



Board of County Commissioners

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September 11, 2023

Scott Fitzwilliams, Forest Supervisor
900 Grand Avenue
Glenwood Springs, CO 81601

Forest Supervisor, Scott Fitzwilliams:

Thank you for your leadership of the White River National Forest. On behalf of Eagle County, we'd like to thank the White River National Forest for the outstanding partnership and productive working relationship we've cultivated. We are continually striving to build on the great work we have done together to care for National Forest System Lands and the communities within Eagle County. We are increasingly concerned about the danger of severe wildfires affecting the communities of Eagle County. We witnessed this most recently with the Lake Christine Fire in 2018, the Grizzly Creek Fire in 2020, and the Sylvan Fire in 2021. Moreover, observing the wildfire threats facing other Western communities underscores the need for us to take proactive measures in managing hazardous fuels. We are writing to you today to request your support of a landscape-scale, community-driven proposal here on the White River National Forest.

Eagle County Natural Resource and Wildfire mitigation staff along with the Eagle Valley Wildland Program and the Town of Gypsum have requested that the White River consider a landscape-scale fuels reduction proposal that will protect critical drinking water assets for the Town of Gypsum and Town of Eagle. The municipal water supplies for Gypsum and Eagle originate on NFS land. The facts and concerns outlined below demonstrate the urgent need for a fuels reduction project in these watersheds:

1. The Town of Gypsum identifies wildfire as a Very High (top of the scale) risk, with Certain Catastrophic impacts (large post-fire sediment influxes) to the upper portion of the Gypsum Creek watershed managed by the USFS. The Town of Gypsum placed this risk at the top of their priority list in their Source Water Protection Plan (2016).
2. Nearly all of the Gypsum Creek drainage administered by the USFS is rated as High in Importance as a surface drinking water source per the USFS National Forests to Faucets 2.0 Assessment. Wildfire behavior modeling conducted with the Interagency Fuels Treatment Decision Support System (IFTDSS) platform indicates that the watershed could burn with a mean of over 8 ft flame lengths, with many portions burning with much higher intensities, during very high to extreme fire environmental conditions. The mean fire size modeled during the initial 8-hour burn period was 737 acres in the High Importance reaches. A wildfire of that size would likely grow significantly in subsequent burn periods due to the involved vegetation types and problems with access. Wildfire behavior of this magnitude could potentially lead to the damaging fire effects (i.e. sediment influxes, soil sterilization) identified in the Town of Gypsum Source Water Protection Plan.



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3. The Town of Eagle regards wildfire as a High (second-highest on the scale) risk, with Possible Major impacts (large post-fire sediment influxes) to the upper portion of the Brush Creek watershed managed by the USFS. The Town of Eagle placed this risk at the top of their priority list in their Source Water Protection Plan (2020).

4. Nearly all of the Brush Creek drainage administered by the USFS is rated as High to Very High in Importance as a surface drinking water source per the USFS National Forests to Faucets 2.0 Assessment. IFTDSS wildfire behavior modeling in very high to extreme conditions indicates that those reaches of the watershed could burn with a mean of over 9 ft flame lengths, with many areas burning at much higher intensities. Mean fire sizes modeled during the initial 8-hour burn period ranged from 308 acres in the Very High Importance reaches to 590 acres in the High Importance reaches. Wildfires of that size would likely grow significantly in subsequent burn periods due to the involved vegetation types and problems with access. Wildfire behavior of this magnitude could potentially lead to the damaging fire effects identified in the Town of Eagle Source Water Protection Plan.

5. Both Gypsum and Brush Creeks have significant percentages of the watersheds rated as Moderate or High Potential for Soil Damage from Fire per the NRCS.

A catastrophic fire in these watersheds could harm or destroy the drinking water supply for thousands of people and be difficult to recover from. We believe we must be proactive in tackling the challenges we face with our ecosystems and fire. This project is an excellent opportunity to implement a Good Neighbor Agreement and build our community's capacity. The landscape scale treatment of the project area meets the intent of both BIL/IRA funding. If the Forest Service Rocky Mountain region were to support funding for this project, Eagle County stands ready to serve as the fiscal agent for the NEPA analysis, lead community meetings and scoping, and create a path towards implementation for this project that would serve as a model for forest health and thriving communities.

Thank you for your consideration. Please do not hesitate to reach out for more information to Marcia Gilles, Director of Open Space and Natural Resources, at marcia.gilles@eaglecounty.us.

Sincerely,

Kathy Chandler-Henry

Chair

Matt Scherr

Commissioner

Jeanne McQueeney

Commissioner