

## GCCI MEETS WITH USFS TO DISCUSS MITIGATION PLANS

JANUARY 16TH 2009

The Gilpin County Citizens Initiative Incorporating Committee, including Nan Harvey, Wes Isenhardt, Terry Scharg, Don Devereux and Michelle Northrup, met with Christine Walsh and Mark Martin of the US Forest Service to discuss partnership opportunities and get the facts on US Forest Service policies regarding Forest Health, Beetle Control and Fire Mitigation on the public lands which border our communities.

Nan Harvey had previously submitted to Christine and Mark outlining our concerns:

- 1. In working with other groups, what were the factors that led to the success of the project and what do we need to know in advance that will help us avoid failure?*
- 2. What kind of partnership do you see between the National Forest Service and the Citizens' Initiative? This is particularly relevant to HFRA 1904-9 and 10.*
- 3. What long long term management plans do you have for Gilpin County - 10 years, 20 years and forward... firebreaks, improving existing trails/roads, treatment, etc.?*
- 4. Gilpin County is well into their CWPP. How would our CWPP work with your agency's plans for say hazardous fuel reduction, treatments, as described in H.R. 1904-12? In our mind, there is no doubt that Gilpin County qualifies for an "at risk community" given the miles of national forest that surround us.*
- 5. An important one for us is whether your agency will be prepared to change the regulations that have bound you in the past, and burdened us as private citizens, to stay within the 150 foot limit to do the proper mitigation for beetle control/protection and fire safety. A provision in HR 1904-24 (Categorical Exclusion) seems very promising to us, in that it seems to allow for groups such as ours to participate in the agency's assessment and treatment on projects of not more than 1000 acres, releasing your burden to report to the EPA. We would like to explore this further.*
- 6. Since money and manpower are the major players in any scheme, for you and for us, it would be helpful to look at the cost of doing nothing vs. the cost of doing certain projects. We have manpower ready and are willing to assist in that part of the quotient.*

In addition to the questions above, the group was able to review maps of both the Yankee Hill Fuel Reduction Project and the proposed Lump Gulch Project. Aside from specific answers, GCCI members left the meeting feeling that our options, if not what we had wanted had at least been clearly defined regarding how we interact with the Forest Service and other public agencies. Also evident was how the perspective of the Forest Service – topography, large-scale stewardship, public agency – is entirely different from the individual homeowner’s “my back yard” perspective and misinformation about USFS policies and plans can add stress to the tenuous balance between public and private land management. In all, members felt the meeting was informative and set GCCI up for a very positive and productive relationship with the USFS in the future.

1. *In working with other groups, what were the factors that led to the success of the project, and what do we need to know in advance that will help us avoid failure?*

Christine and Mark provided us with information on other groups similar to GCCCI in order that we might contact and learn from. They have worked on various projects with the Forest Service in the past and could give us “real world” suggestions on the most effective actions available to us. Groups suggested were Colorado Mountain Club, Indian Peaks Alliance, Volunteers for Outdoor Colorado, Front Range Fuel Reduction Project and . We were urged to contact Ed Self of the Wildland Restoration Project as he has valuable information on creating a successful group of this kind. There are also some local groups, such as a watershed protection group in Eldora that we might both learn from and work with on projects.

2. *What kind of partnership do you see between the National Forest Service and the Citizens' Initiative?*

HFRA (Healthy Forest Restoration Act of 2003) 1904-9 -10 states, in part that “multilevel monitoring” and inclusion of “diverse stakeholders” shall take place throughout project management. This means that communities should take part in reporting on and monitoring forest health and also those groups such as GCCCI, including individual citizens may be included in the planning process. This has taken place in regards to how input is received, for example the normal input process which only allows for comments has been replaced by an *objection* process – objections must be addressed within a certain timeframe in order for the project to proceed. The statutory requirements of the act regarding citizen involvement are met through this change.

The main problems associated with interaction between the Forest Service and citizen groups are liability issues and funding. While liability obstacles are not flexible, several options are available to circumvent funding problems. It was recommended that we contact other similar groups to see how they worked out liability problems for volunteers.

One way to tackle both the liability and funding problem is to arrange for the Forest Service to come in and fell the trees while our group handles the clean-up and coordinates to either donate wood, chip or create burn piles for fire department trainings. While building a burn pile is not complicated, training is still required and this is where funding is a major obstacle. By arranging for “train the trainer” programs, our group can facilitate the process of educating the community and create neighborhood liaisons to the Forest Service projects in their area. Participating in the monitoring and reporting process is also a great way for the community to be involved with the Forest Service on these projects.

3. *What long long term management plans do you have for Gilpin County - 10 years, 20 years and forward... firebreaks, improving existing trails/roads, treatment, etc.?*

Ongoing discussion of the Lump Gulch project showed that even the most concerned citizens may be uninformed about the nature of this project, beginning with the size and scope – many believe it is limited to the Lump Gulch area of Gilpin but the project actually involves nearly 30,000 acres with only half of those acres falling within NFS boundaries. Implementation of Lump Gulch will likely begin in 2010, provided the funding is available and all objections have been answered.

