

## 3. Introduction

### The Purpose

The Garfield County Community Wildfire Protection Plan (CWPP) is a strategic plan that identifies specific wildland fire risks facing communities and districts within Garfield County, Colorado and provides prioritized mitigation recommendations designed to reduce those risks.

The need for a CWPP is crucial as families and businesses continue to develop into unincorporated areas of the county. Demographic trends have shifted in Garfield County as families and infrastructure have moved into rangeland and forest settings away from traditional urban and suburban communities. Homes and infrastructure are being built in close proximity to wildland vegetation-fuels and terrain that could be conducive to catastrophic wildfire. Recent large-scale wildfires in the county have resulted in the devastating loss of structures, businesses, and human lives.

The development of CWPPs is authorized and defined in Title I of the Healthy Forests Restoration Act (HFRA) passed by Congress on November 21, 2003 and signed into law by President George W. Bush on December 3, 2003. CWPPs are designed to empower the county to take advantage of wildland fire and hazardous fuel management opportunities through collaborative planning with the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), U.S. Forest Service (USFS), and Colorado Division of Fire Prevention and Control (DFPC) to reduce the risks of wildfire. On July 1, 2012, the DFPC assumed the responsibilities for wildland fire prevention and protection as provided by House Bill 12-1283. Prior to July 1, 2012, it was the obligation of the Colorado State Forest Service (CSFS) to provide wildland fire prevention and protection. As a result, there are numerous references to CSFS in this CWPP because they participated on the planning team and several CSFS documents are referenced that pertain to wildland fire protection and control.

The CWPP brings together diverse local interests to discuss their mutual concerns for public safety, community sustainability, and natural resources. The plan provides prioritized access to state and federal grant funding to support identified vegetation-fuel management projects and other mitigation actions to reduce the risks of wildfire throughout the county. The HFRA places renewed emphasis on community planning by extending a variety of benefits to counties and communities with a wildfire protection plan in place. Critical among these benefits are the opportunity for jurisdictions to establish a localized definition and boundary for the WUI and to identify or shape fuels treatment priorities on surrounding federal and non-federal lands in Garfield County.

The implementation of effective wildfire mitigation is a dynamic process. The characteristics of forests and interface communities are constantly changing. Flexibility is designed into the CWPP implementation process to accommodate this changing landscape. Regular plan maintenance and annual updates can document these changes and highlight progress.

### The Need

Wildfire is a naturally occurring and important component of the oak shrubland, pinyon-juniper forest, shrubland, and spruce-fir forest vegetation types that dominate much of Garfield County, Colorado. Some of these vegetation types are “fire-dependent” ecosystems that have evolved over thousands of

