

Archuleta County

Community Wildfire Protection Plan (CWPP)

Introduction

Archuleta County, Colorado is located in southwest Colorado with the New Mexico state line forming the southern boundary. Five Colorado Counties (La Plata, Hinsdale, Mineral, Rio Grande, and Conejos) adjoin on the west, north and east boundaries. Pagosa Springs is located near the center of the county and serves as the county seat and only incorporated town. The county encompasses 1,364 square miles (861,129 acres) from semi-arid country along the south and southwest to the alpine peaks of the Continental Divide along the east. Elevations vary from 5900' to 13,300'. The bulk of the land in Archuleta County lies between 6000' to 9000'.

Archuleta County's population (2005 estimated) is 11,716. The town of Pagosa Springs is home to 1,640 residents. Archuleta is the fastest growing county in southwest Colorado and has more than doubled in population from the 1990 censuses of 5,100. In addition, a significant number of summer residents have vacation homes and properties. Most of these seasonal residents come from other states. County records show that 59% of the private parcels in Archuleta County are owned by non-permanent residents. As of 2005, 5,074 single family residential parcels and 7,131 vacant parcels are found in county records. Recent development of properties and rural subdivisions throughout Archuleta County has expanded dramatically. This rapid development has occurred in areas dominated by native vegetation communities creating a wildland-urban interface (WUI).

Over 50% of Archuleta County is in public ownership and Indian Reservation land. The San Juan National Forest covers a large portion of the county with scattered parcels of BLM and State land intermixed. The Southern Ute Tribe is the largest landowner in the southwest portion of the county. These agency- and tribal-administered lands surround and border private lands throughout Archuleta County. Most of the rural subdivision development within Archuleta County has occurred adjacent to the agency land.

Land Ownership in Acres	Number of Acres
Private	298,557
San Juan National Forest	418,565
Bureau of Land Management	5,837
Southern Ute Indian Tribe	130,456
State of Colorado	7,714
Total	

While the risk of wildfire on public lands is generally understood by the public, much of the adjacent private lands and associated property values are equally at risk. These areas adjoining public lands are becoming increasingly valued for their scenic beauty, solitude, and access to recreation opportunities. As development in these areas continues to increase, the risk to lives, property, and resources correspondingly increases.

The risk of wildfire occurrence in Archuleta County is very high. Historic records of fire origins indicate starts occur every year. June through August have the highest frequency of starts, most caused by lightning. Multiple starts in 24 – 48 hour periods are common during these months. During years of low winter/spring moisture, the threat of human-caused fire starts becomes critical by June. All these factors combined cannot be ignored. Fire will occur every year and we must be as prepared as possible. The Archuleta County Community Wildfire Protection Plan was developed because of this increasing threat.

CWPP - Authorization and Process

In response to the tragic wildfires in 2000 and 2002, the U.S. Congress authorized the National Fire Plan and the Healthy Forests Restoration Act (HFRA) in 2001 and 2003 respectively. Under this legislation, local communities can develop and implement forest management plans and hazardous fuel reduction projects. Key to the planning of preventive actions is detailed mapping and cooperative efforts by all stakeholders and land owners. U.S. Forest Service (USFS) and Bureau of Land Management (BLM) are directed by HFRA to give consideration to the priorities of local communities as they develop and implement these plans. HFRA defines Wildland Urban Interface (WUI) within the legislation:

...areas extending 1½ miles from the boundary of a community-at-risk defined by the USFS and BLM inventory and which lack emergency access routes; are in poor proximity to water sources; have areas with steep slopes; have high risk vegetation types; and/or that are in close proximity to fuels on public lands.

In Archuleta County, this process started in 2001 with numerous cooperators developing the **Community Fire Plan**. This plan, developed as a component of the National Fire Plan, identified wildfire risk areas and developed goals and action recommendations throughout Archuleta County. Thirty-three rural subdivisions were identified with areas “at-risk”. This community-wide effort, and the wildfires of 2002, raised awareness considerably. Five counties in Southwest Colorado, including Archuleta, unveiled Community Fire Plans (CFP), which collectively are considered **national models** for collaboration, and for inter-governmental planning and action around wildfire education and emergency response. The five CFPs and our regional progress toward goal attainment can be found at the following website: www.southwestcoloradofires.org.