While HFRA specifies that high risk NFS areas such as Gilpin take priority, there is no statutory requirement that the work be completed within any time frame and much depends on funding,

accessibility, environmental assessments and other factors. (A summary of the Lump Gulch Project is attached which outlines the goals and possible treatments for the area.)

Generally speaking, the NFS has little beetle mitigation in its planning and those concerns are of especially low priority in this area. The NFS policy standpoint is that the pine beetle is an epidemic and resources are better spent on creating a healthy forest that can weather the storm, especially since the epidemic will have only intensified when the mitigation projects are slated to begin (2010.) Even so, efforts to remove “hot” beetle trees are still beneficial and fit well with the fire mitigation priorities of the Service – it’s one less dead tree that will burn in a fire.

“You can see it as a travesty or a natural change in the environment, but our time is a lot different than forest time,” said Christine, who stressed the importance of education and encouraged a focus on fire mitigation, safety and long-term landscape planning – the goal is not to save the forest we have now but to plan for the health of the future forest.

4. *How would our CWPP work with your agency's plans for hazardous fuel reduction treatments as described in H.R. 1904-12?*

The NFS began their management planning before the CWPP process was implemented. The HFRA contains a number of provisions to facilitate and encourage NFS to coordinate with counties throughout the CWPP process. The statute also allows the Secretary of Agriculture to consider the fuel reduction plans of a CWPP as an alternative to the NFS plans for high risk areas, but is not binding on either the Secretary or the NFS to adopt any plan.

By completing the CWPP and submitting an appeal for consideration through various avenues, at-risk communities may be able to expedite approval of plans and also acquire priority funding. Language in the HFRA provides incentives for interagency work on CWPPs, but the real benefit of the CWPP process to citizens is the ability to apply for large scale grants. In general, the CWPP will have no bearing on Forest Service projects other than providing a forum for different agencies to interact and create more comprehensive fuel reduction plans.

5. *Will your agency be able to change the regulations that have bound you in the past and burdened us as private citizens? Categorical Exclusion seems very promising to us, in that it seems to release your burden to report to the EPA. We would like to explore this further.*

Christine feels that NEPA is an effective tool to protect the long term environmental integrity of an area and is not an obstacle to the Forest Service, but communities may still put pressure on the Secretary of Agriculture and their legislators to help move funds into at-risk communities and expedite NEPA review and approval. Even under this circumstance, however, NEPA and other statutory environmental protections must be followed. Categorical Exclusion – which would allow the NFS to legally circumvent the environmental assessment requirements in order to implement an urgent treatment in areas of less than 1000 acres – is no longer available to the NFS or at-risk communities as an option.

Alternatively, there is some flexibility for the community in terms of allowable limit for citizens to create buffer zones between public and private lands. “Good Neighbor” parcels include an allowance for up to 200 feet as part of the Lump Gulch planning. Other areas such as this may be developed as the NFS receives more input from the community through the CWPP and other agencies, and the public. The best option for the community is to coordinate outreach and pursue more “good neighbor” parcels (local landowners are in a better position to approach neighbors because of local knowledge and credibility) and, if the 200 feet does not seem to be an adequate remedy, present concerns to CWPP groups and the Forest Service for review.

6. *Since money and manpower are the major players in any scheme, for you and for us, it would be helpful to look at the cost of doing nothing vs. the cost of doing certain projects.*

“Train the trainer” programming is a great way to facilitate volunteerism where there is limited funding to bring trainers into every community. While the Forest Service loves volunteers, it will still be some time before they can be utilized on the Lump Gulch project in the Gilpin area. In the meantime education, training and coordinating with other groups and agencies is the best use of time and resources.

While “getting into the forest” may seem like an urgent project for our group, there is much value in concentrating on developing our organization and relationships so that we are better able to coordinate volunteers when opportunities arise. We should also be working on finding “liaisons” to different public agencies to stay informed, but most importantly we should concentrate our focus on helping private landowners deal with these issues in their communities – that is the area where citizen groups have the most power to effect change... and where the US Forest Service has no jurisdiction.

In summary, both Christine and Mark were very positive about our ability to solve some of our beetle and fire mitigation issues in our communities and expressed a desire to continue helping us be realistic and up to date in our methods. They encouraged us to contact their office at any time to get help with resources and contacts.

***From this meeting, we received the following suggestions on moving forward:***

- ✓ Continue to develop good relationships with local public agencies
- ✓ Stay up to date on current community projects such as the CWPP group
- ✓ Concentrate on building neighborhood organizations and community projects
- ✓ Make education and recruitment a top priority
- ✓ Impress the value of lobbying at the local level
- ✓ Biomass removal is the high cost, low risk job that the USFS needs the most help with
- ✓ Colorado State Forest has more flexibility, more local opportunities and needs more help
- ✓ Work with Commissioners on local solutions such as tax work off programs
- ✓ Expand goals to include promotion to visitors about fire risk, private property, etc.
- ✓ Pursue competitive grants with gusto
- ✓ Utilize available resources – Colorado University, public forums, newspapers, public events
- ✓ Make sure everyone is on available announcement and mailing lists