

# Confronting the Wildfire Crisis

## COLORADO'S FRONT RANGE LANDSCAPE



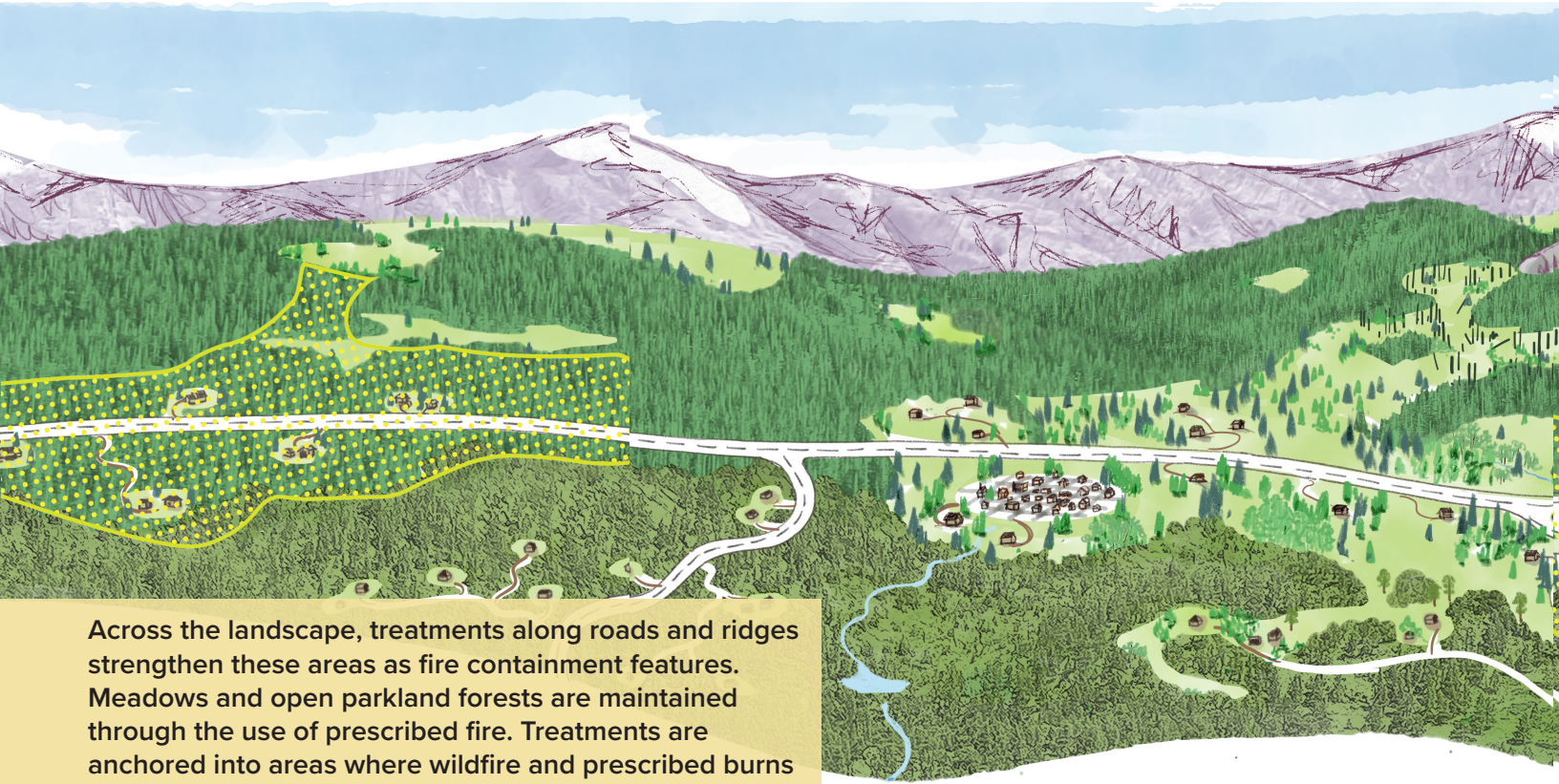
Western forests and communities are at risk from increasingly severe and frequent wildfires. Fueled by drought, wind, and terrain, these fires burn through overgrown forests and threaten towns and cities as well as natural ecosystems. To confront this crisis, the USDA Forest Service is working in high-risk landscapes across the western United States, including in Colorado's Front Range.



