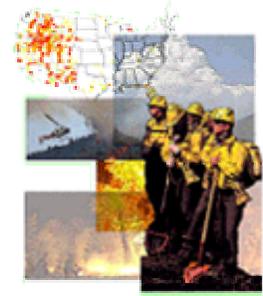


NATIONAL FIRE PLAN

County Mapping Project Will Aid Firefighters San Juan Public Lands, Durango, CO



Detailed computer maps that will help local fire-protection districts battle wildland blazes and aid landowners in reducing fire risks are nearly finished in Montezuma County. In 2000, the state Legislature passed a bill authorizing counties to develop fire-management plans (as opposed to strict fire-suppression plans) and implement mapping programs that would mesh with wildfire maps done for public lands.

Using grant money from the Bureau of Land Management, Montezuma County has become one of the first counties on the Western Slope to finish its work, according to county mapping specialist James Dietrich. The county's "Polygon Project" is essentially complete, with only some technical tasks remaining in order to make the information available to local fire districts and the public.

The term "polygon," familiar to legions of geometry students, refers in this case to chunks of land that are designated according to their susceptibility to wildfire and their road access, Dietrich explained. Using data compiled by the county planning department, Dietrich has divided the entire county, except for public and tribal lands, into 86 polygons, each of which is given a designation from A to D.

"A" polygons are those where a wildfire would be considered absolutely disastrous because the area contains homes, critical watersheds or infrastructure, cultural resources or other valuable qualities.

"B" polygons are areas where wildfire is viewed as highly undesirable under current fuel and drought conditions, but where fire could be part of a management plan once conditions change. Such areas would include sparsely populated tracts such as open range or undeveloped forests.

"C" and "D" polygons contain unpopulated land where wildland fire is acceptable or even desirable to reduce hazardous fuels.

The county's "A" and "B" polygons have each been named and analyzed according to slope, vegetation, and features such as buildings and roads. Dietrich will conduct a detailed analysis of the other polygons at a later date.

The maps are based on aerial photographs, the state database, and U.S. Geological Survey information. They are detailed enough that individual stands of trees can be discerned when the user zooms in with the computer.

Mesa Verde National Park will conduct similar mapping soon. The Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management have already mapped most of their lands.

Eventually, all the data will mesh seamlessly with maps of public lands and neighboring counties. The goal, Dietrich said, is for each fire district to have the information on disk, so that when a wildfire breaks out, firefighters with a laptop computer can see how best to reach remote areas, what slopes and vegetation lie ahead, and how the fire will likely behave.

In addition, Montezuma County Fire Warden Dave Cluff can use the information to decide which landowners he needs to contact regarding fire-risk reduction. Dietrich said that despite the ongoing drought and the bark-beetle infestation that has decimated pinyons, much of Montezuma County is not at critical risk for wildfire. "It's so chopped up with agricultural parcels and such, what you have is really a number of hot spots with areas between as fire breaks," he said. "If we can work on those hot spots, maybe we won't ever have a Missionary Ridge (fire) here."

Dietrich has been helping landowners in large subdivisions, such as the 139-lot Cedar Mesa Ranches subdivision near the Mesa Verde entrance, to use the maps to plan fire-mitigation work and develop evacuation routes. We're trying to empower the community to do as much planning on their own as they can, and communicate those plans to the fire Districts, he said. The Cedar Mesa Subdivision Homeowners Association recently received a rural community assistance grant from the BLM that will help them complete planning for defensible space and set up defensible-space demonstration areas within the subdivision.

Although the mapping is largely complete, the data will have to be updated regularly as development continues. This can't be a static project; it will have to be updated over the years.

The information will eventually be available on the Internet. In the meantime, anyone who wants to look at a particular polygon or receive fire-planning assistance for a subdivision can contact James Dietrich or Mike Preston at the Montezuma County Courthouse, 970-565-8525.