



## 2020: ROCKY MOUNTAIN RESTORATION INITIATIVE'S YEAR IN REVIEW

### HOW AN IDEA TOOK SHAPE AMID HISTORIC WILDFIRES AND A GLOBAL PANDEMIC

**I**t started as an idea and took on a self-organizing life of its own. The idea was simple: Direct strategic investments at improving a few larger landscapes rather than make slow progress in multiple small places.

In February 2019 the National Wild Turkey Federation and its longtime partner the U.S. Forest Service convened to address the challenges that come with fast-paced and large-scale landscape restoration. Colorado has a large number of headwaters and a track record for collaborative work on forest restoration. So it was selected as a pilot location to showcase a Shared Stewardship strategy, a new approach to forest management. By May of that year, NWTF and the U.S. Forest Service convened a group of stakeholders in Colorado and out of those discussions the idea grew into the Rocky Mountain Restoration Initiative (RMRI).

“The idea is to focus in one place, and once you’ve achieved that change on the landscape, move to another,” said San Juan National Forest supervisor, Kara Chadwick, to the Durango Herald. The idea is to work across all boundaries – federal, state and private lands – to make “transformative change” on the landscape through projects

like forest thinning, prescribed burns and boosting logging operations.

By July 2019, others were attracted to this idea of RMRI. They met and discovered they agreed on four things they all valued: **forests and wildlife, water, recreation and communities.** The RMRI idea gained steam. In September partners outlined the process

shape—a kind of bicycle built in motion, according to some. True, the work in each of the three RMRI landscapes predated the idea of RMRI (a primary reason Colorado was selected for the initiative). Prior and leading up to 2020, for example, RMRI partners were already leveraging federal and non-federal resources through the Collaborative Forest

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for accepting project proposals and by November eight collaborative groups had submitted. A month later, the RMRI partners chose to initially focus efforts in Southwest Colorado and selected the Upper Arkansas and Upper South Platte as additional priority landscapes to support. They also identified four cross-cutting issues and assigned subcommittees to address each one of them: what to do with all of Colorado’s unmerchantable wood; how to address workforce shortages; where to find the funding to do the work; and how to generate the public’s buy-in.

By 2020, the RMRI idea was taking

Landscape Restoration Program, Forests to Faucets, Good Neighbor Authority, Upper South Platte Partnership, Chaffee Chips, Southwest Wildfire Impact Fund (SWIF) and other programs. But the idea behind RMRI was to build off the collaborative work already advanced by the three landscapes. RMRI would serve as a center of gravity, attracting national and local attention, and pulling together staff, resources and funding for each of the three RMRI landscapes.

In 2020, the idea of RMRI was assuming an identity and purpose. RMRI partners authored a governance charter establishing roles and organizational structure. Subcommittees

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developed work plans and hosted webinars including experts from around the country. What was emerging was strong alignment between RMRI and organizations' values, priorities and funding. For instance, portions of the Colorado State Forest Service prioritization map—outlined in their 2020 Forest Action Plan—overlapped with RMRI landscapes. Additionally, Great Outdoors Colorado, the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, Gates Family Foundation and Colorado's Department of Natural Resources aligned Restoration and Stewardship of Outdoor Resources and the Environment, or RESTORE, funding with RMRI landscapes. The RESTORE program granted \$150,000 for restoration work in Southwest Colorado and \$350,000 for restoration work in the Upper Arkansas.

Soon, the idea of RMRI influenced decisions to route funding toward RMRI

landscapes. How? "Initially by creating the space to allow for our partnership to emerge, grow, and sustain our shared goals," said Jacqueline Buchanan, USFS lead at RMRI and Rocky Mountain region deputy regional forester. The USFS, for example, received end-of-year funding for the Pike and San Isabel National Forests and Comanche and Cimarron Grasslands (PSICC) and the Arapaho and Roosevelt National Forests and Pawnee National Grassland (ARP) because RMRI partners were able to identify statewide priority landscapes.

"With our RMRI partnership in place we can demonstrate the ability to efficiently utilize resources to meet shared objectives, which allows our partnership to fully take advantage of opportunities such as additional funding," Buchanan said.

