuring canopy trees were not lost, a goal achieved with the help of Conservation Corps saw crews and federal support. The Wyden Authority, a provision allowing federal funding to be used on non-federal lands in some cases, facilitated this project's successful execution. This prescribed burn and other relevant wildfire risk reduction measures implemented by the collaborative helped create safer and more effective firefighting buffers during the 2020 Cameron Peak.

Clear Direction

Although escaped prescribed fires are extremely uncommon, escapes have occurred here with catastrophic effects. For this reason, there may be trepidation or reluctance in some State government quarters for scaling up burning efforts in our state. If Colorado is truly going to increase the pace and scale of prescribed fire, it will be extremely important for the State to clearly articulate its commitment to

prescribed fire and to make the necessary policy changes and investments in staff and training to achieve this. This entire Statewide Strategy aims to address this, but swift implementation of Strategies C1 and C3 in particular would be a powerful message about the State's intent.

Strategies for Change

C1: Establish an annual DFPC budget line item and funding to support expanded prescribed fire planning and implementation by and in cooperation with collaboratives, local agencies, and prescribed burn associations (PBAs). *Legislation required.*

C2: Create and distribute reference resources to support and facilitate treatment coordination, such as cross-agency agreement templates and sample burn and mitigation plans that account for participation by multiple entities and for projects implemented by agency employees on private land. *Administrative action.*

C3: Establish Colorado-based prescribed fire-specific fire management resources (e.g., engines, overhead, modules, crews, etc.) to support prescribed fire agreements and funding to enable implementation by others and to provide rapid response to implement prescribed fire when and where opportunities and weather align. *Administrative action.*

Relevant Federal Fire Commission Recommendations

Recommendation 4: Provide dedicated funding to evaluate, build, and maintain existing federal, state, and local wildfire hazard datasets and identify a use case to refine and, if necessary, expand national datasets.

Recommendation 14: Congress should instruct the agencies to develop the necessary administrative systems to allow resource ordering for prescribed fire to be as seamless as it is for wildfire response.

Recommendation 25: Congress should allow for a certain percentage of hazardous fuels funding above agency base levels to be used across ownership boundaries –including through voluntary engagement of private landowners– based on demonstrated needs for integrated project implementation to address risks.

Public and Political Outreach

Although [research](#) suggests that there is broad public support for prescribed fire, community concerns about risks to public safety have been and continue to be significant barriers to prescribed fire. Past escaped prescribed fires in Colorado hover in the collective memory, and recent escaped prescribed fires in neighboring states are a reminder that no burning is without risk. Additionally, prescribed fires do create smoke that can blow into communities and, for a short time, exacerbate breathing problems and some concerns for sensitive populations. There is legitimate cause for caution and care when planning and implementing prescribed fire, but considerable effort is invested in ensuring that burners are well trained, fires are carefully



Photo: Larimer County Commissioner visiting a prescribed fire burn in Red Feather Lakes for the Magic Feather Collaborative Project.

planned, and emergency response is prepared. And while these fires do produce smoke, [federal analysis of western states](#) indicate that the pre-emptive smoke from prescribed fire is shorter-lived and therefore less severe than the smoke of the catastrophic wildfires that Colorado has seen as recently as 2022. While caution is warranted and tradeoffs exist, these are not reasons to stop prescribed fires from occurring in Colorado.

In this context, garnering public support—or at least acceptance—is difficult. News and social media outlets elevate stories of rare escaped prescribed fires while they neglect to report on the hundreds of prescribed fires that are safely and successfully implemented every year. Prescribed fire escapes are [less than 1% likely](#). There is [evidence](#) that engaging communities in discussions and planning about prescribed fire can decrease resistance to it, but prescribed fire practitioners often struggle to find the time, resources, reference and planning information, and messages to turn the tide of public support. This is particularly true of the many small, resource-limited entities that engage in prescribed fire in Colorado. Addressing this issue

challenge requires constant attention, with regular engagement and messaging. **Strategy O1** aims to bring focus and momentum to this critical issue.