Forest Service  
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

*USDA is an equal opportunity provider, employer, and lender.*

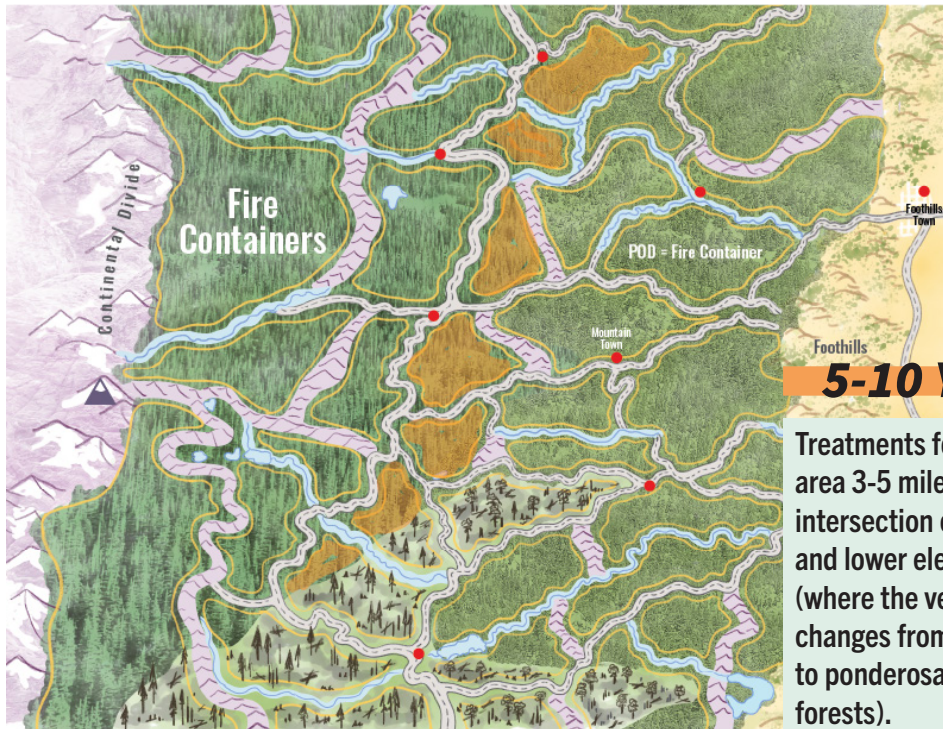




Across the landscape, treatments along roads and ridges strengthen these areas as fire containment features. Meadows and open parkland forests are maintained through the use of prescribed fire. Treatments are anchored into areas where wildfire and prescribed burns have occurred. Meanwhile, communities work to create defensible space and harden homes.