In 2020, RMRI partners also began to increase capacity—a word used to describe an organization's staffing and resourcing

capabilities. The U.S. Forest Service and the Natural Resources Conservation Service each assigned new positions dedicated to support RMRI.

"RMRI's formation has enabled natural resource leaders in Southwest Colorado to help inform, coordinate and address resource values on our landscape and community," said Cody Robertson of the NRCS Durango field office.

2020 marks just the beginning for the Rocky Mountain Restoration Initiative. But what started as an idea has mobilized those impacted by a changing climate and growing population, and it's carved out a public space for them to recover the most vulnerable landscapes on a bigger scale. RMRI is not another project, another bureaucratic mandate. It's Shared Stewardship fleshed out, a new yet logical approach to forest management beyond the "random acts of restoration" of yesterday.

## 2020 RMRI Subcommittee Accomplishments

RMRI Subcommittees were brought together to help remove key barriers and develop solutions identified in RMRI project areas. Visit [restoringtherockies.org/subcommittees](http://restoringtherockies.org/subcommittees).



### Governance

- ✓ Published RMRI Governance Charter outlining roles.



### Biomass Utilization

- ✓ In addition to building and implementing its workplan, main effort in 2020 has been toward encouraging the use of Colorado wood products in postfire rehabilitation.
- ✓ Hosted a biomass energy webinar to build a framework on the challenges and opportunities for biomass utilization in Colorado.
- ✓ Met with the Colorado Department of Agriculture to promote the use of Colorado wood products and biochar.
- ✓ Organizing pilot projects to use Colorado wood products for post-fire rehabilitation on the Grizzly Creek Fire and biochar for agricultural applications.
- ✓ Members of subcommittee facilitated regional (AZ, NM, CO) contractor survey and applications for USDA Wood Innovations.



### Workforce Capacity

- ✓ Built and implemented workplan. Main effort has been toward recruiting and training local talent for the Colorado forestry industry.
- ✓ Connected with several Colorado workforce centers.



### Funding

- ✓ Working on getting the forestry and resilience industry recognized as a growth industry in the 2021 Colorado Talent Pipeline Report. Secured funding in partnership with Northern Arizona University to complete a statewide forestry products industry survey.
- ✓ Researching logging and forestry equipment curriculums. They will use that information to work with the Colorado Department of Higher Education (CDHE) to develop curriculums for two-year and four-year colleges in 2021.

- ✓ Led discussions on a funding strategy to address funding needs across all three landscapes.
- ✓ Hosted Conservation Finance webinar.



### Social License

- ✓ Built and implemented a workplan while adding partners from the CSFS, Fire Adapted Colorado and the Division of Fire Protection and Control.
- ✓ Developed three themes for social license messaging: prescribed fire, fire adapted communities and active forest management.



### Communications

- ✓ Secured funding for brand and logo to increase attention.



## SOUTHWEST COLORADO

On Dec. 9, 2019, the Rocky Mountain Restoration Initiative unanimously selected Southwest Colorado as the first place where it wants to focus its collective efforts. The project area encompasses nearly 750,000 acres, stretching 120 miles along Colo. Highway 160, including the towns of Cortez, Dolores, Mancos, Durango and the San Juan National Forest.



### 2020 Outcomes

#### Joint Prioritization

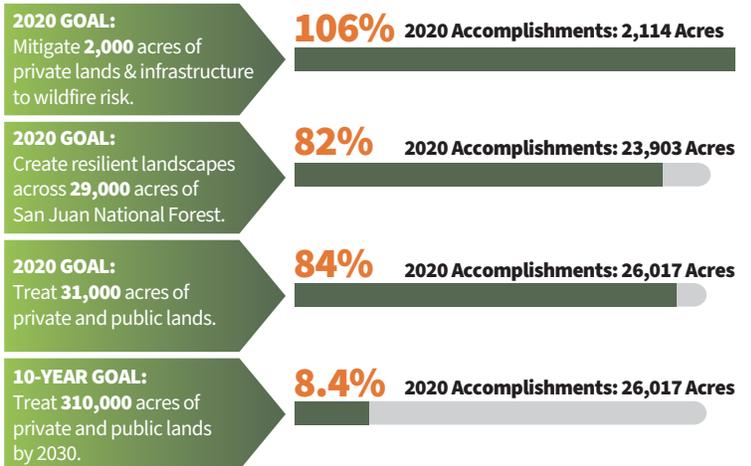
In 2020, Southwest Colorado partners established processes to identify priorities within a 750,000-acre landscape. Additionally, they developed a governance charter and structure standing up a multi-partner Steering Committee made of local natural resource leaders from federal, state and non-government organizations. In addition, the group established an Advisory Network and Science Team, each represented by dozens of local experts and stakeholders to guide decision-making.