Thus, this CWPP is an update to the 2001 Community Fire Plan for Archuleta County and is being revised on the principles, requirements and guidelines established through HFRA.

Steps taken to complete the Community Fire Plan (CFP) and this CWPP include:

- Holding planning meetings with fire and land management agencies.
- Discussing and sharing planning information with the county residents.
- Fuels mapping of selected rural subdivisions within the WUI areas.
- Applying field information and aerial photo imagery to develop detailed mapping utilizing Geographic Information System (GIS) technology.

Archuleta County CWPP **Firefighting and Prevention Capacity**

The following departments and agencies are involved in firefighting and fire prevention activities in Archuleta County:

- Pagosa Springs Fire Protection District
- Los Pinos Fire Protection District
- Archuleta County Wildfire Personnel and Engines (under Sheriff's Department)
- San Juan Public Lands (USFS and BLM)
- Bureau of Indian Affairs

These organizations work with each other and community partners to share resources and information. Formal Mutual Aid Agreements are in place that allow interagency response to fire emergencies. Partnerships have developed related to fire prevention and demonstration projects, firefighting, public education and accessing resources such as equipment, grants and training.

On Private and State Lands fire protection is provided by the fire districts and Archuleta County Sheriff's Department. Pagosa Springs Fire Protection District includes the town of Pagosa Springs, the Pagosa Lakes Subdivisions, Fairfield Development, Aspen Springs Subdivision, and south along Highway 84 to Loma Linda Subdivision. Mutual Aid Agreements are in place to respond outside the district for structural and wildland fires. Beyond the district, Archuleta County Fire is responsible, supervised by the Sheriff's Department Emergency Coordinator. The seasonal fire crew and engines are funded through Archuleta County. Los Pinos Fire Protection District covers private lands in the southwest portion of Archuleta County and southeast La Plata County. The small community of Arboles and Navajo Lake State Park are within the district. Pinyon Park subdivision is also located within the district.

Private Ranches Archuleta County is home to some large private ranches. Forest thinning projects and prescribed burns in forest fuel types are management practices utilized over the last few years. These projects have been carried out by ranch managers and contractors including professional foresters and biologists. Land management plans and applied field techniques have been used for a variety of reasons, including reduction of wildfire effects on the land and promotion of forest health. In the southeast corner of Archuleta County lies the 52,000-acre Banded Peaks Ranch. This ranch has been utilizing forest thinning and prescribed burning projects particularly along its densely forested boundary with the San Juan National Forest. Banded Peaks uses its own red-carded firefighters and equipment, including wildland initial-attack engines and dozers if needed. Although not part of the WUI, future planning of forest project work and wildfire management in Archuleta County will include these private ranches as partners.

The Colorado State Forest Service (CSFS) fire programs provide for effective readiness, and response and suppression of wildfires. This organization's greatest

emphasis is on prevention and mitigation to lessen the chances of catastrophic wildfires on state and private lands in Colorado. The CSFS's activities include:

- 1) Promoting fire mitigation projects.
- 2) Assisting county governments in assessing wildfire hazards.
- 3) Sharing information with diverse audiences on the importance of mitigating hazards on their forested lands to help protect lives and property.

On Southern Ute Tribal Lands, the **Bureau of Indian Affairs** provides wildland fire protection. Much of the area managed is dotted and interspersed with private lands and some of it borders state land (Navajo Lake State Park). The largest wildfires in recent history within Archuleta County have been lightning-caused fires that started on Southern Ute Lands (Dipping Vat Fire, 1996, 17,000 acres; Bolt Fire, 2003, 2200 acres)

