



ABSTRACT

THE EVOLUTION OF RWEACT

RWEACT (Rio Grande Watershed Emergency Action Coordination Team) was established in early July 2013 in response to the West Fork Complex Fire (WFCF) which burned 88,000 acres in the Rio Grande National Forest. The WFCF burned adjacent to nearly 500,000 acres inflicted with a Spruce Beetle infestation; in total, both occurrences affected nearly 1/3 of the RGNF. RWEACT was formed and intended to take the lead in crossing jurisdictions to create an entity that would establish a public/private partnership focused on public safety, protection of infrastructure and the environment. Later in July, Governor Hickenlooper issued Executive Order D 2013-022 declaring a "state of emergency" in the Counties of Hinsdale, Mineral and Rio Grande in response to the WFCF. Executive Order 022 brought significant funding to the Upper Rio Grande in response to public safety and environmental post fire impacts. The structure and function of RWEACT was established in 3 weeks with the WFCF as the galvanizing emergency. This included a name and logo, Executive Director position, "CORE" Board (3 County Commissioners, CWCB Board) with the Executive Director and RGN Forest Supervisor as Ex Officio along with the Office of Emergency Management and Homeland Security, Hinsdale County as Fiscal Agent and the 5 standing committees of RWEACT (Hydrology, Natural Resources, Communication, Emergency Management, Economic Recovery). The immediate goal of RWEACT was to interface with the USFS BAER (Burned Area Emergency Response) Team authorized by policy to conduct a "Values at Risk" assessment. Because BAER can't respond until the fire is considered 50% contained, with the fire at a 2% containment level in July, RWEACT took the initiative to assist the BAER Team in completing the VAR assessment which gave the Forest Service a 2 month lead in this effort. The priorities for each of the committees was determined with Emergency Management as #1 (immediate protection of the public and structures), #2 Hydrology (severe weather forecasting with stream/rain gauge/Doppler radar, remote automated weather stations-RAWS, cell phone and radio warning systems), #3 Communication (emergent messaging by multiple media sources), Natural Resources #4 (protection/mitigation of environmental and VAR assets) and #5 Economic Recovery (address immediate revenue loss in the small impacted communities and a long-term economic recovery plan). RWEACT has since brought together more than 70 partners including local, state and federal agencies, organizations, and individuals to develop this effective, coordinated approach to address fire-caused hazards focused on the protection of human life, critical infrastructure, and the natural health of the Rio Grande watershed and the resiliency of the local economy. RWEACT has tallied nearly 200 accomplished projects and processes to address the emergent mission for mitigating post-wildfire impacts in the upper Rio Grande. Because of RWEACT, the public and agencies are much better prepared for the next wildfire. RWEACT is developing into a non-profit (501-c-3) organization to expand its partnership with the USFS and broaden its mission as a "Watershed/Forest Stewardship" collaborative working more closely with the RGNF on the Forest Plan Revision effort and projects such as the Fell/Buck, Spruce Deterioration Study and Timber- VAR project all of which will address forest/watershed health and community resiliency in a more adaptive manner on the Rio Grande National Forest. The mission of RWEACT's "watershed initiative" is "to promote partnerships and actions that provide for public safety and resiliency of communities and watersheds of the Rio Grande Basin of Colorado".