*Strategies and Tactics*

## The Most Effective Wildfire Treatments



**5-10 Years**

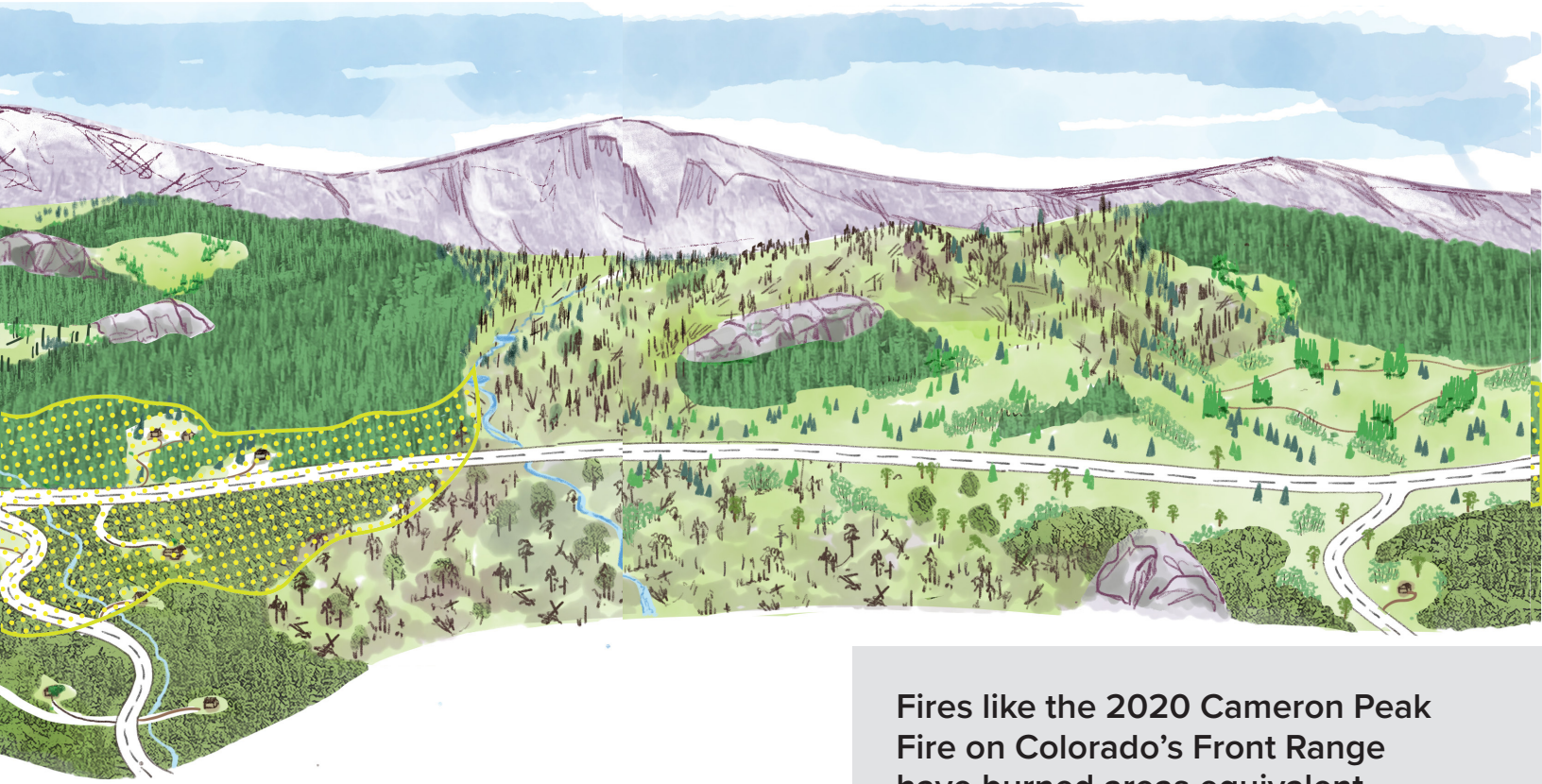
Treatments focus on an area 3-5 miles wide at the intersection of the upper and lower elevation forests (where the vegetation type changes from lodgepole to ponderosa dominated forests).



**DECIDING WHERE TO FOCUS:** Treating the right amount of acres in the most strategic places is the key to making a difference in how wildfire moves across the land. Science shows that by thinning and prescribed burns in specific forest zones we can contain the movement of wind-driven fire. We are working with community partners

to identify and map out these areas across the Forest, tying our planning efforts together with Community Wildfire Protection Plans to ensure work is connected across boundary lines. Our goal is to create “containers” to hold fire even on the worst days.



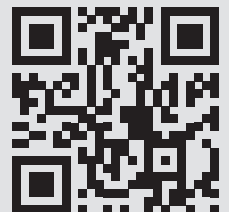


## **PODS - Potential Operational Delineations**

Our goal is not to stop all fires. Fire is part of this landscape and is important to the forest ecosystems and the plants and animals that live here. Instead, we want to return these forests to a healthy state where fires play their natural role. This means limiting the destructive behavior of mega fires and creating sustainable landscapes that can receive fire without lasting negative impacts.

Fires like the 2020 Cameron Peak Fire on Colorado's Front Range have burned areas equivalent to the size of New York City. While it's not realistic to treat a New York City-sized area along the populated Front Range, we can strategically connect areas of thinning, prescribed fire and previous wildfires with features such as ridges, roads and rivers to create a barrier, similar to the sea walls that protect New York City from high tides and storm surges. While treatments like these may not completely stop fire on the worst weather day, they can help us slow it. Working with our partners in the science, watershed and fire communities, we have identified the best areas to implement these kinds of treatments across the Front Range.

Watch a five minute case study from the Arapaho and Roosevelt National Forests to learn about PODs use in Colorado.



# Community Connected Partners

“Communities must see themselves reflected in the work we all do. When we thin trees along a ridge or road to help firefighters catch wildfires or use prescribed fire across public lands to help that forest be more resilient, we need to work together to ensure the communities’ values and concerns are reflected in the choices we make.”

Monte Williams, Forest Supervisor, Arapaho and Roosevelt National Forests.

## STAGES OF READINESS



### Years 0-2

Establish community of partners around shared vision • Identify key stakeholders • Conduct outreach and engage • Articulate the problem • Compose vision and mission • Forge intent to work together through iterative processes • Build basic collaborative capacity • Document agreements and commitments.



### Years 1-3

Translate vision into strategy • Formulate a collaborative spatial strategy • Co-develop and deploy public outreach and engagement strategy • Agree on best practices and operating procedures, monitoring plan and adaptive management strategy • Conduct assessments and prioritization processes, maps, tools, and written plans.