Strategy O1 also acknowledges that our local and state elected officials can lead by example, or, unfortunately, they can create new obstacles to prescribed fire. While there are several municipal and county governments throughout Colorado that are leading the charge on prescribed fire and experiencing tremendous success, there is resistance among some elected officials. The election cycle itself requires ongoing education and engagement

Case Study: The Conifer Wildland Division Community Ambassador Program (CAP), launched by the Elk Creek and Inter-Canyon Fire Protection Districts in 2020, exemplifies successful public engagement by fostering proactive relationships between residents and fire protection services. Community Ambassadors, who live in the neighborhoods they support, serve as trusted volunteer liaisons, providing residents with essential information about wildfire risk, forest health, and mitigation strategies. They connect communities to valuable resources, assist in organizing neighborhood mitigation projects, and help link residents to the annual chipping program and other safety initiatives. By empowering residents with the knowledge and tools to protect their homes and families, the program not only enhances individual preparedness but also builds collective resilience. These efforts are critical in addressing public concerns about wildfire management strategies, including prescribed fire, by fostering informed community dialogue, trust, and active participation.

at this level as well, as elected officials move up or out of office. And while prescribed fire has a great number of supporters in the Colorado Legislature, there are other issues statewide that can divert attention from this critical issue—and elections bring new faces and new opportunities for education and engagement here as well.

Outreach and education are only as good as the resources that inform them, and this is another place where Colorado could benefit from some concerted action. There are websites that provide information about prescribed fire generally, as well as information about where wildfires are burning and current smoke conditions, but these sites are not obvious to the

general public and provide incomplete information about past, present, and future fire and smoke events. For example, a mapping service exists for active wildfires and prescribed fires on federal land maintained by the US Forest Service ([click here to view](#)), and a local newspaper hosts a mapping service for active fires and current smoke patterns in Colorado maintained by a newspaper ([click here to view](#)). None of these existing services includes past or planned fires and anticipated smoke impacts, which are helpful information items to increase public awareness and comfort with prescribed fire. This limited information landscape creates a situation of “if you know, you know” in which some people have access to information that could quell concerns about prescribed fire, but those may not be the people who continue to have concerns about prescribed fire. Smaller entities engaged in burning lack the resources to engage their communities about these tools as well as upcoming burn events. **Strategy O2** aims to address this unequal and incomplete access to information.

Strategies for Change

O1: Develop and implement a statewide prescribed fire awareness campaign in collaboration with partners across the state, including efforts to raise public awareness and understanding and regular and consistent engagement with local elected entities and the Colorado Legislature. *Administrative action.*

O2: Develop and make widely available a database and map of completed and planned prescribed fire events, as well as a living map of active and near-future events with anticipated smoke impact areas. *Administrative action.*

Funding

Prescribed fire planning and implementation efforts in Colorado face significant funding challenges. Very little funding for prescribed fire is provided to the three State agencies with primary responsibility for this work (DFPC, CSFS, and DNR). The DFPC budget funds two full-time equivalent (FTE) employees for prescribed fire planning, along with funding for the current level of CCB Program operations. This only provides for minimal support of

prescribed fire planning on State and private lands. DFPC does not have any dedicated prescribed fire implementation resources (fiscal or human capital). CSFS also does not have dedicated prescribed fire staff, and prescribed fire implementation is technically outside of its staff's regular duties and resource allocation. However, while CSFS does not have any staff that exclusively conduct prescribed fire, many of its staff are qualified and interested in supporting these efforts. DNR has staff who support natural resource management and grant administration for prescribed fire, but there is no prescribed fire staff.

State agencies currently implement prescribed fire as an added responsibility, without extra funding for overtime or travel costs. This lack of dedicated implementation staffing or agency budget limits the quantity and geographic reach of State agencies to implement prescribed fire. The current model cannot be considered an adequate or sustainable approach. Additionally, there is insufficient funding to provide adequate equipment and resources like fire engines and personnel for essential training and prescribed fire implementation at all levels of government. This impacts local and nonprofit partners who carry out much of the prescribed fire work in Colorado.



