What started as an idea just over three years ago has since taken on a self-organizing life of its own. The idea was simple and novel: Direct strategic investments focused on improving a few larger landscapes rather than make slow progress in multiple small places. The Rocky Mountain Restoration Initiative was born when Colorado was selected as the pilot location to showcase Shared Stewardship in action. Its purpose: To increase pace and scale of stewardship work on a specific landscape.

RMRI’s novel strategy was allowing you, the stakeholders, to make decisions about how RMRI moved forward. RMRI is represented by dozens of agencies and organizations across federal, state, Tribal and local jurisdictions and overwhelmingly, you got it right! You identified our four shared values to guide RMRI: Water, Healthy Forests/Wildlife Habitat, Accessible Recreation and Resilient Communities. You selected three high-priority landscapes on which to focus and you identified three cross-cutting issues that are barriers to forest restoration in Colorado and across the West: biomass utilization, work force development and social license.

RMRI Partners are on a trajectory to restore Colorado’s most vulnerable landscapes over a 10-year period. The strength of RMRI is in its partnerships. RMRI partnerships, based on shared priorities and shared decision space, are making decisions that are more likely to be implemented and more likely to be leveraged to better prepare communities for wildfire. Interagency coordination and collaboration provide unity of purpose and perspective when things get tough. Decision-making processes across all three RMRI landscapes rely on locally based information, balance
competing interests, enhance credibility and understanding, build support across jurisdictions, and ultimately accomplish shared goals with a collective impact. The proof? RMRI landscapes are attracting attention on many levels. For example, several Partners have directed funding toward RMRI landscapes, including the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, Colorado’s Department of Natural Resources, Great Outdoors Colorado, the Gates Family Foundation, and Bass Pro/Cabela’s.

Since its inception, RMRI has faced challenges. Unprecedented wildfires, the COVID-19 pandemic, skyrocketing numbers of people recreating outdoors, and workforce shortages will continue to be a part of our current reality. These are problems that might otherwise be impossible handled individually. Handling these problems together provides a viable path forward. Partners are exploring options to boost workforce capacity and we intend to share those ideas at our next RMRI Partnership meeting.

RMRI Partners are on a trajectory to restore Colorado’s most vulnerable landscapes over a 10-year period.

The U.S. Forest Service recently received great news: $18.1 million to treat 10,000 acres on the Arapaho and Roosevelt, Pike and San Isabel National Forests is allocated in Fiscal Year 2022 (FY22). This targeted funding will help make a difference in creating resilient forests and implementing the Wildfire Crisis Strategy in these critical watersheds. The Rocky Mountain region is fortunate to be one of the initial ten landscapes selected for this work. This funding is an initial investment in this important work. We anticipate more landscapes will be funded across the region over time. We also received funding for 43 more Great American Outdoors Act (GAOA) projects in FY22; in addition to the 58 projects funded in FY21 that are already in motion. We have funding and a lot of work ahead of us and in progress.

We are very fortunate to be working with you. You got it right and we are inspired by your commitment, integrity and incredible work. We know that what we asked you to do was good work, but it was hard work. It is this work that incrementally makes a difference in the present and future.

Finally, we take this opportunity to take a moment and appreciate the dedication, professionalism, and accomplishments of RMRI Partners who make a difference in people’s lives. We recognize that you make significant contributions to the RMRI effort, in service to each other, in protecting our high-priority landscapes and subsequently our shared values. You are appreciated, whether you participate on an RMRI Subcommittee or support the work and RMRI landscapes within your agency: monitoring outcomes, planning a project, funding a project, enhancing recreational opportunities, managing trail maintenance, building social license in your communities, managing fire and ecosystems, and so much more. We sincerely thank you for your work and dedication to Colorado and RMRI’s four values.

The Source newsletter focuses on the strength of our Partners. It is by no means a comprehensive list. In fact, there are over 40+ RMRI Partners and the number is growing. The RMRI Communications Subcommittee is committed to creating profiles on each and every RMRI Partner. We understand that staff and resources are limited. So if you would like your organization and the work you’re doing highlighted—or to simply discuss any RMRI communications issues or concerns—contact RMRI communication manager, Nathan Van Schaik, via email at nathaniel.vanschaik@usda.gov or at (720) 584-6571. We are here to help!
What is the Colorado Strategic Wildfire Action Program (COSWAP)