### Years 3-5

Translate strategy into actions • Coordinate implementation • Pool and share resources • Direct funding to support implementation and monitoring • Test/refine monitoring and adaptive management plan on pilot projects • Complete projects clearly connected to values and strategies • Develop mechanism for accepting funds.

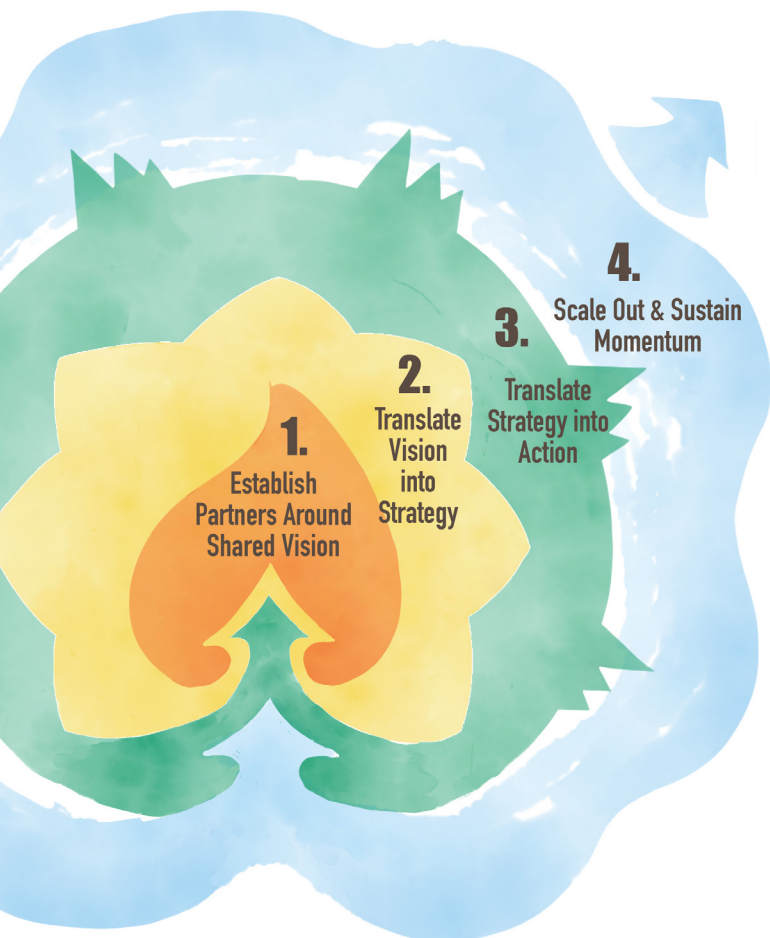


### Years 5-10

Develop 5+ year program of work • Assess, learn, adapt • Institutionalize collaboration to endure long-term change • Direct resources to foster broader systemic readiness • Create portfolio of collaborative, shovel-ready projects • Established budgeting process across partnership long-term • Document plans turnover • Implement co-learning processes.