Photo: Fuel reduction implemented in the forest stands beyond the standard power transmission line right of way in Boulder, County.

A key gap in funding is the lack of financial resources available for contingencies, which are situations in which additional support is required to address unexpected challenges during prescribed fire operations. This could include having resources like air support, especially DFPC helicopter support, available without financial liability if a prescribed fire project begins to leave the designated boundary. Contingency resources are critical to ensure that when things go wrong, the necessary equipment, capacity, and expertise are available to maintain control of the situation and prevent escalation. Currently, if a prescribed fire leaves its containment boundary, agencies must declare it a wildfire and request emergency/suppression support, which creates delay and resource inefficiencies. Proactively having eligible funding in place for these contingency situations would help mitigate such risks, benefiting both the prescribed fire program and public safety.

Funding restrictions often limit resources to specific entities, making it difficult to allocate resources effectively where they are most needed or beneficial. Although there are State resources available for local and nonprofit partners, they are limited and provided largely through competitive grants that can have confusing or prohibitive eligibility requirements. For

The Ember Alliance's (TEA) Northern Colorado (NOCO) Fuels Crew completed fuels reduction and prescribed fire implementation projects with a variety of partners throughout the NOCO Fireshed as well as nationally over the past three years. TEA's base funding, which supported hiring, training, administrative needs, and project work between contracts expired at the end of 2024. The grant supporting these tasks is no longer available in 2025. Without this base funding, TEA is unable to hire a crew in 2025 because it does not have the financial resources to support the crew between contracts. This has trickle-down impacts on the organization's local partners in terms of resource availability. Additionally, this removes a critical link in TEA's Good Jobs Pipeline –the NOCO Crew served as an important stepping-stone for students at Front Range Community College to receive additional on-the-job training and networking to launch them into careers in wildland fire management and adjacent careers. Project-based work (stringing contracts together) is not a sustainable nor reliable model without base funding; ideally, a larger pot of funding would be available to support year-round sustained work. Ideally, this funding would not be based on cost per acre but should support an hourly or daily rate for crewmembers. Cost per acre rates are prohibitive to providing an affordable housing wage, benefits, and undermines efforts to build a local workforce.

example, the [Forest Restoration and Wildfire Risk Mitigation \(FRWRM\)](#) grant program initially excluded prescribed fire projects from eligibility, though this problem has since been resolved. [The Colorado Strategic Wildfire Action Program \(COSWAP\)](#) Landscape Resilience Investment funding allows for both broadcast burning and pile burning. However, eligibility is restricted by entity type and geography, limiting where COSWAP funds are available for mitigation projects. Despite these challenges,

both FRWRM and COSWAP contribute to the application of prescribed fire on the landscape and would benefit significantly from increased funding.

In addition to these grant programs administered by the Colorado State Forest Service and the Colorado Department of Natural Resources, respectively, there are private and federal grant funds available to support prescribed fire. Some entities in Colorado pursue these funds for their prescribed fire work, though both private and federal funding are not always available or reliable. Additionally, some prescribed fire professionals report difficulty using grant funds for prescribed fire, due to the fundamental disconnect between grant requirements for project completion and the unpredictability of weather conditions that enable the safe implementation of prescribed fire.

Grants are not the only funding options available for prescribed fire, however. Local funding is available in some places. Although Colorado's Taxpayer Bill of Rights (TABOR) constrains some local entities' options, some communities have taken it upon themselves to provide funding for prescribed fire efforts. Examples include [Summit County's 2008 mill levy increase](#) to fund wildfire mitigation projects, [Jefferson County's 2024 ballot measure](#) to commit some tax revenue to public safety projects, including wildfire mitigation, and [Eagle County's annual budget allocation for wildfire mitigation efforts](#). Additionally, Title 32, Article 18 of the Colorado Revised Statutes allows for the creation of forest improvement districts to raise funds for enhancing forest health and mitigating wildfire risks, though no such districts have yet been created. While these tools can and do provide significant funding in the communities where they exist, they reflect a willingness of local voters and government leaders to invest personal or public funds that may not exist or be financially feasible in all areas of the state. This patchwork approach to funding solutions for a problem that increasingly manifests statewide raises equity concerns, particularly when public safety is at risk.

