

COLORADO FOREST AND WATER ALLIANCE

Water Values and the Wildfire Decision Support System

POSITION: The Colorado Forest and Water Alliance (COFWA) believes that including critical water infrastructure and critical watershed data for water supplies in the Wildfire Decision Support System (WFDSS) that the U.S. Forest Service uses for managing wildfires during suppression activities is vitally important to protection of water supplies in Colorado and beyond. Over 800 community water systems in Colorado depend on federally managed lands for all or part of their water resources, so we support a collaborative approach between Forest Service, state agencies, and local entities to assure that data for such values is developed and incorporated into WFDSS as quickly as possible.

BACKGROUND: Federal wildfire incident management teams utilize WFDSS as a map-based tool to provide timely information for wildfire suppression activities to locate and identify the “values at risk” in the area where a wildfire is burning. These values include infrastructure like roads and power lines, private properties and homes, and even critical wildlife habitat; *however*, important water supply infrastructure or other critical water supply information has not historically been incorporated into WFDSS.

Including information on critical drinking water infrastructure and water supply watersheds within WFDSS improves the likelihood that fire suppression activities can be directed to avoid catastrophic impact to a community’s water supply. In 2016, a pilot project, funded in part through a Colorado Water Conservation Board grant, gathered geospatial information for major water supply collection systems and reservoirs located in and near the Pike and San Isabel (PSI) National Forests within the Arkansas River Basin and integrated that information into the PSI WFDSS database. The second phase of the project refined the geospatial data gathering and processing methods to incorporate information for other smaller water supply systems into WFDSS, for future similar uses in other national forests in Colorado. The project has continued with support of the Colorado Department of Public Health & Environment, US Forest Service, Coalitions & Collaboratives, Inc., Colorado Rural Water Association, and Colorado Springs Utilities. But this integration of critical water supply data into WFDSS must be expanded and implemented at a faster pace. Having this information readily available when fighting active wildfires, resource managers better understand the importance of specific water supply infrastructure and critical watersheds at risk. This allows them to take the most appropriate actions to protect critical drinking water supplies during suppression efforts and can also inform emergency post-fire response efforts to protect water supplies and infrastructure from the debris flows and water quality contamination often caused by catastrophic wildfires. Additionally, identifying critical water supply infrastructure and watersheds on and near national forests and incorporating this data into WFDSS not only improves wildfire suppression activities and post-fire recovery, but can also help resource managers prioritize areas where wildfire mitigation can be proactively performed to protect water values at risk.

The members of the Colorado Forest & Water Alliance (COFWA) have joined together for mutual assistance in advocating at state and federal levels for policies, funding, and programming 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: