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# NEWS

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## Cooperators Reduce Wildfire Risk in Pueblo Mountain Park

***Note to editors:*** Photos of the Pueblo Mountain Park fire mitigation treatments are available upon request.

**BEULAH, Colo. –** Drive a half-hour southwest of Pueblo, Colo., and you'll begin to see the charred hillsides left by the 12,000-acre Mason Gulch Fire. The fire, which burned in July 2005, forced the evacuation of 5,000 nearby residents before a fortunate shift in the wind ended its run. Approximately five miles south of the burn area, in the path where the fire was headed, you'll find Pueblo Mountain Park. The forests here escaped the 2005 fire, but have forest conditions that could support a similar blaze.

Pueblo Mountain Park provides city dwellers the opportunity to hike, watch wildlife and picnic in native ponderosa pine and Douglas-fir forests. The park also is home to a valuable educational program for Pueblo's fifth-graders. Until recent efforts to address forest health in the 600-acre park, the landscape was slowly becoming overgrown with a dense understory of vegetation that increased the risk of a dangerous crown fire. Thanks to a forest-thinning project started by a retired Pueblo County emergency management official, the park's director and the Colorado State Forest Service, the culturally valuable park, its visitors and surrounding communities soon will be safer from wildfire.

"When this project is complete, the community will have a park that is much less vulnerable to fire," says Director Dave Van Manen of the Mountain Park Environmental Center, a nonprofit that manages the park. MPEC's current work with cooperators will create fuelbreaks to reduce fire risk, help protect improvements in the park, and enhance firefighter and visitor safety.

### Park Provides Unparalleled Opportunity for City Kids

Dedicated to cultivating an understanding of nature, MPEC has managed Pueblo Mountain Park since 2008. Throughout the year, the nonprofit offers programs for all ages, including educational retreats, summer camps, yoga classes, horseback riding and guided hikes. However, the primary users of Pueblo Mountain Park are the fifth-grade students from the city's public schools, who participate in the outdoor-based Earth Studies Program.

"The urban students we work with have little or no experience spending time in the woods," Van Manen said. "Nothing tops the educational value of seeing firsthand what these forests look like."

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According to Van Manen, informal surveys of the students suggest that about 80 percent of Pueblo's kids never even visit the mountains until the fifth grade, when they get their first chance in the Earth Studies Program. MPEC provides the hands-on outdoor science program to all of the city's 1,200 fifth-graders, in addition to students from other schools, letting them experience the park's diverse habitats. Students from 23 schools gain and apply scientific knowledge in a series of six visits throughout the school year, studying topics ranging from local wildlife to forest health. With forest thinning work currently being completed, the kids also get an education on the importance of managing forests to protect them from insects and catastrophic wildfire.

"Many people don't understand the important role of disturbance in maintaining forest ecosystems," said John Grieve, district forester for the CSFS Cañon City District, which guides the park in implementing its forest management plan. "These kids are learning that this work is necessary to maintain a healthy forest."

**Park Had Become Overgrown**

The first ongoing fuels mitigation work in the park began in 2002, when then-Pueblo County Emergency Management Director Steve Douglas approached the park with concerns about mountain pine beetle activity in its ponderosa pines. Having had extensive past experience as a wildland firefighter and an active interest in fire mitigation, he offered to coordinate removal of the infested trees.

After a discussion with the Pueblo City Council, MPEC and the CSFS Cañon City District, which serves Pueblo, Fremont and Custer counties, the city granted Douglas permission to organize the removal of approximately 300 beetle-kill trees. But beetles weren't the only problem. A lack of natural, low-intensity ground fires over several decades had resulted in dense stands that could fuel a dangerous wildfire, as evidenced by the nearby Mason Gulch Fire.

"The park had become so overgrown that there were trails you couldn't even walk down," said Grieve, referring to a thick understory of Gambel oak, juniper and mountain mahogany. Grieve agreed with Van Manen and Douglas that the park's forest could use an overhaul. He developed a forest stewardship plan for the park, which addressed such things as tree and stand structure, fuel loading, wildlife habitat and the presence of insect and disease activity. The CSFS also helped design and implement projects consistent with the plan, and administered grants that the park received to help with forest management efforts.

Douglas has been the primary workhorse on the projects. Using the CSFS forest management plan for guidance, he has led efforts to make the park's forest healthier. Over the last decade, the scope of his and the park's efforts has been expanded because of State Fire Assistance grant funds. SFA grants, administered by the CSFS and issued through a competitive process, are used to create more resilient forests and mitigate wildfire risk. In 2009, on behalf of MPEC, Douglas applied for an SFA grant to help the park further its efforts; a $50,000 matching grant was awarded by the CSFS in July 2010.

**2010 CSFS Grant Funding Boosts Accomplishments**

The park successfully treated more than 60 acres from 2002-2009, but the 2010 SFA grant award made it possible to treat even more forested acreage, and faster. The grant funds meant the park could employ the use of a Colorado Department of Corrections crew to treat an additional 94 acres in 2010-2012.

"This grant was what we needed to get this phase of the job done," Douglas said.

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The park committed $88,000 in matching funds to the 2010 grant in the form of MPEC staff salaries, equipment and volunteer hours. The plan is to create fuelbreaks and remove excess fuels along critical park boundaries, roadways and potential paths for intense fires. Grieve says the 300-foot-wide shaded fuelbreaks they are creating should keep fires on the forest floor and out of the tree crowns – without clearing all existing brush and timber.

"We identified likely paths for a wildfire to travel, and our efforts are taking place with the specific intent of creating significant breaks in these paths," Van Manen said.

The CSFS coached Douglas and park staff on how to correctly identify and mark the best trees for removal. Next, a Colorado Correctional Industries State Wildland Inmate Fire Team (SWIFT), composed of 20 inmates from the Four Mile Correctional Center in Cañon City who are trained as wildland firefighters, began removing the marked trees. To date, more than 20 acres have been completed.

The SFA grant money and matching contributions should allow the park to build fuelbreaks along 2.7 miles of roads, trails and park boundary. This includes areas near roads, barbecue pits and picnic tables, which are more likely to have an ignition source. The fuelbreaks are primarily intended to protect the park and its visitors, but if a fire starts in the park or to the west, subdivisions to the east of the park also should benefit.

"Looking at it from a firefighter's perspective, I want to provide safe routes," said Douglas. He says the fuelbreaks not only will slow down a wildfire, but will allow park visitors to safely escape and provide safe access to firefighters.

In addition to the primary goal of wildfire hazard mitigation, forest thinning efforts in the park also should improve tree health and vigor, the park's aesthetic value and wildlife habitat. Everyone involved with the project says that so far they have gotten only positive feedback from the public. "We were worried when we started cutting trees in the park that people might complain," says Grieve. "But now in the park you can see more and do more."

**A Green Use for Cut Wood**

The park's 14,000-square-foot Horseshoe Lodge, recently renovated due to growing demand for MPEC programs, now offers classrooms, meeting space and overnight accommodations. The upgraded eco-facility includes green features such as composting toilets, bed-frames crafted from beetle-kill wood and the capacity to generate its own heat in the form of two biomass furnaces fueled by trees from the park's fuelbreaks.

Van Manen says that the biomass boilers not only dispose of dead wood from cutting operations; they also prevent the park from paying high heating bills or burning fossil fuels. Most of the wood from the current fuelbreak project is used to fire the lodge's two huge GARN biomass boilers, which meet 98 percent of all its heat and hot-water needs. The boilers consume a cord or more of wood each week, in the form of logs cut to 3-foot lengths. The remaining "slash," consisting of smaller wood and branches, is stacked into 10-foot piles and burned during the winter months.

Douglas says that like the Horseshoe Lodge, he hopes the park's forests will eventually get a complete restoration. "This work will allow the park to get a toehold so it can ultimately expand its forest management efforts," he says. "We've got a great start."

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