The Colorado Strategic Wildfire Action Program (COSWAP) was created after the devastating 2020 fire season by the Colorado legislature through the bi-partisan supported SB21-258 in the summer of 2021. COSWAP moves $17.5 million in state stimulus funding to fuels reduction and wildfire mitigation projects in Colorado. Strategic Focus Areas include Boulder, Douglas, El Paso, Jefferson, Larimer, La Plata and Teller counties, as well as all three RMRI landscapes. RMRI Partners can apply for a workforce development grant or landscape investment. Stakeholders within RMRI focal areas can apply for 6-25 weeks mitigation work completed by conservation corps or Department of Corrections SWIFT crews, as well as funding for workforce training. Additionally, RMRI partners are eligible to receive up to $1 million in landscape scale funding. DNR is doing direct outreach to RMRI focal areas for strategic cross boundary landscape investment proposals for implementation, planning and personnel capacity.

Why did DNR include RMRI focal areas in its list of Strategic Focus Areas?

SB21-258 (Section 5, Para 3) required a federal National Incident Management Organization (NIMO) comprehensive risk analysis by June 15, 2021, to identify the most strategic landscapes in the state for wildfire mitigation and fuel reduction projects. A NIMO team was not available, so modeling and fuels management experts from state and federal agencies formed the Colorado Rapid Fuels Reduction Assessment (RFRA) team.

Through careful deliberation and consideration of legislation, the RFRA team focused on housing unit risk and the wildland urban interface (WUI) through two comparable datasets: the USFS Wildfire Risk to Communities (national dataset) and the Colorado Wildfire Risk Assessment (CO-WRA). The RFRA team focused on analyzing and comparing the top 10% of counties with the greatest housing-unit and population risk—in combination with the Rocky Mountain Restoration Initiative focal areas. The RFRA analysis included adding RMRI landscapes in the Strategic Focus Areas due to RMRI’s stakeholder-driven approach to identifying areas for landscape scale fuels treatment efforts.

The DNR and RMRI Connection

When DNR signed the Shared Stewardship MOU with the USDA Forest Service in 2019, we envisioned a joint effort to identify priority areas. And from there we’d use existing authorities, programs and funding streams to direct investments toward landscape-scale outcomes. Today, that vision is made tangible through DNR programs like COSWAP, which is designed to move funds and crews out to communities in immediate need of forest health and wildfire mitigation projects.

RMRI mobilizes partners around high-priority landscapes to direct investments at improving a few larger landscapes rather than make slow progress on smaller unrelated projects. RMRI allows us to plug into these landscapes—each with a concentration of collaborative work already in motion—and then energize projects on the ground through COSWAP funding. In short, RMRI provides DNR the opportunity to focus and direct concerted investment to achieve landscape scale improvements.

Together, we’re investing our resources where they can do the most to reduce wildfire risk, protect water resources, improve wildlife habitat and recreation opportunities, and ensure that Colorado’s forests continue to contribute to a high quality of life in the state. It’s a Shared Stewardship approach to land management: By combining resources, staff and funding, we achieve shared goals across boundaries.
What is RESTORE Colorado?

The National Fish and Wildlife Foundation’s Restoration and Stewardship of Outdoor Resources and Environment (RESTORE) Colorado program funds at-scale habitat restoration and stewardship projects on public and private conservation lands in Colorado that have the greatest benefit for wildlife and local communities. The program launched in 2020 with the purpose of awarding conservation grants to restore or enhance rivers and streams, native grasslands, sagebrush, forests, and big game wintering range habitat statewide. NFWF delivers added capacity to preserving RMRI’s value: Forests & Wildlife.

RESTORE Colorado has funded 5 projects contributing to all 3 RMRI landscapes. Collectively the 5 projects will:

- Restore more than 1,400 acres of forest habitat on private and public lands.
- Improve habitat management on 400 acres of public lands.
- Open 16 miles of stream by rectifying 2 passage barriers.
- Restore 1.34 miles of riparian and instream habitat.
- Engage more than 350 volunteers to assist in this work.

These 5 grants invest resources into RMRI landscapes. This is a description of their work.

1. Jefferson Conservation District
   RMRI—Upper South Platte, 2022
   Develop and manage an ecology-based forest habitat restoration project on private lands in northeastern Park County, Colorado through mechanical forest thinning methods. Project will increase structural habitat heterogeneity and improve grass, forb, and shrub quantity and quality, for the benefit of upland wildlife species on 200 acres of habitat.

