

Colorado Springs Fire Department - Ready, Set, Go Wildfire Program

WILDLAND URBAN INTERFACE CASE STUDY

The Opportunity

In 2012, Colorado Springs suffered a devastating wildland urban interface fire. The local, state, and national attention brought by the Waldo Canyon Fire provided the catalyst necessary to make changes to the city's approach to wildland-urban interface prevention, mitigation and response.

The Action

Over the course of decades, the city of Colorado Springs and its fire department had made changes to its local building codes and associated ordinances, with the goal of providing guidance to builders and homeowners as to the threat of wildfire in the city. Following Waldo Canyon, the department was able to make further substantive changes to its wildfire mitigation and prevention programs.

The Outcome

For more than a decade, the Colorado Springs Fire Department (CSFD) has worked to align its wildfire prevention, mitigation and response using consistent communication with community stakeholders, along with ordinance and response changes to address the city's wildfire risk.

DEPARTMENT INFO

COLORADO SPRINGS FIRE DEPARTMENT

POPULATION SERVED: 500,000

TOTAL UNIFORMED PERSONNEL: 571

TOTAL CIVILIAN PERSONNEL: 91

FIRE STATIONS: 24

ISO CLASS: 2

GOVERNANCE STRUCTURE: STRONG
MAYOR/COUNCIL

HIGHEST LEVEL OF EMS SERVICE PROVIDED: ALS

ANNUAL BUDGET: \$107 MILLION

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Introduction

In 2021, 55 years after the first Wingspread Conference of fire service leaders and innovators, participants included a “statement of national significance” on the challenges and reality of the country’s wildland fire problem: “Wildland fires are a continuing and growing problem in the United States and globally which must be solved by using all resources and technologies available.” Particularly in the mountain west and California, this was not only known but an annual reality that often outstrips local and regional resources. For municipal, county, and district fire departments, each must continue to find the correct mix of prevention, mitigation, and response.

The Opportunity

On June 23, 2012, a wildfire that originally began in federal land a few miles west of city limits entered Colorado Springs. In part due to several years of drought and above normal temperatures, the fire destroyed 347 homes and took the lives of 2 people. The Waldo Canyon Fire would not be 100% contained until the second week of July and would cause the evacuation of more than 34,000 city residents. The CSFD realized that the wildfire mitigation and building code changes that had been ongoing for more than a decade were not sufficient to prevent rapid fire spread within the city. The scale of destruction and national media attention created the means to make immediate change.



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The Action

Of the more than 200 square miles comprising the City of Colorado Springs, nearly one-quarter is classified as wildland urban interface (WUI) and these areas contain more than 44,000 residential parcels. Since 2000, the CSFD has provided “neighborhood chipping services” which are tied to homeowners conducting vegetation management, either themselves or by a qualified contractor. The department continues to coordinate this through the city’s nearly 150 homeowners’ associations. These efforts along with progressive changes to local ordinances were attempts to lower the risk of wildfires within the city, but the overall impression within the city remained: “that won’t happen here.” The Waldo Canyon Fire made additional, critical changes necessary.

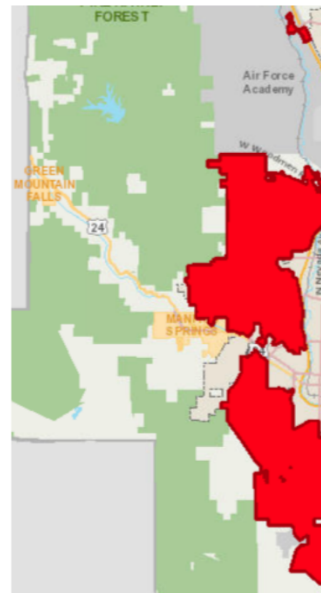
Determine Your Wildfire Risk

It is critical for the residents of Colorado Springs to know if they live in the Wildland Urban Interface (WUI). The Colorado Springs WUI is a geographically defined area where houses or businesses are in or near mixed topographical and geographical features with various timber, brush, and grass species. It is an area that poses a greater than normal risk to people and their property due to the proximity of combustible vegetation and structures.

When you click on the Wildfire Risk Map, you will get more detailed information on the specific area in which you live. Click “Get hazard information by address,” type in your address (house number and street name), and see your wildfire risk.

NOTE: If you type your address in and it says “No Parcel Selected,” you do not live in the WUI.

WILDFIRE RISK MAP



After the fire, the department began to evaluate contemporary technical reports, participated in National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST) studies and insurance industry research, to work with the department’s wildfire subject matter experts in coordination with residents, builders, policy makers, and government stakeholders to develop a series of recommended ordinance changes.

Increased community participation, along with additional trained inspectors, plan reviewers, and wildfire mitigation technicians were required and critical to any sustained change, along with a direct tie to information about mitigation and prevention efforts – both the department and the community needed access to geographic information system (GIS) focused data showing WUI boundaries, acres mitigated, and where work is/was planned.

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The Outcome

The CSFD used a devastating wildfire to catalyze change and has worked in the decade since to fully integrate mitigation and prevention efforts into its WUI model. The department's sole goal is to ensure that a fire like Waldo Canyon does not occur again. To sustain its WUI program, the department has:

- Obtained millions of dollars of grant funding to support mitigation efforts.
- Worked directly with each of the city's homeowner's associations, establishing a "neighborhood champion" in each.
- Coordinated with nearly a dozen other local, state, and federal agencies to align work and ensure participation in prevention and mitigation efforts.

The department collects extensive mitigation/prevention data, including: acres mitigated, tons of debris removed, cubic feet removed, the number of neighborhood meetings attended, the number of plans reviewed, inspections conducted, and on-site consultations conducted.

In terms of response, and operational planning CSFD modifies its computer aided dispatch protocols for incident response based on its evaluation of the daily wildfire danger.

Tips for Replication

Based on its decades-long experience and acknowledging the impact of a single devastating wildfire, the CSFD offers the following recommendations for developing an extensive WUI prevention, mitigation, and response program:

- *Consistent communication with all stakeholders is key:* while initial efforts may be successful because of the momentum created by a single incident or event, engaging with the community and all stakeholders will allow departments to explain its efforts, address concerns, provide clarification on services offered, and defend ordinance changes. This also provides a level of awareness for policy makers and links initial ideas with demonstrable outcomes.
- *Program changes may require support:* whether it is data gathering and analysis, additional staff, or alternative funding streams, departments should be aware of what might be required for long-term program success.
- *Wildfire risk prevention and mitigation is not an individual problem, but a community problem:* Initially the department found that some residents objected to mapping that showed each homeowner's individual WUI risk rating. They were afraid of insurance companies changing their fees, and others seeing their rating. The department denied this request and published these data, since insurance companies already knew the ratings based on their own analysis.

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- *Meet the community “where it is”*: Like the idea of “community risk,” individual capability and need must be addressed by the program – the department cannot set a priority or support an ordinance change that excludes some members of the community, specifically for vegetation removal and mitigation consultations.

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The Metropolitan Fire Chiefs Association brings fire service professionals together to address the challenges of large-jurisdiction departments across the globe serving as an educational resource and promoting best practices for members to follow.

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CPSE and Metro have partnered to develop this series highlighting proven practices of Metro departments accredited by CPSE’s Commission on Fire Accreditation International.