Some other states do a significantly better job of funding prescribed fire work. States like [Georgia](#), [Texas](#), and [Idaho](#) allocate funds through line-item budgets for "forest health practices" or "land management" activities, which include prescribed fire. The largest financial support

often comes from special legislative initiatives, as observed in [California](#) and [Washington State](#). Additionally, some states, like [Arizona](#), use wildfire protection fees collected through property taxes, managed at the county level, while others, like [Alabama](#), rely on severance taxes operated by state agencies like departments of natural resources or forestry commissions. Many states involve multiple agencies in funding prescribed fire or wildfire mitigation, and these agencies sometimes operate independently of each other.

There is growing [evidence](#) that investments in fuels mitigation efforts like prescribed fire decrease the risk of wildfire and decrease the cost of wildfire response and suppression over time. Yet current funding in Colorado is insufficient, hard to get, and inequitable, and, as with federal funding, there is significantly more funding available for wildfire response than for proactive risk mitigation. Unless proactive funding for planned and carefully managed prescribed fire is increased, the current cycle of large reactive investments in fighting large, unexpected wildfires cannot possibly change. And though some of the strategies in this document can be done with existing resources or through passage of no-cost legislation, most require additional resources to be effective.

While increased advocacy for change at the federal level could assist with this, the Colorado solution for Colorado benefit is exemplified by **Strategy C1** above, which promotes the creation of dedicated prescribed fire programmatic funds for DFPC. **Strategy O1** will ensure that public and legislative attention remains focused on this critical issue. **Strategy F1**, below, acknowledges that in order to significantly increase the pace and scale of prescribed fire, all of Colorado's fire and natural resource agencies must be directed, empowered, and funded to support this work. **Strategy F2** acknowledges the State role in supporting the prescribed fire work of its partners and seeks to add funding to grant programs and ease access to that funding for partners. **Strategy F3** has no direct fiscal consequences to the State budget; rather it seeks to expand the fire-related work that can occur with existing wildfire response resources. **Strategy F4** proposed direct and specific funding for the statewide outreach campaign proposed in Strategy O1. **Strategy F5** highlights the need for long-term sustainable funding solutions that may be different from or in addition to those proposed in this document,

especially in light of the equity issues raised by the current patchwork approach to local funding solutions.

Strategies for Change

F1: Appropriate annual, dedicated, and sufficient funding to DFPC, CSFS, and DNR to implement this statewide strategy and support coordinated implementation by partners statewide. *Legislation required.*

F2: Expand funding for prescribed fire through existing grant programs by adding resources through the budget process, ensuring that program eligibility criteria allow for prescribed fire, and extending the competitive grant program to all government entities. *Legislative action.*

F3: Expand wildfire response and mutual aid funding and administrative framework to allow for prescribed fire implementation, management, and contingency needs by State staff and cooperator pool. *Legislative action.*

F4: Allocate budgetary resources to State agencies to implement the statewide prescribed fire awareness campaign described in Strategy O1 for the next three years. *Legislative action.*

F5: Determine how much money is needed to fully support prescribed fire efforts, assuming a phased approach; analyze the best methods and opportunities for long-term, sustainable, and equitable statewide funding for prescribed fire and other wildfire mitigation activities in Colorado. *Administrative action.*

MAKING THE PLAN A REALITY

The physical, administrative, and funding landscapes for prescribed fire are ever-changing. In order to be most impactful, this document cannot simply be filed away and forgotten. To create the change envisioned and desired by the Colorado Fire Commission and the Prescribed Fire Subcommittee, the strategies identified here must be implemented. Responsibility for nine of the strategies belongs to the Colorado Legislature, whose commitment to the fire service is known and has been demonstrated many times in recent years. As these items come to fruition through the legislative process, the executive branch must be ready to act. A plan will be needed to get these ideas into practice on the ground.