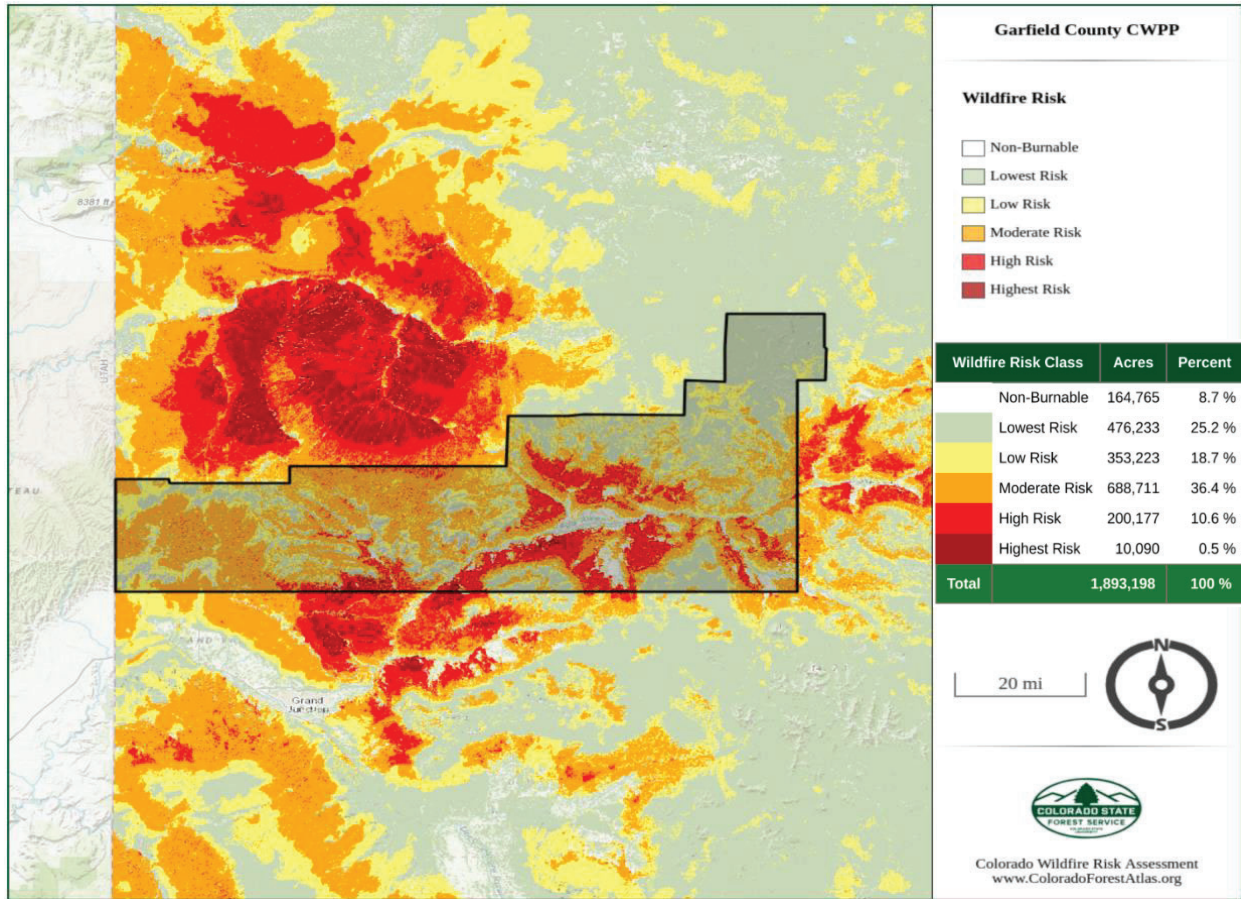
years to be resilient to wildfire occurrence, and in the case of many plant species, dependent on wildfire to maintain stand health and trigger reproduction. Even though fires naturally occur and are important for ecosystem function, they present considerable risks to human welfare and economic values.

Since the early 20th century rangeland and forest management practices across the western United States were designed around a simple protocol, “Prevent Wildfires.” While originally intended to protect human settlement and forest and rangeland resources, the practice of fire suppression led to a wide range of negative consequences. Without natural wildfire cycles, weedy species such as cheatgrass, shrub growth, or other forest stands have accumulated to hazardous levels.

Garfield County’s record-setting growth has precipitated a significant population shift into rangeland and forested regions that are at a high risk for catastrophic wildfire. With the County’s population rapidly increasing, there are more structures, residents, and supporting infrastructure in fire-prone areas than ever before, directly impacting human welfare and compromising the safety of firefighters and emergency responders that serve the County.

In 2017, CSFS sponsored a Risk Assessment Summary Report to assess the risk of wildfire in many of the forested counties including Garfield. The resulting report provided a wide range of information including a composite wildfire risk. Wildfire risk ratings are obtained by combining the probability of a fire occurring with the individual risk layers and values (WUI risk, drinking water risk, forest assets risk, and riparian areas risk) (Figure 1). Approximately, 48 percent of the County is classified with a moderate to highest wildfire risk. The wildfire risk areas were identified through a spatial analysis using Geographical Information System (GIS) technology based on terrain, climate, vegetation-fuels, and wildfire history. Areas with moderate to very high risk mainly occur in the Roaring Fork Valley and a few towns that occur along the Interstate 70 (I-70) corridor, which are major population areas in the County.

Figure 1: Garfield County Wildfire Risk



## Policy Framework

This CWPP is a planning document. There is no legal requirement to implement the recommendations herein. Actions on public lands will be subject to federal, state, and county policies and procedures such as adherence to the HFRA and the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). Action on private land may require compliance with county land use codes, building codes, and local covenants.

