

COLORADO FOREST AND WATER ALLIANCE

Forest and Watershed Health in Post-COVID-19 Stimulus Planning

POSITION: COFWA strongly urges all funding entities, when appropriating stimulus and/or infrastructure dollars, to increase financial support for utility and water supply infrastructure projects that protect, repair, and improve water supply resilience. Headwater watersheds are the natural infrastructure of western water supplies and require continued prioritization for mitigation of wildfire risk through increased funding and enhanced federal, state, and local agency support.

BACKGROUND: COFWA has followed the numerous discussions on addressing the economic fallout from the efforts to contain the COVID 19 pandemic. COFWA recognizes the challenges facing the utility and water supply sectors. COFWA has specific input in this regard, as identified in our 2020 Strategic Plan.

COFWA recognizes the unprecedented nature of COVID 19 and the devastating costs facing the economy and our citizens. Likewise, Colorado governmental entities face extreme revenue shortfalls and challenging decisions to recover from the economic consequences of this pandemic. With the early closure of ski areas, mountain communities have been hit hard, but these areas are also the 'high headwaters,' providing critical source water for millions of downstream users, including water utilities and agriculture. Increasing the pace and scale of project work that protects these critical water-supply sources from catastrophic wildfire improves both water and food security in Colorado during these unprecedented times of uncertainty, while simultaneously helping support the economies of many rural mountain communities by maintaining and increasing jobs locally.

Recent comprehensive water supply and drought planning (Drought Contingency Planning) in Colorado clearly identified the importance of healthy forest watersheds and the need to mitigate wildfire risks in order to secure essential water supplies. We urge Colorado entities and our federal partners to prioritize funding and other resources for water supplies as we navigate recovery from the pandemic. If effective steps are not taken to secure funding for these needs, new COVID-19-related competition for scarce dollars will likely divert federal and state funding away from the following critical programs:

- Full implementation of Colorado's Water Plan, related Basin Implementation Plans (Basin Roundtables), and the upcoming, newly revised Colorado Forest Action Plan and Atlas;
- Implementation of the federal Water Source Protection Program of the 2018 Farm Bill, which secured additional federal funding to match local watershed investments; and
- Increased wildfire risk reduction treatments in critical public utility corridors and water supply watersheds.

Many states will be needing assistance in the upcoming months. Colorado has the distinct advantage that the public lands within our state generate significant revenues from Special Use Permits and related activities. In addition to the nearly \$30 million currently paid by Colorado ski resorts, tens of millions are paid by utility companies that provide critical services to Coloradans. A greater portion of this local funding could be retained within Colorado immediately to provide jobs and increase our collective investment in projects to improve forest health and watershed protection as outlined in Colorado's Water Plan and Forest Action Plan – and reflected in the numerous NEPA-ready forest management projects already planned throughout our state. We must not lose these critical priorities as we face more challenges and already constrained budgets.

The members of the Colorado Forest & Water Alliance (COFWA) have joined together for mutual assistance in advocating at state and federal levels about policies, funding, and programs that support meaningful and measurable improvements in forest health and watershed resiliency benefiting Colorado.

Colorado Forest & Water Alliance Members: Colorado Water Congress, Colorado Timber Industry, Club 20, and the Watershed Health Investment Partners

Approved by Consensus: April 16, 2020