On USFS and BLM Lands, the San Juan Public Lands (combined USFS and BLM) manage wildfire from the Public Lands Center in Durango and through the Ranger District Offices. The Pagosa Ranger District manages the eastern and northern reaches of these lands within Archuleta County from Pagosa Springs. The Columbine Ranger District manages the western portion of these public lands from Bayfield. The two Ranger Districts, which adjoin in the Piedra River drainage, both maintain wildland engines and crews. Additional red-carded personnel come from staff in the districts. During periods of very high to extreme fire danger (usually June into July), national resources including additional engines, crews, and contract helicopters are pre-staged at these districts. The 20-person San Juan Interagency Hotshot Crew is stationed north of Durango and is frequently utilized on wildfires in Archuleta County. This crew is a national resource crew and is subject to being called on assignments away from this area at any time. The Durango Interagency Fire Dispatch Center is located at the Public Lands Center and is responsible for dispatching these resources. In addition, an air tanker base is located at the Durango-La Plata County Airport and is also dispatched through the same operation.

Partners in this CWPP

Pagosa Springs Fire Protection District
Los Pinos Fire Protection District
Colorado State Forest Service (CSFS)
San Juan Public Lands (USFS and BLM)
Archuleta County Sheriff's Department (ACSD)
Archuleta County Supervisors and Agencies
Southern Ute Indian Tribe (SUIT)
Bureau of Indian Affairs, Southern Ute Agency
Firewise Council of Southwest Colorado
Firewise Council Neighborhood Ambassadors
Fort Lewis College, Office of Community Services
San Juan Mountains Association (SJMA)
Wildfire Prevention and Education Month Planning Committee
Private Contractors – specializing in fuels thinning and forest health
Town of Pagosa Springs agencies
Property Owners Associations (POAs)

Archuleta County CWPP
Goals, Strategies, and Partner Responsibilities

Goal: Reduce Risk in the Wildland-urban Interface (WUI)

Strategy #1) Utilize the new Archuleta County Community Base Map to display the identified threat areas to as broad a segment of residents and land owners as possible, including community groups and POAs. Share mapping information and provide working copies to fire departments, county departments, state and federal agencies involved to reduce wild fire risk especially in the WUI.

Partner responsibilities:

(Presenting information to county residents)

Pagosa Springs Fire Protection District Staff

San Juan Public Lands Staff

Colorado State Forest Service (CSFS) Staff

Los Pinos Fire Protection District Staff

ACSD Staff

Archuleta County Supervisors

Fort Lewis College – Office of Community Services Staff

Firewise Council and Neighborhood Ambassadors

Wildfire Prevention and Education Month staff

San Juan Mountains Association Staff

(Providing working copies)

ACSD Staff

Archuleta County GIS Mapping Office

Fort Lewis College – Office of Community Services

Strategy #2) Continue adding layers to the Archuleta County Community Base Map database to assist in emergency operations management and overall planning involving future development and infrastructure. Also add layering to show accomplished treatments and methods used.

Partner responsibilities:

ACSD

Archuleta County GIS Mapping Office

San Juan Public Lands

(and input from private contractors on treatments)

Strategy #3) Build the capacity of the Firewise Council of Southwest Colorado's Neighborhood Ambassador Program through recruitment, training and utilization.

Partners responsible:

Firewise Council

SJMA and community partners

Strategy #4) Initiate fire mitigation projects utilizing planning based on the Archuleta County Community Base Map contained in this CWPP after appropriate review processes are completed. Utilize an assessment strategy ranking projects and listing timetables and funding requirements. A working partnership with the San Juan Public Lands is required to plan and carry out these projects as required by HFRA.

Partners responsible:
San Juan Public Lands
All partners

Strategy #5) Support and advertise the existence of private contractors who can carry out firewise prevention projects on homeowners' properties.

Partners responsible:
CSFS
Wildfire Prevention and Education Month Committee
Agencies involved through local media outlets

Strategy #6) Encourage the development of private, small diameter wood products processing businesses including biomass technologies. Also, encourage the extraction of saleable material from mitigation projects such as pulp, fence posts, fuel wood, mulch products, compost material, and wood for furniture and other ornamental purposes.

Partners responsible:
All partners
(CSFS and Fort Lewis College Office of Community Services are good first contacts)

Strategy #7) Assist POAs in developing wildfire protection plans in at-risk subdivisions through partnering with San Juan Public Lands. This is an ongoing activity countywide.