The following documents set policy and provide guidance to the development of the CWPP:

- HFRA (2003) – Federal legislation that promotes healthy forest and rangeland management, hazardous fuels reduction on federal land, community wildfire protection planning, and biomass energy production.
- National Fire Plan and 10-Year Comprehensive Strategy (2001) – Interagency plans that focus on firefighting coordination, firefighter safety, post-fire rehabilitation, hazardous fuels reduction, community assistance, and accountability.
- 10-Year Comprehensive Strategy: Implementation Plan (May 2002).
- National Cohesive Wildland Fire Management Strategy Phase II National Report (June 2012).
- Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) Disaster Mitigation Act (2000) – Provides criteria for state and local multiple-hazard and mitigation planning.
- State of Colorado Forest Improvement District House Bill 07-1168 (2007) – provides for the creation of forest improvement districts for wildland fire management including vegetation-fuel management.
- Garfield County Wildland Fire Operating Plan provides intergovernmental mutual aid agreements among fire authorities operating within the county.
- 2022 Garfield County Hazard Mitigation Plan (HMP)

## Existing CWPPs

As of March 2021, three CWPPs have been completed and approved within Garfield County. These CWPPs are on file with their respective FPD, Garfield County Office of Emergency Management, and Colorado State Forest Service. These CWPPs were used in the completion of this countywide CWPP to identify community risk and vegetation-fuel management projects within their respective planning areas. These CWPPs are:

- Garfield County Community Wildfire Protection Plan, May 2012.
- Glenwood Springs Fire Protection District; Wildland Urban Interface Community Protection Plan; April 2007.
- Community Wildfire Protection Plan: Selected Areas within the Burning Mountains Fire Protection District; Garfield County, Colorado; February 2008.
- Missouri Heights Wildfire Protection Plan, 2009.

Other surrounding areas have developed county-level CWPPs which should be reviewed and evaluated for partnership opportunities in fuel reduction priority areas on adjacent lands. These include Mesa County, Rio Blanco County, Routt County, Eagle County, and Pitkin County.

## BLM and USFS Policy

## Introduction

Many cities, towns, and communities within Garfield County are surrounded by BLM and USFS lands that are undeveloped and a source of vegetative-fuels and wildfire ignition potential. Residents of the County have demonstrated awareness of these risks, as well as the need to develop CWPPs and take action across multiple scales; from the individual home and subdivision to adjoining public lands under county, state, and federal management.

The recommendations identified in the CWPP will assist the BLM and USFS in identifying and prioritizing forest and rangeland treatments on federal lands in relation to adjacent populated areas. The appropriate environmental analysis and documentation through the NEPA process for vegetation-fuel treatments on BLM and USFS lands needs to be completed prior to any ground disturbing or vegetation management activities occurring.

A completed CWPP does not authorize private landowners to conduct vegetation treatments on federal lands. Private landowners that own land adjacent to federal lands may not conduct defensible space treatments on BLM or USFS lands without written permission and the NEPA process being completed. The NEPA process can take up to a year to complete once a project location has been identified. The best approach for private landowners with property adjacent to federal lands is to contact the BLM or USFS and initiate appropriate planning.

## Project Goals and Objectives

Several goals and objectives can be achieved through the CWPP collaborative planning process and its implementation to reduce the risks and hazards of wildfire in the county (Table 1).

*Table 1: Garfield County CWPP Goals and Objectives*

| Goal                                     | Objectives   |
|--|--|
| Facilitate and develop a countywide CWPP | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Promote a collaborative planning process.</li><li>• Ensure representation and coordination among agencies and interest groups.</li><li>• Develop a long-term framework for sustaining CWPP efforts.</li></ul>  |
| Conduct a wildfire risk assessment       | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Conduct a county-wide wildfire risk assessment.</li><li>• Identify WUI areas and define risks and contributing factors.</li><li>• Determine the level of risk to communities.</li></ul>  |
| Develop a mitigation plan                | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Identify and prioritize vegetation-fuel treatment projects.</li><li>• Identify and prioritize fire authority needs to improve response capacity.</li><li>• Develop an action plan and implementation team to carry</li><li>• Build relationships among federal, state, and county agencies, Fire Protection Districts (FPDs), and communities.</li></ul> |
| Facilitate emergency planning            | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Develop strategies to strengthen wildfire emergency management, response, and evacuation capabilities.</li></ul>   |

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| Facilitate public outreach | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Develop strategies to increase citizen awareness and action for Firewise practices.</li><li>• Promote public outreach and cooperation for all fuel reduction projects to solicit community involvement and private landowner cooperation.</li></ul> |
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