

COLORADO FOREST AND WATER ALLIANCE

Forest Health and Water Planning

POSITION: The Colorado Forest and Water Alliance (COFWA) recognizes the importance of incorporating forest health in ongoing water supply planning being conducted by the nine Basin Roundtables in updating their respective Basin Implementation Plans (BIPs), and further developing statewide forest health considerations in the planned update to the Colorado Water Plan by Colorado Water Conservation Board (CWCB). Additionally, COFWA promotes the incorporation of elements of the water resource planning work conducted by the Basin Roundtables and CWCB to be incorporated into the Forest Atlas tool recently developed by the Colorado State Forest Service.

BACKGROUND: With increasing large, high-severity wildfires, and widespread forest mortality from disease and insect infestation, Colorado's forest health presents a significant risk to our state's water resources threatening critical municipal, agricultural, and industrial water supplies and environmental and recreational values.

The threat of wildfire to Colorado's water resources was recognized by the CWCB specifically in 2012-13 as catastrophic fires, including the High Park, Waldo Canyon and the Westfork Complex, caused post-fire conditions that significantly degraded water quality, damaged available water supplies for agricultural and municipal uses, and reduced reservoir storage capacity. As CWCB developed Colorado's first State Water Plan, it incorporated the need to address the threat of wildfire and post-fire impacts to water resources and directed the nine Basin Roundtables to consider addressing this threat in their initial BIPs completed in 2015. In the intervening years, several Roundtables have made significant progress on this, but much more should be done.

Currently, Roundtables are initiating updates to their 2015 BIPs. *This is a unique opportunity for the Roundtables to collaborate and develop a more comprehensive approach to understanding and addressing the risk of wildfire to water supplies in their respective river basins and across the state.* Consistent consideration of this shared threat by the nine Roundtables during their BIP updates would also inform upcoming statewide planning efforts including the CWCB's update of Colorado's Water Plan and the Colorado State Forest Service's ongoing development of Colorado's Forest Atlas. Finally, developing a stronger understanding of forest health risks in their own river basins will help the Roundtables in their ongoing efforts.

Benefits of including forest health and wildfire risk assessment in the Roundtables' BIP updates could include the following:

1. Use of a consistent approach to prioritizing forest health projects to protect critical water supply watersheds and water infrastructure, such as key storage reservoirs
2. Development of basin-specific and statewide prioritized plans to most effectively mitigate identified wildfire risks to water resources in the most cost-efficient manner
3. Refined and supported funding requirements that are needed to achieve these outcomes
4. Opportunities for leveraging a robust common understanding of forest health risks to Colorado's water future.

Similar to the need to cooperate in planning to meet Colorado's existing and future water needs, we share the responsibility to protect our precious water resources from the threats of poor forest health and high-severity wildfires.

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: 06/08/2020