#### Cross-Boundary Strategy

Once partners identified a high-priority landscape, there were questions on how to generate funding and align programs to accomplish work on-the-ground. The RESTORE program is a great example of Shared Stewardship because agencies and foundations pooled resources, identified priorities, and aligned priorities with Southwest Colorado. Southwest Colorado partners also developed the Southwest Wildfire Impact Fund as a private lands funding strategy to increase the pace and scale of private lands treatment in Southwest Colorado. Southwest Colorado partners can use the Southwest Wildfire Impact Fund to align private land treatments with public land treatments. In the 2020 Forest Action Plan, the CSFS included RMRI landscapes among their highest priorities. Lastly, Southwest Colorado partners submitted a CFLRP grant and had their proposal ranked as a top-three project in the country. All these programs come together to form a landscape-scale strategy.

#### Outcomes at Scale

Through joint prioritization and cross-boundary strategies, Southwest Colorado partners were able to achieve outcomes at scale. Southwest Colorado partners used their selection as an RMRI priority landscape to apply for grants and highlight collective accomplishments, shared values and shared priorities. A shared vision helped partners to tell one collective story. Southwest Colorado partners, as a result, reached better outcomes in 2020:



#### Shared Stewardship stresses outcomes. How are stakeholders in SW Colorado developing an outcome-based prioritization strategy?



**Jason Lawhon**  
U.S. Forest Service

Focusing on outcomes starts with planning together to identified shared values, prioritizing where those values are most at risk on the landscape, and working together to invest in individual and collective actions that benefit those shared priorities. RMRI is different as it tries to bring focus to these areas and amplify diverse investment of funding and resources through new and existing programs.

Partners in Southwest Colorado developed a shared vision of their landscape and the actions it would take over ten years to make it a reality. They are now actively developing a strategy to prioritize locations across the 750,000 acre project area to address threats to the four RMRI values.

#### How has RMRI enabled its partners to achieve what could not be accomplished singly?



**Patt Dorsey**  
National Wild Turkey Federation

The great thing about RMRI is that it doesn't change what partners are doing. Partners are doing great stuff across the landscape and they each contribute uniquely to the collective outcome.

RMRI's shared goal, to affect a 750,000-acre landscape in southwest Colorado, aligns and coordinates the efforts of partners to achieve more together than any partner could do alone.

## UPPER ARKANSAS

RMRI partners are working to restore 30,000-45,000 acres of public and private lands in priority areas across their 900,000-acre project area. The Ark River headwaters communities are a model of collaborative impact, working with 80+ partner organizations (county governments, agencies, non-profits and businesses) to restore Arkansas River Headwaters health. The project's top community priority is to accelerate action to address declining forest health related to decades of full fire suppression. Upper Ark Thrives delivers regional and national benefits since these headwaters, in Colorado's largest river basin, provide drinking water for over a million people. The Arkansas River also is the most rafted in the country. The project area hosts an estimated 4 million visitors a year from across the U.S. and around the world.



### 2020 Outcomes

#### Chaffee Chips

In 2020, Upper Arkansas partners implemented the Chaffee Chips program. The



program encourages landowners to clear brush and trees and pile slash near their curbs. County trailers remove slash from treatments to county grinders. In the first year 185 landowners participated in the program generating 485 piles and creating two firewise communities. Goal is to expand the program into Lake County.

