

# National Fire Plan - San Juan County - Community Fire Plan

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## Introduction

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San Juan County is home to 539 residents and is situated in the Southwest corner of Colorado 47 miles north of Durango, Colorado. The land is punctuated by high mountain passes and peaks with the highest mean elevation of any county in the United States.

Type of Ownership	Number of Acres
Private	28,000
San Juan National Forest	172,000
Bureau of Land Management	49,000
State of Colorado	1,880
<b>Total</b>	<b>250,880</b>

The following agencies are involved in fire prevention and firefighting in the county including:

Bureau of Land Management (BLM)  
Colorado State Forest Service (CSFS)  
Durango Fire and Rescue Authority (formerly Hermosa Cliffs Fire Department)  
Silverton/San Juan County Fire Department  
United State Forest Service (USFS)

### Goals of the National Fire Plan

- ensure firefighting resources;
- rebuild communities damaged in past year's fires, such as the ones in 2000, and rehabilitate fire-damaged ecosystems;
- thin vegetation in areas where private development adjoins public lands; and
- work with local residents to reduce fire risk and improve fire protection.

## Firefighting and Prevention Issues and Capacity

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San Juan County is characterized by topographic isolation and surrounded by vast expanses of public lands. In 1999, there were 27 San Juan County residents living outside the incorporated Town of Silverton. There are about 40-50 structures in the county -- mostly rustic-like homes and cabins surrounded by alpine forests. The local Sheriff and fire department personnel do not characterize the county's risk for catastrophic wildland fires as being extremely high. However, in dry summer seasons preceded by dry winters, the risk is certainly felt in the community. For example, in the late 1800's, there was

a wildfire taking out many acres along Lime Creek. There was also a large fire on Ophir Pass and one started by the train in the Animas River Valley in recent years. Local residents report that the risk of wildland fire in and around Silverton is low.

The northern part of the county is served by a joint fire department funded by San Juan County and the Town of Silverton. This Department is all-volunteer. Like many similar departments, it is always stretched in terms of money and human resources. The southern section of the county around the Old Lime Creek Road and Cascade Creek and Cascade Village are serviced by the Durango Fire and Rescue Authority (formerly the Hermosa Cliffs Fire Department.) If updated or new policies were to be considered and implemented by the Board of County Commissioners, such as adopting the 1997 Uniform Fire Code, there is concern about the ability of the community to implement and enforce such measures.

If a fire were to break out on public lands, these local fire departments could be first responders until federal fire resources arrive. Many locations on the public lands are too remote for the local fire departments to respond except on foot.

The Colorado State Forest Service provides readiness, prevention programs, and projects aimed at response and suppression of wildfires on private lands. This organization's greatest emphasis is on prevention and mitigation programs that lessen the chances of catastrophic wildfires on state and private lands. The CSFS's activities include:

- a) promoting fire mitigation projects;
- b) assisting county governments in assessing wildfire hazards; and
- c) sharing information with diverse audiences on the importance of mitigating hazards on their forested lands to help protect lives and property.

The CSFS leads efforts such as Fire Academies and Fire Conferences – avenues for sharing new information and training fire professionals in the most up-to-date techniques. The CSFS also distributes fire equipment and grants, trains personnel, and carries out “on the ground” projects.

Overall, population growth is not a significant problem or issue for the county. In fact, many residents report they would like to see more growth in the county. There are several new subdivisions, such as Mill Creek Village, going in near Cascade Village. More are being talked about or are in the process of developing. Both fire departments involved expressed concern about their ability to fight fires in these developments if adequate road and accessibility issues are not addressed.

Wildland fires in San Juan County are covered by the Columbine Ranger District which has one engine with a crew of five, a new nine-person fuels-suppression crew. A new 20 member San Juan Interagency Hot Shot Crew will be stationed in Durango but will mostly work elsewhere across the nation. The Durango Interagency Fire Dispatch Center helps to make fire response quick and effective. The USFS, BLM, Bureau of Indian Affairs, Mesa Verde National Park and CSFS each contribute staff and resources to operate the full-time facility – located in the Public Lands Center, 15 Burnett Court in Durango. And finally, a new air tanker base to be located at the Durango-La Plata County airport is scheduled for completion in 2002. It will improve the firefighting capability in the region but again, its personnel are mostly to be assigned to priority fires across the country.

### **San Juan County – Community Fire Plan Goals**

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- a) Provide more public education about how to fire wise homes and properties.
- b) Determine if there are ways to get the local Silverton/San Juan Fire Department additional equipment.
- c) Protect the Town of Silverton's water supply on Bear Creek from a catastrophic wildfire.
- d) Protect important viewsheds along Highway #550 and around Silverton since tourism comprises the county's economic base.

### **Recommendations for Action**

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#### **Recommendation #1**

Work with the Colorado State Forest Service and federal agencies to conduct a public education program for county residents on ways to fire safe their homes.

#### **Recommendation #2**

Place better signage in the backcountry, and, improve communication mechanisms between San Juan County personnel and federal agencies when federal fire bans are put in effect that impact the county.

#### **Recommendation #3**

Determine potential funding for the local Silverton/San Juan County Fire Department to get better equipment and training that could improve their ability to be first-responders to wildland fires. The equipment requests include: bladder bags, shovels, pulaskis, and light-weight fire suits and clothing – for 10 firefighters.

#### **Recommendation #4**

The United States Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management, in partnership with local communities, the fire departments, and the Colorado State Forest Service, will consider fire prevention and mitigation projects on lands identified in the Community Fire Plan including:

- subdivisions in the lower part of the county;
- projects along Cascade and Lime Creeks; and
- Bear Creek drainage that protects Silverton's water supply.

Further, the following areas were identified as priorities in terms of viewsheds, community values and tourism:

- the San Juan Skyway; and
- public lands that can be seen immediately from Silverton.

#### **Recommendation #5**

Support and advertise the existence of private contractors and the Southwest Youth Corps, each who can carry out specific fire wise projects on homeowners' properties. □