2. National Forest Foundation
   RMRI—Upper Arkansas, 2022
   Increase quality and quantity of elk and mule deer forage, reduce risk of catastrophic fire, improve forest resiliency, and enhance hydrologic function in riverside upland forest habitat on public and private lands in Chaffee County, Colorado. Project will restore 425 acres of ponderosa pine woodlands, dry mixed conifer forests, aspen stands, lodgepole pine forests, and sagebrush shrublands over a three-year period.

3. Mountain Studies Institute
   RMRI—Southwest, 2022
   Restore riparian habitat and revegetate degraded floodplains, in-stream habitat and improve hydrology to benefit imperiled warm water native fish including the Roundtail Chub, Bluehead Sucker and Flannelmouth Sucker. Project will rectify two barriers for fish passage, open access to 16 miles of stream for fish refugia, restore 1.34 miles of stream geomorphology and aquatic habitat, restore 11.32 acres of floodplain, and treat 40 acres of invasive tamarisk.

4. National Forest Foundation
   RMRI—Upper Arkansas, 2021
   Improve wildlife habitat and reduce the risk of severe wildfire by 50% through targeted, cross-jurisdictional treatments in Chaffee County on the Arkansas River headwaters. Project will restore 380 acres of forestland through mechanical mastication and hand thinning treatments, benefiting mule deer, bighorn sheep, elk, and wild turkey populations and reducing the risk of severe wildfire to the Town of Buena Vista.

5. Chaffee County
   RMRI—Upper Arkansas, 2020
   Strategically assess the forests at the headwaters of the Arkansas River in Chaffee County, Colorado to identify the 5-10% of the landscape where treatment will decrease the risk of severe wildfire to the Town of Buena Vista.

NFWF invests financial resources and intellectual capital into science-based programs designed to address conservation priorities and achieve measurable outcomes. It’s RESTORE Colorado program supports RMRI projects on public and private conservation lands and benefits important wildlife habitat and local communities.

How NFWF supports RMRI

Created by Congress in 1984, the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation is a nonprofit organization governed by a 30-member Board of Directors approved by the Secretary of the Interior. NFWF has grown to become the nation’s largest private conservation grant-maker. They work with both the public and private sectors to protect and restore our nation’s fish, wildlife, plants and habitats for current and future generations. NFWF has been an enduring RMRI Partner since the launch of RMRI.

About

NFWF invests financial resources and intellectual capital into science-based programs designed to address conservation priorities and achieve measurable outcomes. It’s RESTORE Colorado program supports RMRI projects on public and private conservation lands and benefits important wildlife habitat and local communities.

RMRI Partner Investment

These 5 grants invest resources into RMRI landscapes. This is a description of their work.
The work in progress in the Upper Arkansas landscape stands to serve as a national model in land restoration, wildfire mitigation and community resilience. A governing body made of diverse interests and skills guides a plan that is producing serious results. The Envision Forest Health Council is an all-star cast of cross-jurisdictional land managers, government officials, resource managers, firefighters and scientists.

Community Wildfire Protection Plans are designed to accomplish two main objectives: Identify the right areas to reduce wildfire threat, and encourage the collaboration required to get that work done. The first objective to prioritize forest treatments in Chaffee County was accomplished when the county updated its plan in early 2020. The exercise used computer modeling technology to visually describe risk and identify action areas to decrease it. 

Accomplishing the second objective to improve collaboration began with the formation of the Envision Forest Health Council — a group of leaders working together to inspire the community to implement the plan. Inspiration looks like $19 million in funding raised, 1,637 community members taking action and 21,000 acres in the treatment pipeline. This report is the second annual update summarizing progress toward improved community wildfire resiliency.

The Envision Forest Health Council developed this long-range plan to address the risk with up to 30,000 acres of forest treatments by 2030 — an objective that would halve the risk severe wildfire poses to people, structures and natural resources. Implementation spans priority areas on 70% public and 30% private lands.

The plan uses computer modeling to map the level of risk and identify the right areas to treat for the highest cost efficiency and community benefit. In two years, more than 3,000 acres of treatments took place while 21,000 acres of projects entered the planning pipeline. $19 million has been raised to support plan implementation by leveraging tax revenues from the Chaffee Common Ground Fund.

Outcomes at Pace & Scale

**2022.** Envision Forest Health Council, the National Forest Foundation (NFF), and Bird Conservancy of the Rockies jointly secured $305,700 in grant funds to reduce the risk of high-intensity wildfire and restore wildlife habitat along the west side of Highway 24, north of Buena Vista, CO.