*\*Years shown are approximate and may vary from county to county.*



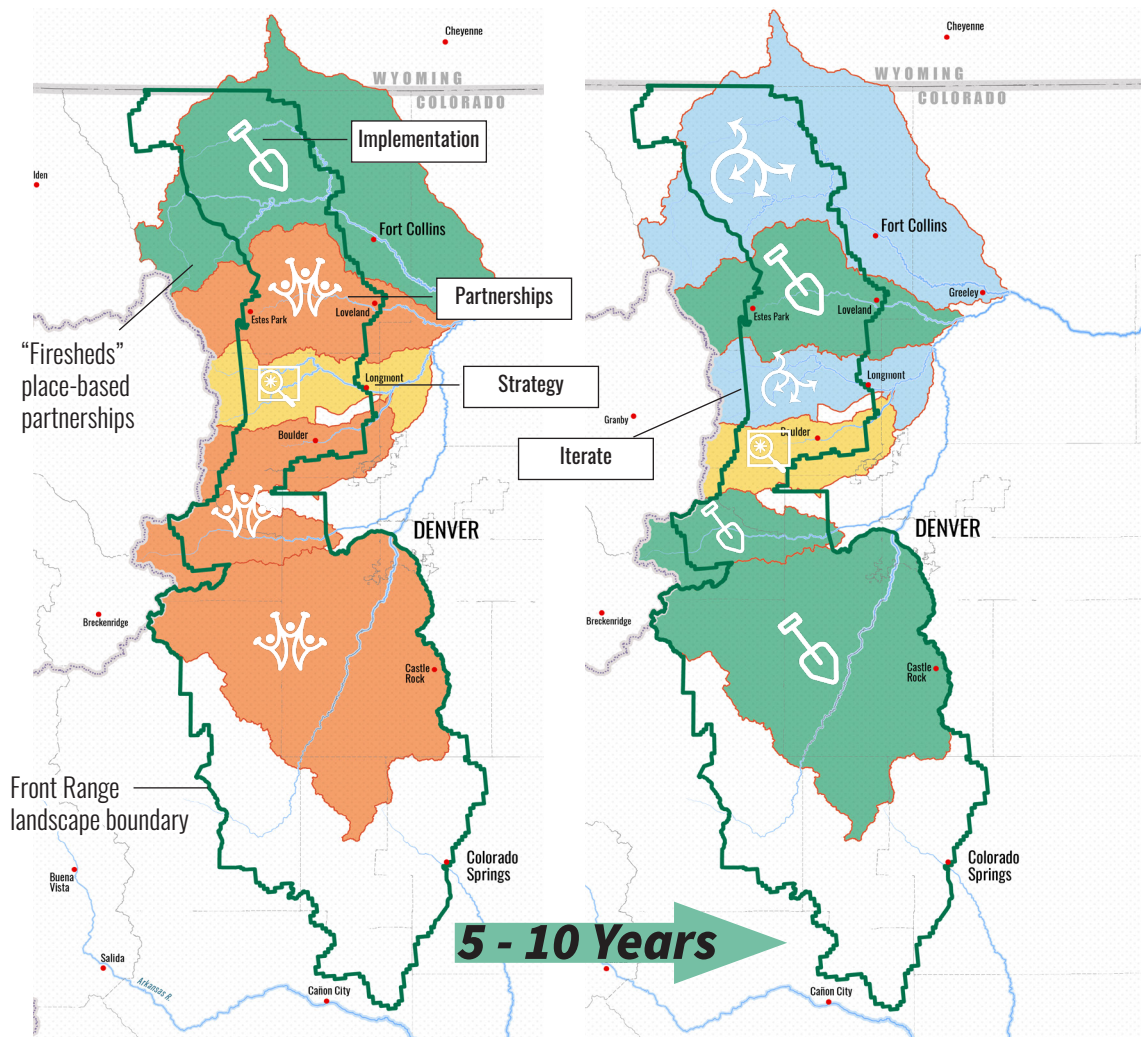


Wildfire doesn't stop at property boundaries. A wildfire in the high country can impact people living in cities miles away. **Land management agencies and communities must work together at a large scale to strategically manage forests for fire mitigation.**

Solutions need to be multi-jurisdictional and include partners in science and research, as well as community-connected partners. From serving as a critical connection to local communities through project planning to supporting implementation and funding across boundaries, partnerships are valuable for many reasons. Securing enough stability and capacity to serve in this role long-term requires time and resources. Investing in partnerships early leads to long-term success.

The Forest Service has invested more than \$1.5 million in capacity building for community connected partners along the Front Range Wildfire Crisis Landscape since 2022.

**Investing in community outreach and collaborative capacity** early on helps build social consent, saving time and money while allowing agencies to increase the pace and scale in the long term. **Moving these landscapes** from the early phases of readiness **to high-functioning implementation** over the next five years will provide a new measure of success.





# What is a fireshed?

We define a fireshed as a **landscape-scale area** where wildland fire has potential to overlap with important resources, and where a **coordinated mitigation, response and recovery strategy** could influence wildfire outcomes.

Along Colorado's Front Range, fireshed partnerships have been forming centered around water such as the Cache la Poudre, Big Thompson, St. Vrain, Boulder Creek, Clear Creek and South Platte rivers. **Water is typically the primary landscape feature that connects communities in the West.** By collaborating across federal, state, county, and private lands, partners can increase the effectiveness of wildfire mitigation treatments and improve watershed protection outcomes.

Over the past year, fireshed networks have been **solidifying partnerships** and working with the science and research community as well as the Forest Service to identify areas where work will have the most impact.



The Northern Colorado Fireshed Collaborative spans the Front Range from the Wyoming border through Clear Creek County. The Collaborative includes representatives from federal, state and local natural resource agencies, non-profits, community groups, and researchers, working strategically across land ownerships to increase the scale and pace of forest restoration by bringing fire



# Community Connections

## The Magic Feather Prescribed Burn

is located near the community of Red Feather Lakes, Colo., which was impacted by the wildfires of 2020. The community contains 967 home sites on approximately 3,000 acres. Firefighters have used spring, fall and winter burning windows to accomplish 680 acres of treatment to protect communities, watersheds and recreational opportunities in a strategic location 5 miles west of Glacier View Meadows. Northern Colorado Fireshed Partners, including the Coalition for the Poudre River Watershed, have been instrumental in gaining public support and elevating the importance of this type of forest treatment. Burning is expected to continue in 2023 as conditions allow.



