

Love thy trees but love thy neighbor more

Communities can benefit in a wildfire with planning and preparation

Chaffee County — The Salida Field Office of the Colorado State Forest Service has assessed 1,079 properties for wildfire risk — roughly 19% of homes in unincorporated areas of the county. Of those, 40% have high or very high risk and so far, only 13% are known to have been treated by landowners to mitigate risk.

Homes in the most critical areas are located in the wildland urban interface (WUI) — pronounced “woo-wee” — where development meets or intermingles with forests.

WUI property owners often underestimate their situation.

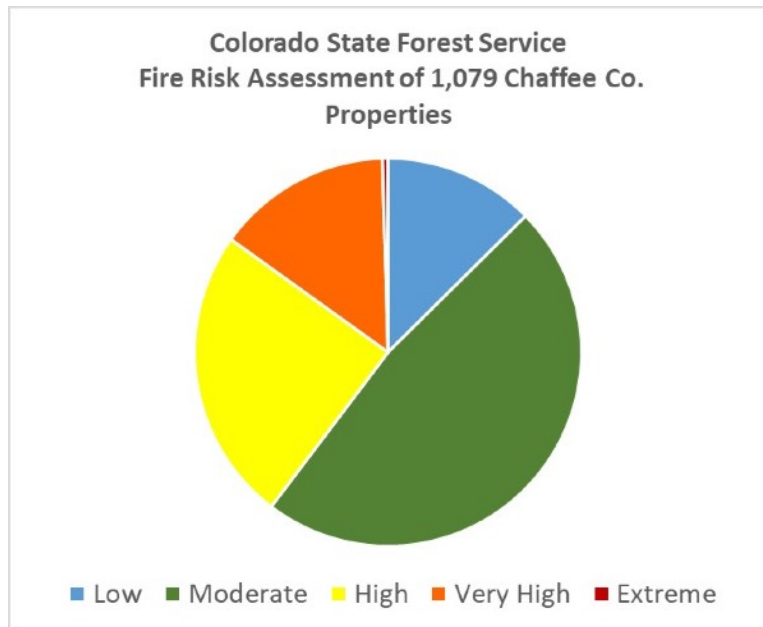
“A lot of them moved there or put their house there because of the trees, so you’re asking them to take away the appeal,” CSFS Salida Office Forester Kathryn Hardgrave said. “They don’t realize what the consequences could be or if it’s their second home, they don’t think it will be as dramatic.”

Community Wildfire Protection Plans define the WUI and help shape treatment priorities for surrounding lands. They also address local firefighting capability and defensible space around homes and subdivisions.

Chaffee County is one of 49 in Colorado with a countywide plan but the number of smaller plans covering fire protection districts and communities at the subdivision or HOA level in Chaffee County is small.

There are 235 of these smaller plans in the state, including six in Chaffee County: Alpine/St. Elmo, Game Trail, Maysville/North Fork, Mount Harvard Estates, Trail West and Poncha Springs.

Additional programs help neighborhoods become Fire Adapted Communities or



Federal and state programs can help neighborhoods become Fire Adapted Communities or Firewise Communities, when homeowners take personal responsibility to reduce wildfire risk. Chaffee County has no Fire Adapted Communities and three Firewise Communities.

Firewise Communities, when homeowners take personal responsibility to reduce wildfire risk by creating safer and healthier conditions for people and nature.

“When there is a wildfire over the ridge heading toward your community, these plans are what you go to,” Salida District Ranger Jim Pitts said.

Colorado has 151 Firewise Communities, including eight in the town of Breckenridge alone. Chaffee County has three — Alpine, St. Elmo and Maysville — and no Fire Adapted Communities.

Being “Firewise” will pay off in the event of a wildfire, Pitts said, because it ensures agencies that residents have done what they can to prepare.

“If it is not a safe environment to go in and take a stance to protect a structure or make a fire line, we are not going to put firefighters in there,” Pitts said. “These plans also describe the resources and steps that

people agree to take in an evacuation. That planning all adds up quickly in an emergency assessment.”

If the potential of a firefighter showing up — or not — is not enough to get people firing up their chainsaws, then what will?

“Wildfire is part of our reality,” Hardgrave said. “People do need to hold hands, so to speak, to work together and make a difference together. If you have half an acre

and no one else in the neighborhood is willing to do anything, your house may survive but you will be looking at a big black landscape for awhile.”

For more information about community fire mitigation, contact the CSFS Salida Field Office at 539-2579 or visit csfs.colostate.edu/salida.

— ***Kim Marquis***