**2021.** The National Forest Foundation created the Upper Arkansas Forest Fund for wildfire mitigation work. The fund was directed in part by the Envision Forest Health Council and has already built fire breaks on Methodist Mountain above Salida, and above the Arkansas River above and below Browns Canyon National Monument.

**2020.** The Envision Forest Health Council finalized the draft plan for what is being called the Next Gen CWPP, which stands for CommunityWildfire Protection Plan. That draft document set the pace and scale of future work designed to protect Chaffee and Fremont counties from wildfire incidents.
Upper South Platte Partnership

Contribution by Audrey Miles-Cherney

Since 2015, the Upper South Platte Partnership (USPP) has been actively collaborating on healthy watershed goals. This partnership consists of diverse stakeholders working together on common goals across private, local, State, and federal lands with a cross-boundary approach.

USPP goals are also in alignment with the RMRI objectives. These are especially important for safe drinking water for our communities, resilient and sustainable forest ecosystems supporting wildlife, and wildfire adapted communities. While any one partner is capable of accomplishing great work, collaborating together within the partnership makes for a stronger and more effective approach for landscape-scale impact.

Much like the RMRI, the USPP focuses on critical, high-priority areas within our focus area where combined resources will have a greater impact. As a collective, the USPP shares expertise and provides a collaborative network of resources among the active partners who are committed to working from a “stronger together” approach.

The USPP currently consists of three primary participatory levels:

1. General participatory level
2. Management and Science Team (MST)
3. Goals, Strategies, and Funding Team (GSFT)

Our MST meets monthly to focus on identifying on-the-ground projects, planning, implementation, and monitoring. The GSFT is focused on bigger picture issues at watershed, state, regional, and national levels. The GSFT is also tracking and sharing funding opportunities and leveraging resources to maximize their impact.

The general USPP meets periodically each year to review monitoring and reporting efforts as well as lessons learned from scientific experimentation, problem-solving, and adaptive management frameworks.

Interested in learning more or getting involved with USPP? Contact USPP Watershed Coordinator, Audrey Miles-Cherney, a.miles_cherney@colostate.edu, 720-403-4609.
Montrose Forest Products, LLC (MFP) is a sawmill that produces 2"x4" and 2"x6" stud lumber from Engelmann Spruce, White fir, Lodgepole pine and Sub-Alpine fir and 1"x4", 1"x6", 1"x8" boards from Ponderosa Pine. MFP is a purchaser of standing timber from the U.S. Forest Service, U.S. Bureau of Land Management and non-industrial private lands. We employ 95 people at our mill and annually produce 82 million board feet of lumber. Additionally, we purchase logs from approximately nine independent logging contractors throughout the Western Slope, who employ roughly 150 people including logging crews, road builders and log truckers.

The status of sawmills across Colorado and the West has been subject to shifting political winds and the whims of public opinion. Since the late 1990’s, 14 Colorado sawmills have closed, including the U.S. Forest Industries sawmill at South Fork that opened in 1887. Through it all, MFP has kept its location in Montrose and has shifted names or owners five times since it opened in the late 1950’s.

Now, as Colorado’s largest sawmill — and one of the few green infrastructures still operating in the state — MFP has innovated its way to surviving even shaky markets. For example, when the U.S. Forest Service asked for help to deal with beetle infestations in South-west Colorado, MFP retooled its mill to take in more beetle-infested pine. But as those log supplies thinned and deteriorated, MFP in 2019 invested in a planer mill. Modernizing its equipment proved a necessary adaptation, enabling MFP to meet a growing need to restore our forests’ resilience and resistance to future wildfires.

And today, MFP is working on a $15 million project to retrofit the mill to run off its own wood chips. As a leader in biomass utilization, the mill will be capable of producing 1.25 megawatts of electricity—enough to be self-sustaining.

Montrose Forest Products has invested over $50 million since 2012 toward modernization and optimization upgrades.

Montrose Forest Products partners with the Rocky Mountain Restoration Initiative to foster healthy, functioning forests to support suitable wildlife habitat and populations. MFP plays a critical role to RMRI’s mission by maximizing capacity to meet forest management needs.

“At Montrose Forest Products, we stand ready to help Coloradans restore their forests, protect their watersheds, reduce the wildfire threat and get ahead of the beetle infestation sweeping Colorado,” said Tim Kyllo, MFP resource forester and member of several RMRI subcommittees. “We partnered with RMRI to tackle problems that might otherwise be impossible handled singly. Together we share the same values, resources and responsibility.”
How does MSI support the RMRI mission?

