

Wildfire a looming threat to county's way of life

Public safety, water quality, economy threatened by tree die-offs, according to state agency

Chaffee County — It's not a question of if a wildfire will burn in Chaffee County but a question of when, according to a report by the Colorado State Forest Service, a state agency charged with helping homeowners prepare for a wildfire.

Colorado has seen a 400% increase in acres burned by wildfire since the 1990s. Widespread insect infestations have killed off wide swaths of the state's forests and while residents can't see it yet, the situation is no different in Chaffee County.

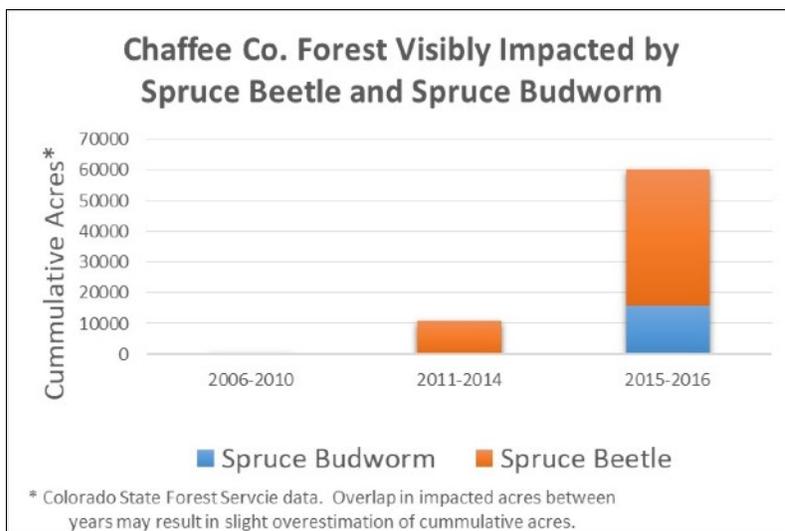
More than half of Chaffee County's forested lands are insect-infested, according to land managers.

The rest of the trees are at risk, especially at higher elevations where spruce beetles are spreading from the south. Only five spruce trees per acre look dead now but the visible mortality rate — when needles turn brown and then drop — will increase to 120 trees per acre in just a few years.

In addition to spruce beetles, the county's forest pests include other bark beetles and Western spruce budworm — the state's most widespread insect defoliator. The budworm in 2016 caused damage on 12,000 acres in Chaffee County, according to the CSFS.

Chaffee County so far has been lucky in terms of wildfire. The community could be better prepared to deal with a wildfire and lessen the aftereffects (*see Community Planning story*).

Fire mitigation on private land is just the beginning. More than 80% of the county is comprised of federal lands and forest health



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is in dire straights, according to Salida District Ranger Jim Pitts.

Federal land managers have ramped up fire mitigation efforts in Chaffee County in the past three years by treating more than 4,000 acres with thinning and prescribed burns, Pitts said.

Nearly 20,000 acres have been treated since 2009 but more work needs to be done.

"The acres we've treated so far are in high priority areas but we do have holes, and we've got to work on filling in some of those gaps that will provide a better buffer," he said.

Recent work on Monarch Pass will protect infrastructure and power lines near the ski area and reduce the chance that the pass would act like a funnel in a wildfire, which is what happened in the Sangre de Cristos during the Hayden Creek Fire in 2016.

Pitts said the county's deeper forests still need to be treated, where thick stands of trees could fuel a fire. Pre-constructed, strategically placed fire breaks can provide opportunities to stop a wildfire from spreading.

In 2002, more than 2,000 fires burned 502,000 acres in Colorado and forced the evacuation of 81,000 residents. Ten years later, six people lost their lives and more than 600 structures were destroyed during the 2012 fire season that caused more than \$538 million in losses.

Since then the wildfire season has lengthened, resulting in fires that start earlier, last longer, cost more to suppress and cause more damage, according to the CSFS report.

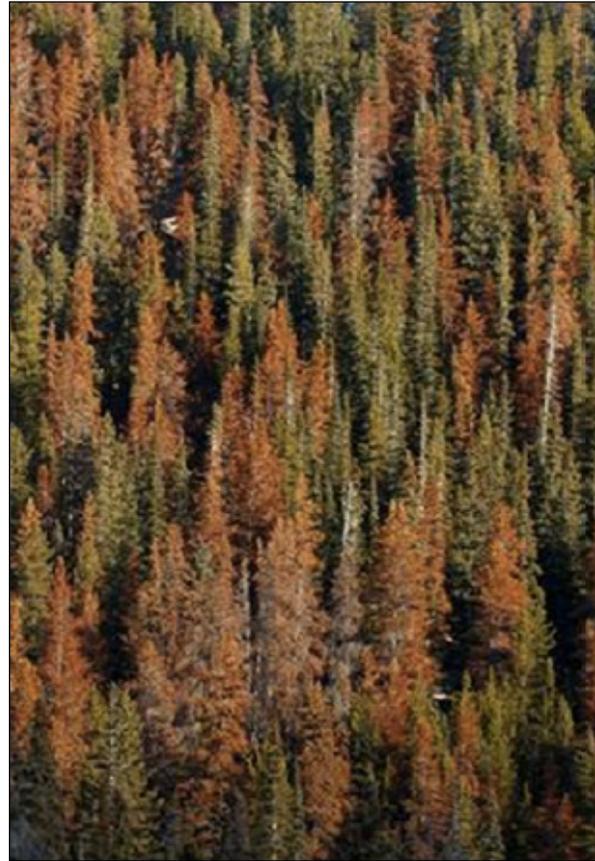
Chaffee County's 413,000 acres of forest offer outdoor recreation opportunities, provide fresh water and support diverse wildlife species.

Large wildfires can cause flooding, erosion, degraded water quality and reduced water storage capacity, according to the CSFS report, harming drinking supplies, agriculture and additional segments of the economy.

Heavy sediment resulting from rains after a wildfire could devastate the Arkansas River fishery, threatening its Gold Medal trout status, and degrade the experience for river runners.

Flooding after wildfires in other parts of the state has altered seasonal flows, leading to unfavorably timed runoff, and put so much sediment into reservoirs that it reduced storage capacity, according to the CSFS report, which also found that water quality can be impacted for at least five years after a fire.

This story was written by Kim Marquis and produced as part of Envision Chaffee County's effort to educate the community about current issues related to public lands.



Federal land managers have ramped up fire mitigation efforts in Chaffee County in the past three years by treating more than 4,000 acres with thinning and prescribed burns. Nearly 20,000 acres have been treated since 2009 but more work needs to be done, according to Salida District Ranger Jim Pitts. The county has 413,000 acres of forest.