



PRIOR COLLABORATION IMPROVES WILDFIRE RESPONSE AND RECOVERY

THE 2011 TRACK FIRE IN RATON, NEW MEXICO

FACT SHEET 2 • SUMMER 2014

Large wildfires can affect communities in many ways. For the city of Raton, New Mexico, the 2011 Track Fire posed a significant threat to the city's municipal watershed. Despite significant pre-suppression work to treat the forest within the watershed, the Track Fire burned with high severity through much of the area and necessitated immediate recovery actions to maintain the watershed as a primary drinking water source. The relationships, communication, and trust that were established between key partners during prior projects, however, initiated quick wildfire response and recovery actions, which helped save the watershed from the "worst case scenario fire." This case study demonstrates the value that prior collaboration can have in reducing the lasting impacts of a large, severe wildfire.

WILDFIRE PREPARATION

Sugarite Canyon State Park is one of the only parcels of public land in the Raton area and is highly valued for activities such as hiking, camping, fishing, and hunting. It contains dense ponderosa pine and mixed conifer stands and serves as the primary municipal watershed for Raton. In 2002, several key players from local- to national-level agencies involved in natural resource management started working with each other and with relevant NGOs to discuss, plan, and implement vegetation management projects in the Sugarite Canyon State Park area.

Thinning projects within the state park began in 2004. In 2006, the group was awarded a federal Collaborative Forest Restoration Program¹ grant to prepare a watershed stewardship plan and implement restoration projects on the New Mexico side of the border. Approximately 600 acres of dense forest were ultimately thinned from 2005 to 2007, and additional acres on the Colorado side brought the total area treated to around 2,700 acres by 2010.

THE TRACK FIRE

The Track Fire burned 27,792 acres in New Mexico and Colorado from June 12th through June 27th, 2011. Fire behavior was extreme and facilitated by high winds, low humidity, and dry conditions following extended drought. Within hours of ignition the fire jumped I-25, necessitat-



ing landowner evacuations on the fringes of Raton and surrounding lands. It quickly ran up and over surrounding mesas before spreading eastward to the basin containing lakes Maloya, Dorothea, and Alice, which provide the primary drinking water for the city of Raton.



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The Raton Fire Department responded first to the fire, but local response capacity was quickly overwhelmed. A New Mexico state wildland fire crew arrived several hours after the fire started, and was followed by a Type II federal team the following day. Although there was little that local efforts could do to stop the spread of the fire in the extreme dry conditions, the partnerships that were established during the prior collaborative thinning projects helped promote efficient communication and organization around next steps. Networks and trust established between partners during previous efforts were widely credited for expediting action and facilitating a smooth transition from local to regional and federal efforts.

RECOVERY

Recovery efforts were urgent and extensive. In addition to the severity of the burn, large rainfall events forecasted soon after the fire was contained posed a significant threat to the municipal water supply. Watershed engineering work began immediately upon containment to prevent post-fire sedimentation from degrading the water supply.

Several preparatory considerations helped facilitate the necessary efficiency of this work. The City of Raton Water Works Department had set aside funds through a special user fee which could immediately be used as the required match for Natural Resource Conservation Service Emergency Watershed Protection funds. This funding was therefore able to get rehabilitation through seeding and contour logging started as soon as possible. In addition, although the fuels reduction efforts did not alter the fire behavior of the extreme fire event, the cooperative relations built during the reduction efforts helped greatly in the local post-fire recovery by facilitating quick decisions, action, and trust among partners to tackle rehabilitation efficiently.

In general, the post-fire watershed rehabilitation work was highly successful. Although one of the three reservoirs had to be sacrificed for use as a sediment basin, the recovery effort was broadly seen as providing the best possible outcome from a worst-case scenario in the watershed. Efforts also succeeded in protecting the municipal and recreational values associated with Lake Maloya, the largest reservoir and centerpiece of the state park.

LESSONS LEARNED

Some disagreement and eventual compromise around how to treat forests in the state park may have resulted in less intensive treatments or prevented more acres from

being treated prior to the fire. While some partners felt that chipping and leaving woody material on-site rather than removing it may have contributed to damage in treated areas, others felt that the chipped material had a negligible impact on damage given the large area of untreated acres, severe conditions, and wildfire intensity.

ONGOING EFFORTS

Overall, the success of local recovery efforts was largely attributed to strong partnerships formed around wildfire mitigation prior to the Track Fire. As one local official noted: "It's about trust. If you personally know the person making decisions, where they are coming from, and you trust them, it makes all the difference in making efforts straightforward." Additional efforts have continued to utilize trust between partners in addition to volunteer resources for seeding and planting in the burned area, and for planning new projects and initiatives that continue to bolster local wildfire resilience.



LEARN MORE

For more information about the project and additional publications go to:

ewp.uoregon.edu/wfresilience

This case study is also elaborated further in Working Paper 50: *Community diversity and wildfire risk: An archetype approach to understanding local capacity to plan for, respond to, and recover from wildfires*, which can be found at: http://ewp.uoregon.edu/sites/ewp.uoregon.edu/files/WP_50.pdf

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¹ The Collaborative Forest Restoration Program is unique to New Mexico, and is administered through the USDA Forest Service State and Private Forestry Program. For more information, visit: http://www.fs.usda.gov/detail/r3/workingtogether/grants/?cid=fsbdev3_022022.

This fact sheet series is part of a research collaboration between University of Oregon, Washington State University, Portland State University, and University of Idaho, with funding from the USDA National Institute for Food and Agriculture, Grant #2011-67023-30695. All photos were taken by Autumn Ellison in and around Sugarite State Park in May 2014.