Mountain Studies Institute was a champion and advocate for securing the Rocky Mountain Restoration Initiative in Southwest Colorado, as well as attracting the Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Program (CFLRP) to both the neighboring Rio Chama landscape and the Southwest Colorado landscape. Both programs are poised to bring in funding and resources in support of forest work over the next ten years.

MSI specializes in public outreach. In SW Colorado, MSI continues to inform, educate and connect citizens with land managers and research.

“At the Mountain Studies Institute,” said MSI’s Aaron Kimple, “we support the RMRI mission in the Southwest landscape by creating conditions for informed decision-making around land management. We incorporate research and monitor for outcomes.”

Where does MSI operate?

MSI supports decision-makers and leaders in the mountain communities of Silverton, Durango, Pagosa Springs, and Telluride as well as the San Juan Mountain region in general by helping to improve the overall health of the mountain ecosystems, and specifically diversify Silverton’s economy.
**Mission**

A collective voice and representative organization for Colorado that provides educational and networking opportunities for communities, groups and individual stakeholders focused on reducing the negative impacts of wildfires in the state.

**What We Do**

Fire Adapted Colorado (FACO) is a state-wide network serving as a force-multiplier to spread ideas, resources and programs that help Colorado communities and landscapes coexist with wildland fire. Wildfire is a cross cutting theme in the RMRI landscapes, affecting forests and communities, wildlife, recreation, and water resources.

**Who We Are**

FACO currently has **150** members representing **40** place-based organizations and **20** partner organizations. The core of our network consists of Colorado practitioners representing:

- Wildfire Councils
- Watershed Collaboratives
- Fire Departments and Fire Districts
- Local and County Governments

**FACO Point of Contact**

Becca Samulski  
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**Media**

- FireAdaptedCO.org  
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- twitter.com/adapted_fire

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**Fire Adapted Colorado**

*Contribution by Becca Samulski*

Designed by mitigation specialists and incorporated as a nonprofit in 2015, FACO leverages connections to improve the performance and results of its members representing wildfire councils, watershed collaboratives, fire departments and districts; and local governments working on fire adaptation in their communities. FACO also works with many state and federal agency partners, research and science groups and other non-profits.

RMRI is one of the partner organizations that FACO works with to amplify the work within RMRI landscapes across the state. FACO is also closely associated with and was born out of the Fire Adapted Community Learning Network (FAC Net), a national network of people working to build wildfire resilience capacity in wildfire-prone communities, and works closely with Coalitions and Collaboratives Inc. to support acceleration of wildfire mitigation through direct mentorship and capacity awards. These are some of the connections that enable them to share lessons from and bring info to the RMRI efforts from wildfire mitigation professionals across the state and country.

Fire Adapted Colorado is also the convener of the Colorado Wildland Fire Conference. Many of our network of members serve as the planning team for the conference that moves around the state every eighteen months. The next conference, Accelerating Adaptation and Managing Expectations, will be held April 11-14, 2023 at the Fort Collins Marriott. Last September in Grand Junction, Patt Dorsey presented a high energy micro-talk about how the Initiative is working to increase pace and scale and RMRI was among the featured member partners for poster bingo.

In addition to direct support through resource sharing, mentoring, and strategy session facilitation, in the past six months FACO has hosted webinars on critical information. Legislative updates were shared by Carolyn Aspelin (CSFS), Angela Boag (DNR), and John Whitney (Office of Sen. Bennett). The new minimum standards for Community Wildfire Protection Plans in Colorado were shared by Daniel Beveridge (CSFS) alongside initial findings of the Community Networks in Fire-Environment Resilience Project with Matt Hamilton and Jon Salerno (CoNIFER Project). FACO also coordinated with partners on an Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act programs presentations for forest collaboratives. Recordings are available on the FACO Webinars Channel. FACO’s Director has participated in RMRI’s Social license and Biomass Utilization subcommittees. By following along with RMRI updates from these subcommittees, the stakeholder meetings, and newsletters, she has been able to share updates and resources from RMRI participants out to a broader professional community of wildfire resilience leaders.

In the past year, FACO has also shifted from a contract labor basis, to having two FT staff members and is now working to add a training specialist to support the demand for more in-person and virtual training than staff can currently fill in areas such as Mitigation Best Practices, Community Wildfire Protection Planning, Home Wildfire Risk Assessments, and Neighborhood Ambassador Programs.