Credit: USDA Forest Service

## Funded by the St. Vrain and Left Hand Water Conservancy District, residents

of Jamestown, Colo. are increasing ecosystem resilience and mitigating wildfire risk through forest restoration. Begun in the spring of 2022, this project benefits not only residents of Jamestown but also those of surrounding communities, including everyone downstream of the project area. The project site is located on private and town property in Jamestown and is critical area for reducing wildfire threats to public safety and water resources.



WATCH: The St. Vrain Forest Health Partnership created to highlight the work they did to reduce wildfire risk to the community of Jamestown.



<https://vimeo.com/539297837>

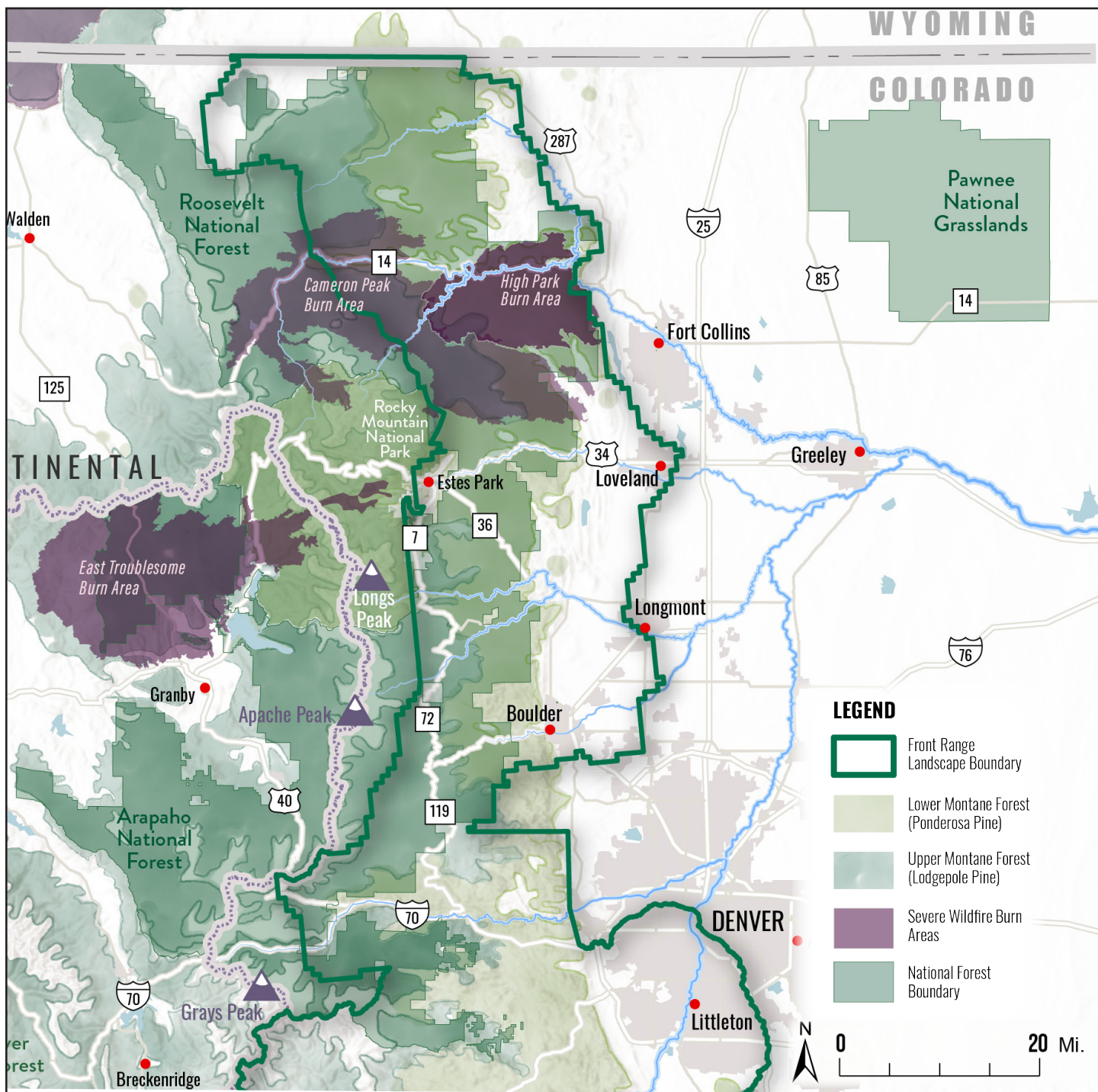
## In 2023 the Forest Service burned more than 300 acres on the Forsythe II Prescribed Burn near Gross

Reservoir in Boulder County. The reservoir provides drinking water for millions of resident around the Denver metropolitan area. Partnerships with a local nonprofit focused on education and outreach, including field trips led by the Boulder Watershed Collective, helped to build trust before the Forest Service implemented this burn. This was the first prescribed burn in the area in more than two decades.