In partnership with staff from the Division of Fire Prevention and Control, the Colorado State Forest Service, and the Department of Natural Resources, the Prescribed Fire Subcommittee will create an implementation plan to deliver on these strategies. The implementation plan will identify actions, timelines, responsible entities, and partners to ensure that the strategies become reality. Implementation is expected to require significant collaboration, particularly in the near term as new systems are established. The implementation plan will be a living document, adjusting as needed to reflect legislative and administrative changes in Colorado and at the federal level. To ensure continued attention to this important work in our state, the Colorado Fire Commission will receive regular updates from staff as implementation progresses and provide ongoing feedback and support.

At the end of the day, however, this plan and the substantial hours and effort that went into it only matter if there is actual implementation. This means work on the ground done by qualified staff with skills and experience and expertise. It means work done in offices, meetings, and virtual events to plan and strategize. It means coordination in a focused and intentional way by entities like the Prescribed Fire Council and in an informal and ad hoc way by all the organizations and agencies that came together to write this Statewide Strategy. This document is a roadmap. The journey starts now.

APPENDICES

Appendix A: Glossary of Terms

- **Colorado Certified Burner (CCB) Program:** The Colorado Certified Burner Program is a training and certification initiative designed to equip individuals with the skills and knowledge to safely conduct prescribed burns, or controlled fires, for land management purposes. The program covers essential topics such as fire behavior, burn planning, safety standards, smoke management, and legal compliance with state regulations. Certified burners are trained to reduce wildfire risks, improve forest health, and restore ecosystems through responsible burning practices. The CCB Program also emphasizes collaboration among landowners and fire agencies and provides ongoing support to ensure burns are conducted safely and effectively, helping to mitigate the growing threat of wildfires in Colorado.
- **Community Wildfire Protection Plan (CWPP):** A CWPP is a collaborative, community-based strategic plan aimed at reducing the risk of wildfires to people, property, and natural resources in a given area. It is a tool used by local governments, fire agencies, residents, and other stakeholders to identify wildfire hazards and create specific actions to mitigate those risks. A CWPP typically includes an assessment of local wildfire risks, identifying areas at high risk for wildfire damage, and prioritizing fuel reduction efforts, such as clearing brush and dead vegetation. It also outlines evacuation plans, emergency response strategies, and recommendations for building codes and land-use policies that can help make communities more fire-resilient. CWPPs are tailored to local conditions and needs and are essential for fostering proactive wildfire management at the community level. The process encourages public participation and coordination among federal, state, and local entities, helping communities prepare for, respond to, and recover from wildfires.
- **Fire Deficit:** A fire deficit refers to a situation where there is an insufficient amount of prescribed or natural fire in a landscape, leading to an accumulation of excessive vegetation, particularly in fire-prone ecosystems. This lack of fire can increase the risk

of larger, more destructive wildfires due to the buildup of fuel, such as dead wood, shrubs, and grasses. Over time, a fire deficit can disrupt ecosystem processes, including nutrient cycling, habitat diversity, and species regeneration, as many ecosystems depend on periodic fires for health and resilience. Restoring fire to these landscapes through prescribed burning can help reduce the fire deficit and maintain ecological balance.

- **Good Neighbor Agreement (GNA):** A GNA is a collaborative partnership between federal agencies (such as the U.S. Forest Service) and state or local governments, Tribes, or non-governmental organizations, designed to improve forest management and reduce wildfire risks across boundaries. The agreement allows federal agencies to partner with these entities to conduct land management activities, such as forest thinning, prescribed burns, and other restoration work, on public lands. The key feature of a GNA is that it allows for greater flexibility and efficiency in the use of resources, enabling the federal government to delegate certain responsibilities and work together with local partners to address forest health, wildfire prevention, and other landscape-scale challenges.
- **Memorandum of Agreement (MOA):** A MOA is a formal, non-legally binding document that outlines an agreement between two or more parties to collaborate on a specific project or initiative. It is used to clarify the roles, responsibilities, and expectations of each party involved, as well as to define the scope and objectives of the collaboration. While an MOA is not legally enforceable like a contract, it serves as a clear written understanding that helps prevent misunderstandings or conflicts as the parties work together.
- **Memorandum of Understanding (MOU):** An MOU is a non-legally binding agreement between two or more parties that outlines shared goals, roles, and responsibilities, typically in a broad and general manner, without imposing specific obligations. It is often used to express mutual intent to collaborate and set the framework for a partnership, usually in the early stages of a project. An MOU is generally less detailed and focused on high-level intentions, while an MOA is more structured and can signal a more concrete collaboration with actionable steps.

