



Colorado State Forest Service
5060 Campus Delivery
Colorado State University
Fort Collins, CO 80523-5060
(970)491-6303; FAX (970)491-7736
<http://www.cfs.colostate.edu>

NEWS

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Contact: Kathryn Hardgrave

970.217.6850

kathryn.hardgrave@colostate.edu

American Recovery and Reinvestment Act Fulfills Dream of Veteran Firefighter

Moises Barrera, a 10-year veteran of the Larkspur Fire Department, dreamed of having a fuels mitigation crew for nearly as long as he's been with the department. A fuels mitigation crew would work to reduce live and dead vegetation available to a forest fire and would be first to respond to wildland fires that occur in the Larkspur Fire Protection District. The department recognized the benefits of a mitigation crew — but funding was a challenge.

Barrera's dream became reality when the Perry Park Metropolitan District, located in the Larkspur Fire Protection District, successfully competed for an American Recovery and Reinvestment Act sub-grant through the Colorado State Forest Service. The U.S. Forest Service awarded the ARRA funds to the CSFS through a competitive grant process. The goal of the metro district sub-grant is to create and retain jobs and implement the Perry Park Community Wildfire Protection Plan.

The Metro District Executive Board proposed creating jobs with the ARRA sub-grant by partnering with the Larkspur Fire Department. "Larkspur Fire has been our partner in this project for almost 10 years now," said Ernie Bergamo, Firewise Committee chairman and Metro District board member. "It made sense for us to utilize this kind of program to take our community's Firewise efforts to the next level of wildfire awareness and fuels treatment."

The sub-grant funded a newly formed fuels mitigation crew to reduce vegetation in Perry Park. Keith Worley, a local forestry consultant, sets up project areas for the Metro District, based on high-priority fuels mitigation needs identified in the Perry Park CWPP. Private fuels mitigation companies will also be hired to reduce the negative impacts an uncontrolled fire would cause if the fuels were not removed.

Now, Barrera is "crew boss" to the 10-person fuels mitigation crew. His workforce includes two squad bosses and eight crew members. Crew members begin their 10-hour work day with physical training, followed by a weather report and a briefing on the fire situation across the country. The crew also receives a safety talk before heading to a project area.

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Earlier this month, the crew arrived at Bear Creek Canyon, a new project west of residential structures in Perry Park. The vegetation is thick. Oak brush, 3- to 6-feet tall, grows in large clumps. Small trees crowd the leftover space on the forest floor. Overhead, Douglas-fir trees loom. Some are old and infected with a parasitic plant called dwarf mistletoe that spreads via seeds propelled to other Douglas-fir trees. And freshly sprouted poison ivy grows on the roadside.

The crew breaks into two squads. Crew members with chainsaws are paired with other crew members who pile the cut limbs and trunks. The sawyer's partner also acts as a second set of eyes and ears. At the end of the day, the remaining trees no longer are crowded and the vegetation that allows a fire to climb from the forest floor into tree tops is cut. Back at the fire station, tools are sharpened for tomorrow's work.

Although the crew has only been together for a month, camaraderie between former strangers is building quickly. Many are volunteer firefighters. The group shares a common thread—passion for reducing wildfire risk and the satisfaction gained from a hard day's work outdoors. "It is exciting to be on a brand-new crew, to be at the root of something that has the potential to continue past the grant period," says Chris Gentile, fuels mitigation crew member. "We have the chance to make a difference."

The ARRA grant will fund CWPP projects in Perry Park through September 2011 and is expected to create or retain up to 43 jobs.

To learn more about how to minimize the negative impacts of wildfire, visit the Colorado State Forest Service fire protection webpage at <http://csfs.colostate.edu/pages/wf-protection.html>.

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