Partners responsible: All partners

Goal: Increase the number of fuel reduction projects on San Juan Public Lands in the WUI and other priority areas

Strategy #1) Initiate wildfire mitigation projects on San Juan Public Lands identified on the CWPP Community Base Map, prioritizing projects after appropriate review processes are completed. These projects will be carried out by the San Juan Public Lands in partnership with local communities, fire protection districts, CSFS, ACSD, and if possible, the Bureau of Indian Affairs

Partners responsible: San Juan Public Lands

Strategy #2) Continue to build, create and strengthen partnerships among federal, state and local governments and agencies, fire protection districts, private sector entities, non-profits, POAs and land owners.

Partners responsible: All partners

Strategy #3) encourage continued development of private small diameter wood products processing businesses including biomass technologies.

Partners responsible: All partners

Goal: Reduce Ignitability of Structures

Strategy #1) Initiate wildfire mitigation projects identified from the CWPP Community Base Map following appropriate review processes, and assist other fire managers with fire-risk reduction activities in their jurisdictions. These projects will be carried out by the San Juan Public Lands in partnership with local communities, fire protection districts, ACSO wildfire/fuels crews, private contractors, CSFS, and if possible, the Bureau of Indian Affairs. **This strategy is a top priority for wildfire risks to drop in the WUI.**

Partners responsible: All partners

Strategy #2) Support and advertise the existence of private contractors who can carry out firewise prevention projects on homeowners' properties.

Partners responsible:

CSFS

Wildfire Prevention and Education Month Committee

Strategy #3) Continue to work collaboratively across jurisdictions to support the Archuleta County land use code and recommend changes if necessary. Issues such as access for emergency fire equipment, water sources, building materials, safe evacuation, and distances from structures to burnable vegetation need to be assessed constantly in development planning.

Partners responsible:

Archuleta County supervisors and agencies

Fire protection districts

Goal: Increase Public Involvement in Wildfire Awareness

Strategy #1) Increase collaboration with partners to provide timely information on wildfire awareness. Fire prevention messages should be directed not only to permanent residents but also seasonal residents and tourists. This job cannot be

done by the public agencies alone because of the general misconception that wildfire awareness doesn't apply to private lands. Specifically, increase working relationships with the Firewise Council of Southwest Colorado, Fire Chiefs Associations, San Juan Public Lands' Public Information Specialists, CSFS, and non-profits such as SJMA. Continue to recruit for Firewise Ambassadors from diverse areas and neighborhoods throughout the county. Continue involvement with the Wildfire Prevention and Education Month (April) Committee. Use diverse spokespersons with the media outlets to keep messages from becoming "canned".

Partners responsible: All partners

Strategy #2) Continue ongoing demonstration projects and add new ones in different areas to give property owners a visual picture of treatments. The Pagosa Ranger District, Bureau of Indian Affairs, and private contractors have already had positive effects with previous demonstration project areas. This effort is very productive and should increase. The other side of this "visual picture" is looking at areas near structures that are at very high risk. The Pagosa Springs Fire Protection District has had a positive impact with homeowners performing these "tours with fire personnel." Increasing these activities will be a major catalyst to success.

Partners responsible: All partners

Regional Efforts in Wildfire Prevention/Education

Efforts across the five county region of southwest Colorado in presenting wildfire prevention information and developing media for homeowners on defensible space have been a cooperative venture led by the Firewise Council of Southwest Colorado. Since its inception in 2003, the Council has produced videos and DVDs, newspaper articles and brochures, and has presented public programs at meetings and on local and regional radio stations. Archuleta County property owners have greatly benefited in the years the Council has been active.

