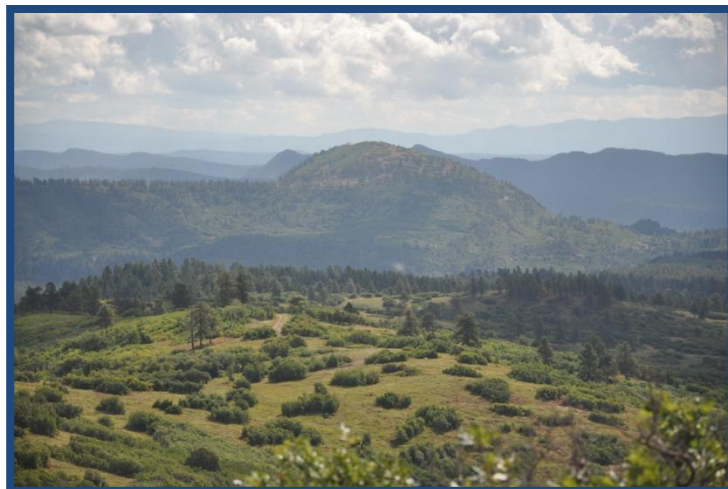


American Recovery and Reinvestment Act Colorado State Forest Service Success Story

High-Priority Forest Restoration and Fuels Mitigation Grant



During the 1990s, La Plata County grew an average of 3.13 percent annually. Total county population grew from 32,284 in 1990 to 43,941 in 2000, a 36.1-percent increase.¹ With the influx of people came the challenge of maintaining viable wildlife habitat and minimizing conflicts between wildlife and humans. Perins Peak State Wildlife Area, a 13,442-acre tract of land located west of Durango and northeast of Hesperus is managed for wildlife habitat. The Colorado Division of Wildlife Durango District wants to entice roving wildlife to forage there, particularly in the winter when other food sources may be buried in snow.

Wildlife habitat objectives can complement other land-management objectives. At Perins Peak, another management objective is wildfire mitigation. The La Plata County Fire Risk Communities of Concern map rates the fire risk on private land adjacent to Perins Peak as high to moderate ("High" is the highest ranking on the map.) The Perins Peak State Wildlife Area fire mitigation report outlines projects specifically designed for hazardous fuels reduction and forest stewardship. The projects benefit wildlife and people living in the wildland-urban interface.

When the CDOW began the Perins Peak fuels reduction project in July 2010, the backdrop to Durango Ridge Ranch changed. The once solid-green blanket of oak brush seen from U.S. Highway 160 became a mix of openings and oak clumps near the ridgeline. "I'm ecstatic," said Trevor Balzer, CDOW Durango District wildlife manager. "It's the best thing that could happen to a wildlife area."

Multiple hydro-axes, operated and owned by Rue Logging, Inc., created the vegetative mosaic that stretches over 1,400 acres. A hydro-axe is a large piece of equipment with a front-end attachment that resembles a lawn mower blade that is 6 feet in diameter. The whirling blade descends upon an oak clump leaving only stubs and mulch. What would take a 10-person chainsaw crew a day to complete, the hydro-axe can accomplish in an hour or less.



This is not a one-time shot. Since 2005, the CDOW has improved wildlife habitat and reduced the wildfire risk on more than 6,500 acres using equipment or prescribed fire. Projects were completed with cooperation from the San Juan Basin Colorado Habitat Partnership Program, Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, and local federal land management agencies. As soon as the CDOW hydro-axe work was complete, the equipment "hopped the fence" and continued the oak mosaic on land managed by the Bureau of Land Management.

¹Durango Comprehensive Plan 2007 Update



Photo provided by R. Klatt

Ron Klatt wrote the Perins Peak fire mitigation report and oversaw the hydro-axe operation to ensure the work met project specifications. “Blending fire and habitat management was an interesting challenge,” said Klatt. It combined his experience as a range conservationist and fire management officer. “It’s very satisfying to watch the vision in your head materialize so quickly on the ground. The ARRA funds made it all possible,” Klatt added.

In 2007, Klatt retired from a 35-year career with the U.S. Forest Service. He spent the last 11 years as the Columbine District fire management officer for the San Juan National Forest.



Rue Logging, Inc., of South Fork, Colo. was awarded the hydro-axe contract. Brian Rue, president of Rue Logging started the family-owned business in 1989. When logging opportunities declined, Rue diversified his business to include fire mitigation work, and oil and gas pad clearings. The oil and gas work was a “good shot in the arm” until about two years ago. Now the atmosphere is tough, stressful and competitive, as well-established and new businesses compete for projects. Rue has not had to lay off an employee in nine years. He hopes he can stretch it to 10. “I just want to get up in the morning and go to work,” said Rue. Rue Logging was awarded the 2007 U.S. Forest Service Small Business of the Year Award.



“Everyone is very pleased,” said Patricia Haupt, Firewise Neighborhood Ambassador for Durango Ridge Ranch, a subdivision of 35-acre lots. The project created a wide fuelbreak north of the subdivision. Wildlife viewing, including a nesting pair of golden eagles, coyotes, mountain lions, porcupine, badgers, deer, elk and bear, is a day-to-day benefit of the oak mosaic because the wildlife are all more visible. Nineteen of the 34 landowners have employed local businesses to create defensible space on their own properties. Landowners are seeing the multiple benefits and have scheduled additional mitigation work.