

# Crossing Boundaries for Collaboration

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Building Wildfire Mitigation Through Partnerships



Dollar Ridge Fire

August 2018



# Executive Summary

The Dollar Ridge Fire started on July 1, 2018, burned about 70,000 acres, 438 structures, and cost more than \$21 million for suppression. This area has a long history of wildfires, with major fires happening about every 5 years. Communities at high risk from wildfire share the characteristics of heavy fuel loading, steep terrain, narrow one-way roads and limited fuel reduction treatments.

Utah Department of Natural Resources Forestry, Fire, and State Lands (FFSL) requested a Community Mitigation Assistance Team (CMAT) to work with local partners and communities in the Uintah Basin impacted by the Dollar Ridge Fire. Duchesne, Wasatch and Uintah Counties and the Ashley National Forest were involved with the request.

CMAT was asked to: 1) engage community members to learn their mitigation barriers and how they would like assistance from local, state and federal agencies to reduce wildfire risk to the communities, 2) make recommendations to those partners on best mitigation practices to have a lasting impact, 3) increase local capacity to continue mitigation actions within communities, and 4) identify the right partners to include during the development of the county Community Wildfire Preparedness Plan (CWPP).

Local, State, Federal, and Tribal partners from the Uintah Basin participated in a Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats (SWOT) analysis. Information collected in the SWOT analysis, one-on-one discussions, meetings, and research on local conditions was used to inform the CMAT process.

Recommendations and best mitigation practices were developed around the stakeholders' priorities of cross boundary coordination and building capacity for more risk reduction.

Partners also discussed the 2016 Utah Wildland Fire Policy and its potential as a nationwide model for addressing the WUI-wildfire problem. Local partners already work collaboratively during response, training and projects. They identified cross boundary coordination as a priority to increase mitigation. There are existing working groups in place which could prioritize mitigation with resources and funding in high risk areas to make a difference in these communities.

This report summarizes recommendations that can help mitigation partners in the Uintah Basin increase effective and sustainable mitigation actions and reduce negative effects from wildfire.

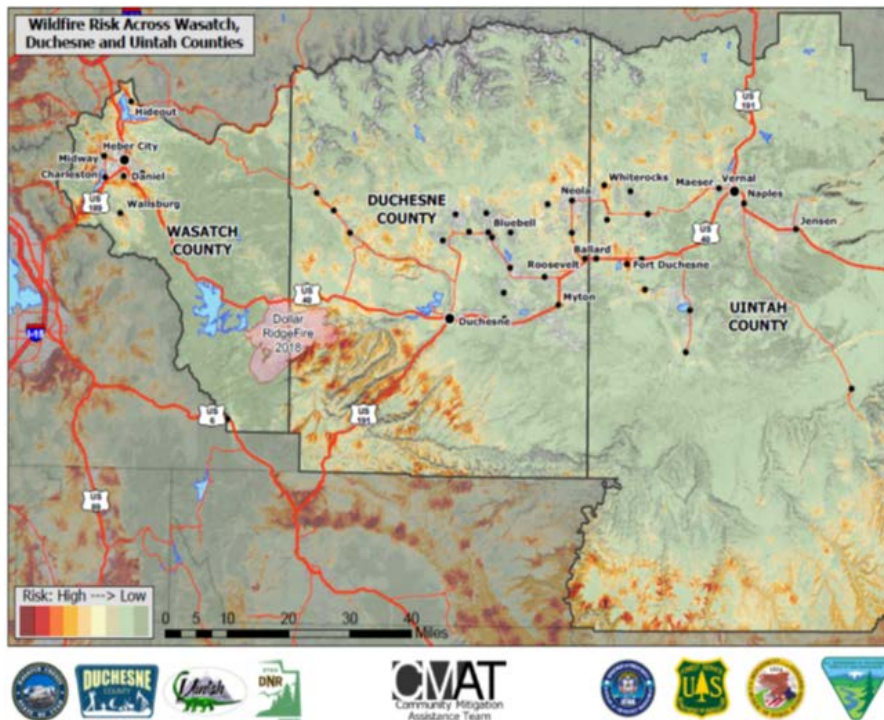


*The SWOT analysis involved facilitated discussion with partners to determine wildfire mitigation strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats. Groups prioritized opportunities and reported out.*

# Guiding Principles

*Consider these guiding principles when developing a wildfire mitigation strategy and the projects that comprise it, they will make your efforts more effective. These guiding principles apply to mitigation efforts across the board in every community.*

**Be strategic.** Focus on high risk areas first. Be strategic by doing larger landscape scale fuel treatments and helping clusters of homes reduce risk. Scattered smaller treatments are not as effective.