Credit: Rhianna Truex





## Arapaho and Roosevelt National Forests & Pawnee National Grassland

This map shows a detailed view of the Front Range Landscape boundary, National Forest boundaries, forest type, and previous burn areas of over 50,000 acres.



# Partnerships in Action



The Forest Service continues its multi-year partnership with water providers Denver Water and Colorado Springs Utilities. Through the Wildfire Crisis Strategy, we're working with these water providers to increase the pace and scale of treatments protecting these watersheds, which supply water to over 3 million people.

In 2023, Denver Water and the Forest Service completed fuels reduction work on projects such as Miller Gulch Stewardship agreement. This agreement was set up to complete about 1,500 acres of fuels reduction in the Upper South Platte Watershed.

Thinning projects in partnership with Colorado Springs Utilities were conducted in 2023 near watershed areas like the Rampart Reservoir, which supplies water to the city of Colorado Springs. Work was completed on the ground in 2023, for example, as part of the Brachi fuels reduction project. Work continues in the Pikes Peak Upper Monument Creek area near Rampart Reservoir.



A thinning project near Rampart Reservoir, which supplies water to the city of Colorado Springs. The project increases the resiliency of the forest and protects the watershed. USDA Forest Service photo.



Before



After

A section of the Jerome Miller/Miller Gulch Project before and after mechanical thinning. Photo courtesy of Stewardship West.



About an hour southwest of Denver, an area near the Front Range town of Bailey, the **Jerome Miller/Miller Gulch restoration project** will protect water for Denver and Aurora's residents. What started as a single stewardship agreement in 2021 between the Forest Service and Stewardship West has taken on a life of its own. Today, the state of Colorado, Colorado State Forest Service, Jefferson Conservation District, Denver Water and Aurora Water have each invested in the Jerome Miller/Miller Gulch Project.

Forest Service summer fire crews in partnership with Denver Water conducted a **prescribed fire** in 2023 near Buffalo Creek. This burn is a follow-up to 200 additional acres that were burned in 2021. Prescribed fires are important to improving forest health by reducing hazardous fuels such as twigs, fallen branches and other material on the ground that can fuel wildfires. Forest health is critical to Denver Water because water flows through forest land before it reaches Denver Water reservoirs. This project is part of the From Forests to Faucets partnership and the Wildfire Crisis Strategy.



Implementation of the Sand Springs prescribed fire next to the Colorado Trail in the Little Scraggy area. Prescribed fire is used to reduce the accumulation of hazardous fuels and lessen the impacts of future wildfires. Photo by Andrew Slack, Colorado Forest Restoration Institute.