Neighborhood Ambassador Program

In December 2004, the Firewise Council of Southwest Colorado initiated a pilot program to establish wildfire prevention "ambassadors" from within individual neighborhoods and subdivisions. Built on research principles from a Fort Lewis College project, results showed that one of the most trusted sources of information about wildfire prevention is neighbors and friends — everyday people who are trusted and known. The Neighborhood Ambassador Program recruits, trains, and utilizes volunteers who serve as Ambassadors. Duties include:

- Plan educational campaigns or events particularly during the annual Wildfire Prevention and Education Month (April)

- Maintain contact with your local fire district as an on-the-ground information source on specific local conditions
- Ensure that residents in your subdivision, through as many means as possible, have access to the wildfire mitigation companies' contractor list kept by CSFS
- Make a list of all possible locations for distribution of wildfire information in the event of a wildfire
- Link to the Firewise Council of Southwest Colorado in ways that will assist your neighborhood group POA
- Serve as an example of a home site where defensible space has been created
- Assemble contact information for homeowners with phone numbers, email addresses, etc.
- Ensure that all street signs and addresses are readable
- Establish an email/phone tree through which residents in your subdivision can receive information
- Assemble a list of absentee land/home owners and their contact information
- Provide information on homes/property that have animals that may need evacuation or rescuing
- Gather information on residents with special needs, such as those who are physically impaired and may need special assistance
- Maintain regular contact with your POA or other neighborhood organizations
- Provide a map of your subdivision showing locations of structures, propane tanks, power lines, water sources, roads, gas lines, bridges (and weight limits), hazardous materials, archaeological or cultural resources, and areas of heavy fuel loads. As part of the continued updating and additional information in this CWPP (individual subdivision mapping is proposed using GIS), this will be a great opportunity for Neighborhood Ambassadors to get involved in the near future!

Wildfire Prevention and Education Month (April)

As a result of the partnerships built regionally over the years, in 2003 a strong region-wide education program was launched called *What Are You Waiting For? April Wildfire Prevention and Education Month*. Over 20 partners, including representatives from Archuleta County, have joined together to produce a month of public events, forums, newspaper inserts (including the weekly Pagosa Sun and the daily Durango Herald), tours to demonstration projects, video releases, and distribution of free educational materials, including DVDs and VHS.

* Partners in the Archuleta County CWPP should continue to participate actively in the Firewise Council of Southwest Colorado, its Neighborhood Ambassador Program, and the April Wildfire Prevention and Education Month group.

Summary

This CWPP complements and builds upon the nationally recognized Community Fire Plan. It incorporates key principles and guidelines arising from the HFRA. The plan lays out an ambitious program for:

- Reducing structural ignitability
- Increasing community safety
- Continuing successful education and community mobilization endeavors
- Reducing risk in the WUI
- Accomplishing important federal lands fuels treatments
- Continually enhancing partnerships between federal and state agencies and among community organizations and local governments

Success of this CWPP will be realized only through sustained, careful, and effective partnership building among all affected stakeholders.

San Juan Public Lands 10-Year Management Strategy

In March 2004, San Juan Public Lands released “A 10-Year Strategy to Reduce Fuels and Restore Watersheds.” Each Ranger District has produced project planning maps associated with this management plan. Projects proposed on the Pagosa Ranger District for the first 5 years are displayed on the **Five Year Action Plan (2006-2011) for Vegetation Management** attached to this CWPP. The La Plata County CWPP has the Columbine Ranger District’s **Hazardous Fuel Reduction** map attached to it. On that map, nearly all the projects shown in the southeast portion are within Archuleta County. The 10-year management plan provides important background information such as fire history and emerging forest health issues, and also establishes a framework for setting priorities for various projects on these federal lands.

Maps

Archuleta County Community Base Map; Fire Risk – Communities of Concern

(Combined risk map) * This map was created by combining fuel, aspect, slope, and land status polygons.

Archuleta County Land Status Map

Displays all private property with color-keyed acreage size groups and subdivisions outlined with a black line.

Archuleta County Fuel Polygons Map

From fuel inventories in the field and aerial images, vegetation is classified according to its fuel loading.

Archuleta County Combined Aspect & Slope Polygons Map

Color-keyed to show areas of southern aspect with the steepest slopes highest on the scale.

Archuleta County Combined Fuel Polygons & Aspect/Slope Polygons Map

Combining the two previous map layers over the land status shows highest fuel hazard areas.

San Juan Public Lands, Pagosa Ranger District/Field Office: Five Year Action Plan (2006-2011) for Vegetation Management Map