**CMAT Focus Area**

**No boundaries.** Wildfires do not stop at the boundary of one piece of property. Link fuel reduction and defensible space projects to benefit a larger area. Engage with other jurisdictions to accomplish work on abutting properties.

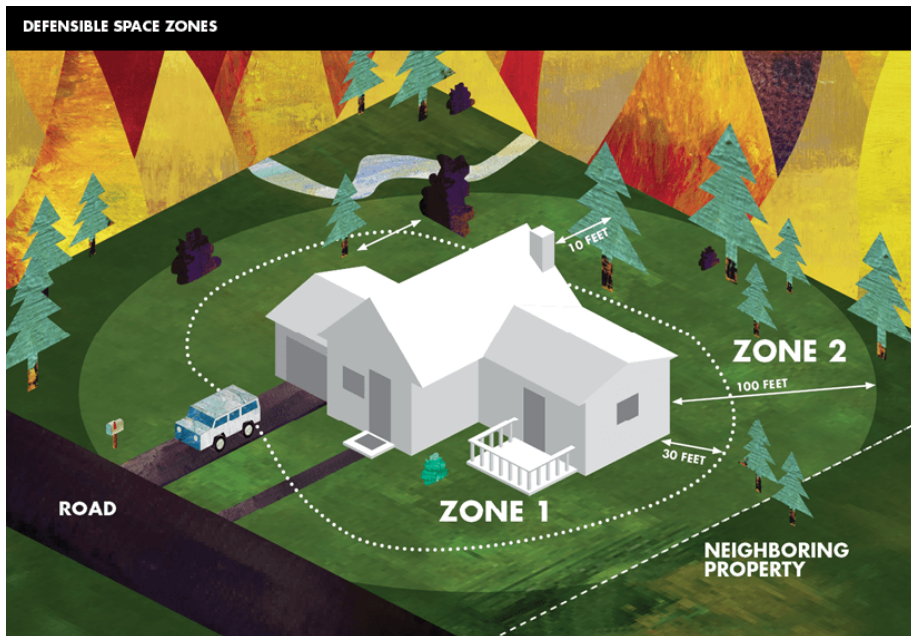
**Work together.** A group of people who share the same goals can get more done together than separately. They plan together, piggyback on strengths, share resources, staff, and the work. A collaborative group of partners is more likely to get supporting funding than individual organizations. Collaboratively planning, implementing, sharing successes and lessons learned is an essential first step in building a common vision and gaining broad community support.

**Employ messaging wisely.** Messaging will help raise awareness of wildfire risk and share successes, but messaging does not result in mitigation on the ground. That takes face-to-face engagement over time. Brochures, websites, blogs, and other social media are tools to share information but should not replace the critical face-to-face engagement that leads to action. A brochure that illustrates defensible space can be a tool during a one-on-one discussion, but handing out brochures at an event, leaving door hangers, or placing a news release in the local paper asking folks to create defensible space has little value. Websites, Facebook, and blogs are no substitute for one-on-one engagement with residents and they are time consuming to create, update, and maintain.

**Stretch project funds.** Require homeowners to cover (either in cash or sweat equity) half the cost of a mitigation project. A homeowner who invests in a project is more likely to maintain it over time and empowers them to take responsibility for what's theirs. Always engage local and regional partners that have something to lose or gain; these individuals and businesses may have financial resources to contribute.



Promote home hardening and defensible space. Having homeowners prepare their yard and structure for wildfire is the most important thing they can do to avoid loss. Cleaning gutters, keeping lawns green and mowed, removing fuels, and providing access are critical. Homeowners can harden homes by using non-flammable building materials, replacing wood shake roofs, installing  $\frac{1}{8}$ " metal screen on all vents and under decking, moving flammable materials from under decks, and sealing cracks where wind-blown embers can ignite the structure are just a few home hardening techniques.



Invest most of your time and resources on risk reduction actions. Meetings, recognition programs, news releases, or going to events do not accomplish mitigation. Respect everyone's time. Do not hold additional meetings if wildfire mitigation discussions can be consolidated into existing forums. Remember, many hands make light work. Make meetings short and strategic. Spend time reducing risk on the ground.

Help vulnerable populations. Provide mitigation assistance for low income, elderly, and disabled residents in high and medium risk areas who may be unable to accomplish this work on their own.

Face-to-face engagement. Sharing with residents is best done face-to-face through a home assessment and conversations about the realities of living in a wildfire prone environment. Often this discussion has to take place many times before someone takes action.