Watch a video about Sand Springs from Denver Water

<https://youtu.be/fRMwWfATHYo>

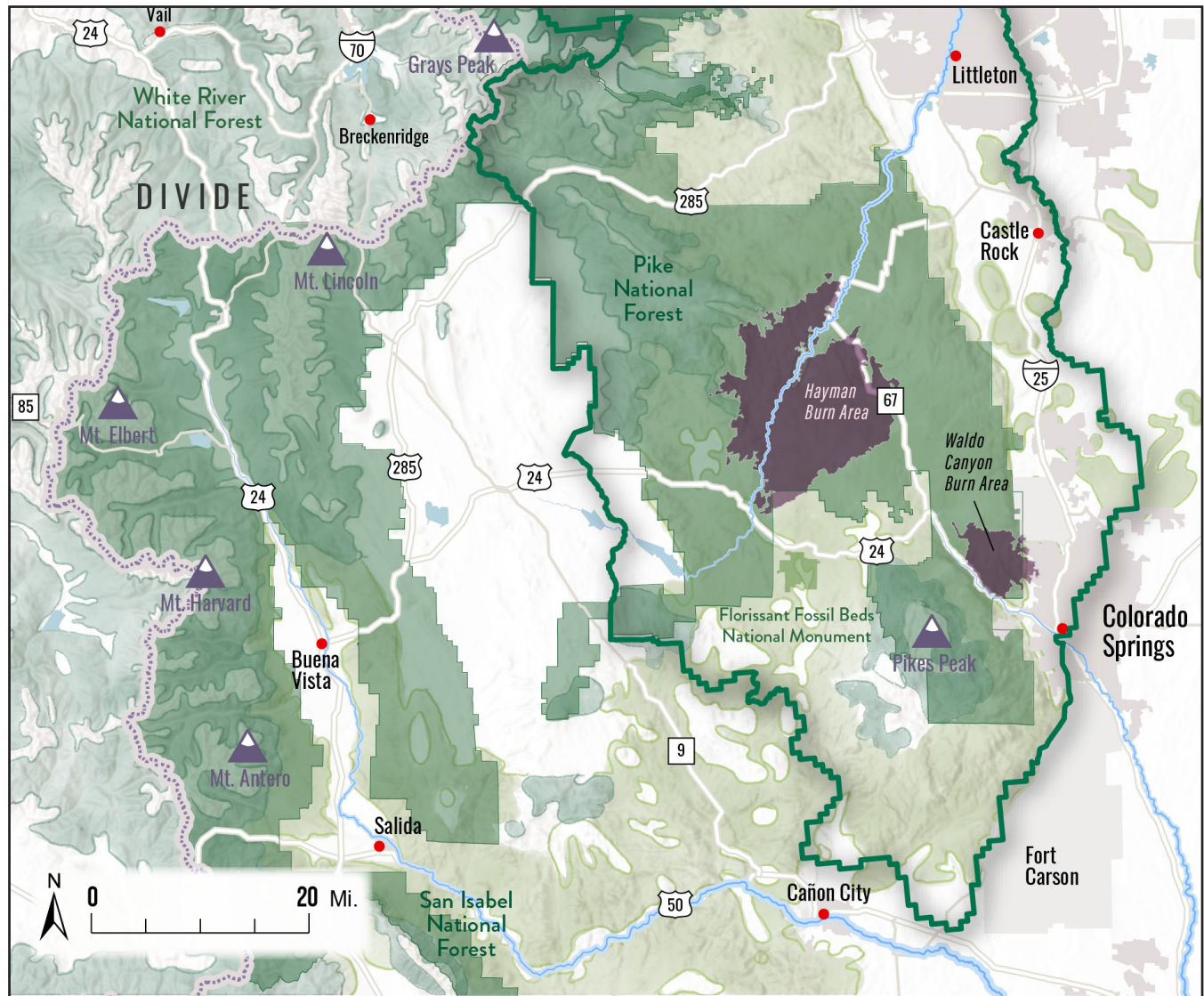
Fuels reduction projects were in full swing in 2023. Crews with the **Monument Fire Center fuels reduction/fuel break project**, for example, masticated over 500 acres to reduce potential wildfire near the communities of Palmer Lake and Woodland Park.





“Being identified as one of the initial Wildfire Crisis Strategy Landscapes and receiving the first influx of funding has made it possible for us to build our team and begin the hard but rewarding work ahead of us.”

Diana Trujillo, Forest and Grassland Supervisor  
Pike-San Isabel National Forests & Cimarron and Comanche National Grasslands



## Pike-San Isabel National Forests & Cimarron and Comanche National Grasslands

### LEGEND

- Front Range Landscape Boundary
- Lower Montane Forest (Ponderosa Pine)
- Upper Montane Forest (Lodgepole Pine)
- Severe Wildfire Burn Areas
- National Forest Boundary





Illustrations and graphics by LV Brown Studios

## What should the future look like?

**Frequent fire is a critical component of a healthy, dry western forest.** Vegetation and wildlife along Colorado's Front Range evolved under the management of indigenous people and natural fire events. After more than a century of fire suppression, Colorado's lower elevation forests are overgrown. Fire keeps these forests healthy by reducing vegetation density, recycling nutrients and helping maintain wildlife habitat.

If we are going to effectively address the Wildfire Crisis in the west, **fire must be part of the solution.** We must help our communities and forests prepare for and live with fire as a natural part of the ecosystem, just as Colorado residents have adapted to living with dangerous wildlife

such as bears, moose, and mountain lions that inhabits these forests.

While home hardening and defensible space are critical parts of our strategy, we are working to reduce risk to much more than homes and communities. The greater **landscape must also be strategically managed to conserve rivers, forests, and diverse habitats for wildlife** for future generations.

Along the Front Range, we are working with **community-connected partners** to help residents understand the larger issues at hand and to ready communities to allow fire to again serve its natural role on the landscape.