

**Recommendations from The Nature Conservancy to
the Colorado General Assembly's
Wildfire Matters Interim Committee
August 25, 2014**

- Good Afternoon. My name is Paige Lewis and I am the Forest Restoration and Fire Program Director for The Nature Conservancy in Colorado.
 - The Nature Conservancy is a non-profit conservation organization working around the world to protect the lands and waters on which all life depends.
 - Our work in Colorado focuses on 3 priority areas: conserving native grass and rangelands; sustaining meaningful flows in rivers and streams; and, of course, improving forest health and fire management.

- First, I want to thank you for devoting time today to this important topic.
 - The Nature Conservancy has identified increasing the use of fire for management as a critical strategy in achieving our overall goal of restoring forest resilience and reducing wildfire risks to people and nature.
 - In many circumstances, fire can be much less expensive, facilitate treatment of larger acreages and provide unique ecological benefits, particularly in Colorado's fire adapted ecosystems.
 - We recognize that fire is not an appropriate tool for all situations, but the scale of Colorado's forest management challenge demands that we retain and use all available tools in the management tool box.

- In Colorado, TNC's Forest Restoration and Fire Program staff focuses on finding ways to apply the latest science and research to current land management dilemmas, including the safe and effective use of fire.

- Our staff includes the seven-member Southern Rockies Wildland Fire Module, a highly skilled fire management team that designs and implements prescribed burns around the state and also works with a number of interagency partners to manage wildland fires.
 - By engaging at the operational, scientific, and policy levels the Nature Conservancy interacts regularly with a number of Colorado's prescribed fire practitioners, including stakeholder led groups such as the Colorado Prescribed Fire Council, and the Southern Rockies Fire Science Network.
 - In our brief time today, I would like to offer some thoughts on behalf of this practitioner community on how the General Assembly could improve our ability to safely and effectively use prescribed burns to reduce risks to communities and improve the forest for future generations.

- **Time is of the essence in restoring and enhancing Colorado's ability to effectively use prescribed burns as a tool in forest and natural resource management.**
 - It is not a matter of IF wildfire will occur, but WHEN.
 - If we do not find a way to use prescribed fire effectively in Colorado, we are essentially deferring our wildfire risk to a less controlled, and likely more damaging and costly, wildfire event in the future.

- We currently expose our forests, our communities, and our fire responders to extreme risk, asking them to try to control fires under the worst conditions. The extensive planning involved in prescribed burns gives us a greater ability to select the conditions under which we choose to have fire and can mitigate most of this risk.
- A recent paper prepared by the U.S. Forest Service's Fire Sciences Lab in Missoula states that "Decades of research have shown [prescribed fire] to be the single most effective tool for wildfire hazard reduction (Graham et al. 2004)." (Finney, et al 2013) This is because prescribed fire is the only large-scale fuels treatment option that addresses all vegetation presenting a fire hazard, especially small diameter material and surface fuels.
- This same study identified 14.4 million acres across the state where prescribed burning could be most effectively used to produce meaningful reduction in fuel hazard.

Recommendations:

1. Ensure that the State of Colorado is a leader in the safe and effective use of fire for natural resource management.

- The policies and actions of state government, even outside of a regulatory framework, have a tremendous impact on the operating environment in which other landowners and land managers work.
- If state employees are not allowed – or no longer have the qualifications – to design and implement safe and effective prescribed burns, this will have a negative impact on the capacity of all land managers to implement meaningful forest restoration and fuels reduction projects.
- Due to changes in state fire management responsibility and regulations that were implemented in the wake of the 2012 Lower North Fork Fire, the use of prescribed fire on state lands or by state employees has been drastically curtailed. If this situation continues, the State stands to lose both capacity and opportunity while forest conditions and wildfire risk on state lands further deteriorates.
- **In order to remedy this situation we recommend that the General Assembly:**
 - Maintain the ability of state employees to use pile burning and encourage the Governor to remove the ban on state employees' use of broadcast burning.
 - **Most Important: Address the need for state employees to have some level of liability protection when implementing prescribed fire projects given the removal of overall governmental immunity for prescribed fire activities conducted by state agencies.**
 - Foster close coordination between the Division of Fire Prevention and Control and the Colorado State Forest Service so that state led prescribed fire activities have the benefit of both forest science and fire management expertise.
 - Support critical prescribed fire training for state employees to ensure that the state increases and sustains its capacity to use fire for natural resource management.

2. Foster a supportive and effective operating environment for the use of prescribed burns, both pile burns and broadcast burns, in Colorado.

- There are number of steps that the State can take to ensure that prescribed fire practitioners at all levels have the tools and resources they need to operate safely and effectively.
- **In order to sustain and increase state support for the appropriate use of prescribed fire, we recommend that the General Assembly:**
 - Ask the Colorado Department of Public Health and the Environment to continue and expand their use of more flexible smoke management permits that enable land managers to implement larger-scale and/or more cost-effective projects while still addressing public health and air quality concerns.
 - Sustain current state grant programs that support forest management and wildfire risk reduction and ensure that these programs allow grant recipients to include the use of pile burning and broadcast burning in their projects if appropriate.
 - Reauthorize and fund WUI Risk Reduction Grants managed by DNR.
 - Continue to fund the Colorado Watershed Restoration Grant Program managed by CSFS.
 - Expand implementation of the new Certified Burner Program and continue to seek ways to make the program appealing and accessible to private landowners.

3. Encourage a Fire Adapted Communities approach in Colorado's Wildland Urban Interface.

- Legitimate concern about the use of fire near communities is one of the most significant barriers to restoring Colorado's forests to a more resilient, natural condition.
- Fire Adapted Communities is a national movement -- supported by a number of land management, emergency management and public service organizations -- that is designed to help communities and their partners take a more comprehensive approach to community wildfire preparedness and to acknowledge the realities of living in a fire prone environment.
- A FAC is defined as one where "Community leaders and residents accept responsibility for living in an area with wildfire hazards. They have the knowledge and skills and have adopted tools and behaviors to prepare in advance for their community's resilience in a wildfire prone environment."
- Colorado has three "hubs" in the national FAC Learning Network: Woodland Park, Summit County, and La Plata, Montezuma and Archuleta Counties.
- **We recommend that the General Assembly consider steps that the State might take that would both support and incentivize continued proactive approaches by WUI communities.**
 - Sustained financial resources (see reference to key grant programs above).
 - Consideration of a voluntary statewide standard for wildfire mitigation along with incentives for those counties or communities that choose to adopt the standard.
 - Revisit other recommendations offered by the Governor's Wildfire Insurance and Forest Health Task Force (Sept. 2013).

I would like to conclude by reiterating that time is of the essence in taking steps to ensure Colorado has all the tools it needs to effectively restore our forests and reduce risks to our communities. The need and the opportunity are there. The State of Colorado must step up to this challenge.