# Recommendations

*These specific action items address priorities identified during the SWOT analysis. These best practices are the product of on-the-ground mitigation experience and research. All of these mitigation best practices together make up an effective and sustainable mitigation program.*

## **BUILD CAPACITY**

**Invest in wildfire mitigation** - All jurisdictional leaders should enable, prioritize and support community wildfire mitigation through funding, staffing, and policy. Deliberately prioritize the highest risk areas of your community and invest funding and staff to reduce risk in those areas.

**Spread best practices** - Provide training to Volunteer Fire Departments (VFD), Fire Councils, church groups, fire department auxiliaries, and resident ‘spark plugs’ on best mitigation practices to build capacity. Identify residents that have a passion for mitigation or are especially community-focused. Train them to be local mitigation ambassadors to their neighborhoods or subdivisions. These residents become your wildfire mitigation ‘spark plugs’.

**Homeowner responsibility** - Speak candidly about the realities of wildfire, response, life safety, and individual responsibility. Share with residents that fire protection may not be available during a wildfire and that protecting their home might put firefighters’ lives at risk. Stress individual homeowner responsibility for wildfire preparedness and mitigation. Ultimately, it is the responsibility of each homeowner to be prepared for emergencies and to mitigate wildfire risk on their property and within their community. Mitigation is contagious. When homeowners take action others will follow, increasing collective capacity.

**Identify non-traditional resources impacted by wildfire** - Work cooperatively with the oil and gas industry, Utah Petroleum Association, water providers, electric utilities, and others for funding, in-kind resources, or other investments in wildfire mitigation.



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**Share information on all available funding opportunities -**

Compile a comprehensive list of available funding from all sources (for example, Watershed Restoration Initiative (WRI), Catastrophic Wildfire Reduction Strategy (CatFire), State Fire Assistance (SFA), Volunteer Fire Assistance (VFA) federal pass-through, etc...) and share with all partners (Ute Indian Tribe, FFSL, USFS, County government, and other eligible applicants). Develop applications collaboratively to increase project success and impact. The State Office of Emergency Management (OEM) liaisons may be available to assist with this effort.

**Diversify Institutional Knowledge -** Spread knowledge among multiple partners to build a deeper bench. Utilize existing working groups (CatFire, Local Emergency Planning Commission (LEPC), and Wasatch County Public Lands Meeting) to plan, implement, and track strategic wildfire mitigation projects.

## **WORK COLLABORATIVELY**

**Share information -** Share information about fuel treatments so all stakeholders are aware of when and where projects will occur and sets the stage for greater collaboration. Use maps to display “who, what, when, where, and how” information about fuel treatments, prescribed burns, wildfires, ingress/egress work, logging operations, and home site mitigation to increase opportunities for collaboration across boundaries. Ensure mitigation and risk mapping is part of the local emergency preparedness monthly meetings and pre-season meetings.

**Utah Wildland Fire Policy -** The 2016 Wildland Fire Policy Update has the potential to be a national model. The Policy allows “eligible entities” to enter into a cooperative agreement with the state to transpose former suppression funds into mitigation funds, in the form of matching contributions for “wildfire preparedness, wildfire mitigation and wildfire prevention” (S.B. 122). The policy could be a game-changer in Utah and perhaps nationally, requiring local jurisdictions to take responsibility for reducing their risk, with their resources thus significantly increasing mitigation actions and more effectively reducing risk.

### **Recommendations:**

- FFSL should increase coordination with participating entities to align directly with county CWPP priorities. FFSL, when applying for funding, should coordinate with participating entities to increase the leveraged resources.
- Participating entity contributions should align with county CWPP priorities.
- Require participating entities to report outcomes spatially (GIS).
  - Use Utah Wildfire Risk Assessment Portal (UWRAP) to collect and share management outcomes and efforts; collect all mitigation projects; make UWRAP easy to use; share outcomes on maps and through GIS so partners can prioritize high risk projects, celebrate successes, analyze gaps in treatments, and adapt.
  - Collect and show all projects in one place to aid cross-boundary planning.



## Community Wildfire Preparedness Plans (CWPP)

Use best practices when developing/revising a CWPP.

- The right partners to engage in CWPP development or revision are FFSL, USFS, BLM, BIA, Ouray Ute Tribe, county EM, fire wardens, fire chiefs, Fire Councils, HOA representatives, realtors, business, environmental groups, and residents.
- Including residents is critical. If residents participate in development or revision of the CWPP they will be more likely to help implement the CWPP recommendations. Residents and land managers must drive a CWPPs development/revision. If the community participates in the development/revision process, then and only then, will they be a part of implementation.
- CWPPs developed by the community have a higher rate of implementation than those that aren't. Inviting community members to meetings is not enough; identify, define, and assign risk reduction tasks.
- Identify specific high, medium, and low wildfire risk areas to the parcel level and illustrate them on a map that is widely distributed in the community. Pinpoint short, medium, and long-term actions to reduce risk (starting with the highest risk), identify the responsible party, set dates and milestones for action, and celebrate successes.
- Use an excellent CWPP as a template (see tool box).
- CWPP is a living document, update at least every five years or when conditions change, and put into action.