- **National Wildfire Coordinating Group (NWCG):** The NWCG is a consortium of federal, state, local, Tribal, and territorial agencies in the United States that collaborates to provide a unified approach to wildfire management and coordination. It develops and promotes national standards for wildfire response, training, and qualifications, aiming to ensure that agencies and organizations involved in wildfire management work effectively together. Click [this link](#) to learn more about NWCG.
- **Prescribed fire burn associations (PBAs):** PBAs are collaborative groups formed to manage and promote the use of prescribed fire as a land management tool. These associations typically consist of landowners, fire practitioners, and natural resource professionals who work together to plan, implement, and monitor prescribed burns in a safe, controlled, and effective manner. PBAs aim to enhance wildfire resilience, improve habitat, and reduce fuel loads to mitigate the risk of catastrophic wildfires. Through shared knowledge, resources, and expertise, PBAs help increase the use of prescribed fire, build community capacity for fire management, and foster collaboration among stakeholders to achieve long-term land stewardship goals.
- **Wildland-urban interface (WUI):** The WUI refers to the zone where human-developed areas, such as homes and infrastructure, meet or intermingle with wildland vegetation, creating a heightened risk of wildfires. This interface is particularly vulnerable to wildfire threats due to the proximity of flammable vegetation and structures.
- **Wyden Agreement:** This agreement is a cooperative tool used by the USDA Forest Service to include non-federal lands, such as private properties, in resource management projects like prescribed fires. This collaboration benefits landowners by improving fire containment, reducing wildfire risk, and enhancing habitat restoration. It also allows private landowners to participate in fire management more easily, leading to healthier landscapes, reduced wildfire danger, and ecological benefits such as increased wildlife sightings and better forest conditions.

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Appendix C: Prescribed Fire Subcommittee Members

Dan Beveridge, Colorado State Forest Service (*co-chair*)

Paul Cada, Vail Fire and Emergency Services

Lesley Dahlkemper, Jefferson County Commissioner

Paul Duarte, Division of Fire Prevention and Control

Daniel Godwin, US Department of Agriculture

Connie Johnson, Colorado 911 Resource Center

Alison Lerch, Department of Natural Resources

Katie McGrath-Novak, Colorado Forest Collaboratives Network

Rodrigo Moraga, Colorado Prescribed Fire Council

Rebecca Samulski, Fire Adapted Colorado

Jody Shaddock-McNally, Larimer County Commissioner

Rocco Snart, Division of Fire Prevention and Control (*co-chair*)

Parker Titus, The Nature Conservancy

Kevin Whelan, West Slope Representative for the Special District Association of Colorado

Brendan Witt, Western Resource Advocates

Appendix D: Stakeholder Workshop Documentation

- [Workshop registration results](#): Stakeholders were invited to share their perspectives on the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats of using prescribed fire across the state while registering for in-person and virtual workshops. Their feedback was synthesized into key themes and provided as a handout during workshops, which is reflected in the linked document.
- [Combined workshop outcomes](#): Participant feedback of six workshops is combined in the linked document.

Appendix E: Additional Strategies

[Additional Strategies Considered Less Urgent and Less Important by the Prescribed Fire Subcommittee](#)

Appendix F: Prescribed Fire Subcommittee Meeting Summaries

[Link to all the following Prescribed Fire Subcommittee meeting summaries.](#)

- June 17, 2024
- July 19, 2024
- August 16, 2024
- September 20, 2024
- October 18, 2024
- November 15, 2024
- December 21, 2024
- February 3, 2025

Appendix G: Training Pathways Timeline and Cost Estimate Graphic

Figure 1: Training Pathway for Agency Staff