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## ENGAGE RESIDENTS

**Smoke in the air** - Seize the opportunity of smoke in the air to engage with residents in high risk areas about specific mitigation recommendations. Talk with residents in “close call” areas and where evacuations occurred. These residents feel the direct consequences of wildfire and are primed for mitigation. They are ‘low hanging fruit’ in high risk areas.



**Build trust** - Don't rely on messaging, fairs, literature distribution, TV ads, or social media to move people to take risk reduction action. Face-to-face relationship building over time, frank information about fire behavior, available resources, individual barriers to mitigation, and available local help are key to helping landowners to take action.

**Share successes** - Share accomplishments through media, presentations, yard signage, or site visits to build momentum for mitigation work. Small successes, when celebrated, can result in a domino effect. Stories, especially those from the perspective of the property owner, have the biggest impact. Statistics are another excellent way to share success. Remember to incorporate these stories and statistics into personal interactions, speaking gigs, media opportunities and through the web.



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### ***Effective on-site assessments at the home/parcel level***

- Before heading to an on-site assessment, ask the homeowner to gather neighbors to participate.
- Come prepared with at least two printed maps. One zoomed-in map depicting the parcel, and one zoomed-out map depicting the larger community/landscape scale. Utilize a satellite imagery base map with a county parcel overlay.
- Currently, Utah FFSL primarily provides on-site assessments. Emergency managers, fire department members, fire department auxiliaries, other wildland fire personnel, and residents can provide on-site assessments when trained.
- Training for how to conduct an on-site wildfire risk assessment should include information and skills pertaining to forest fire ecology, fuels science, fuels management, structure ignition vulnerability science, structural ignition risk mitigation, common wildland fire suppression tactics, emergency preparedness as well as behavioral social science.
- Start by asking the property owner about their goals. This may yield insight into the property owner's level of interest or resistance to wildfire mitigation.
- Focus on building rapport and trust throughout the entire period of engagement.
- Provide site specific information about wildfire risk, expected wildfire behavior and the ways homes are exposed to ignition during a wildfire.
- Illustrate the fundamental differences between direct flame impingement, radiant heat, convective heat as well as ember exposure. Provide site specific mitigation recommendations for each potential risk exposure in a relatable manner.
- Explain why each mitigation action is necessary by relating how the outcome will affect future wildfire behavior and/or structural ignition potential and firefighter safety.
- Relay information pertaining to fuel type, loading, composition and continuity (vertical and horizontal) to the mitigation measures that are being proposed.
- Be site specific, detailed, and thorough when making mitigation recommendations using common, sensible and understandable language.
- When analyzing risk and making recommendations at the parcel level, begin with the structure and move out to the forest (from the front door to the forest). Recent studies demonstrate the importance of 'home hardening' measures in reducing structural ignition during a wildfire. While everyone wants to talk about the trees, do not neglect the home itself. Homes are highly combustible fuels.
- Stress the importance of personal responsibility and the priority of firefighter safety. Be candid. Discuss the potential consequences of not preparing for wildfire.
- Directly challenge assumptions and misunderstandings about the perceived ineffectiveness of wildfire mitigation.
- Leave the property owner with a list of site-specific action items.
- Ask for a verbal commitment to mitigation when it seems appropriate. Seal the deal with a handshake when you've received a verbal commitment. Actual on-the-ground mitigation is an outcome that we all want to see. Ask and thou shall receive!
- Thank residents for the opportunity to talk with them about wildfire mitigation and for being invited on to their property.

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# THE TEAM

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The Community Mitigation Assistance Team (CMAT) is sponsored by the U.S. Forest Service to assist communities impacted by wildfire. CMATs are comprised of public and private wildland-urban interface (WUI) mitigation professionals from across the country. The Team provides technical and strategic mitigation support to build and strengthen sustainable mitigation programs. The team mentors organizations, helps to identify and provide tools, advises on the highest priorities for risk reduction, and shares best management practices for mitigation.

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**Left to Right: Jamie, Greg, Terri, Liza, Jon, Pam, Kent**





### [Community Toolbox](#)

The Community Toolbox contains this report and numerous resources that will help you increase mitigation in your area.



**USDA National Forest Service CMAT**  
<https://www.fs.fed.us/managing-land/fire/cmat>