#### Next Generation Community Wildfire Protection Plan

In February 2020, Upper Arkansas partners finalized their Next Generation Community Wildfire Protection Plan, which identified 5% of the landscape that needs to be treated to reduce 50% of the wildfire risk towards community-identified assets. They are on track to complete the work by 2030.

#### Methodist Front Project

The Envision Forest Health Council's 2020 marquee projects are the Methodist Front, Coyote Valley Road and Railroad Bridge projects. The Methodist Front Project is a cross-jurisdictional treatment that extends from the Decker Fire perimeter across private lands and state lands and connects with National Forest lands. The project represents a ten-mile long fuel break and 8,000 acres of treatment. The treatment protects firefighters' lives and water resources, including drinking water for one million users and 60% of the Gold Medal trout habitat in Colorado. It will also enhance wildlife habitat through aspen regeneration. The Upper Ark partners have funded 500 acres of private lands treatment including support from a RESTORE grant and \$800,000 of community funding from the Chaffee Common Ground Fund ballot initiative and the cities of Poncha Springs and Salida.

#### Chaffee Treats

Chaffee Treats is a new fire mitigation program begun in 2020. The program aims to treat private lands, representing 30% of the priority acres in Chaffee County. In the first three months, the program signed up 161 landowners. The next step is for partners to develop full funding to develop and implement treatment plans.

#### Chaffee Recreation Plan

The Upper Arkansas partners and many stakeholders are developing the Chaffee Recreation Plan, a county-wide all-lands plan with the goal of maintaining exceptional recreation experiences while sustaining natural resources and the economic benefits of recreation. More than 30 partner agencies, local governments and non profit organizations are on track for 2021 plan completion.



**Cindy Williams**  
Envision Chaffee  
County

#### What can account for all the successes in the Upper Arkansas?

Chaffee County citizens are leading the charge, including agreement via a 2018 ballot measure to tax themselves to help fund forest restoration. Our program is guided by community-driven and science-based plans, where wildfire treatment focuses on the 5% of the landscape where models show it can reduce half of the risk. The collaborative effort engages 80+ partner organizations that encompass governments, agencies, non-profits and businesses to deliver collective impact.



**Greg Felt**  
Chaffee County,  
Commissioner  
(District 2)

#### Where do you think RMRI fits in the Upper Arkansas?

RMRI is directing more national, regional, state and local attention to fuel local momentum. This empowers our programs to tap resources that support success and also to be shared as examples that other communities may follow.

## UPPER SOUTH PLATTE

The Upper South Platte Partnership (USPP) is dedicated to creating a sustainable and resilient landscape with healthy forests, clean water supply for the Denver Metropolitan Area, high-quality recreation opportunities, proactive and engaged fire-adapted communities, and safe, effective and efficient fire response and management. Over the next 10 years, RMRI partners in the Upper South Platte landscape intend to treat 75,000 acres of private lands and 75,000 acres of public lands to protect water supply to 2 million users in Denver Metropolitan area, critical wildlife habitat and unique and high volume recreation areas.



### 2020 Outcomes

#### Increased Capacity

- U.S. Forest Service (USFS) hired Jake Todd to serve as partnership coordinator to help manage partnerships for the Pike and San Isabel National Forests Cimarron and Comanche National Grasslands (PSICC), including RMRI partnerships in the Upper Arkansas and Upper South Platte.

#### Partnerships

- The USFS with support from Denver Water implemented restoration treatments within Denver Water's zones of concerns in the Upper South Platte.
- The USFS implemented a noxious weed contract.
- The USFS began work with Colorado Forest Restoration Institute (CFRI) and The Nature Conservancy to conduct a landscape-scale National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) analysis. They are working with other Front Range entities, like the Front Range Roundtable Landscape Restoration Team, to launch that project.
- The Forest Stewards Guild began creating informational videos on prescribed burning.
- The USFS implemented a noxious weed contract.

#### Good Neighbor Authority

- The USFS is developing a Good Neighbor Authority agreement (GNA), with the Colorado State Forest Service in an area known as Deer Creek. This 500-acre project is the first of several GNA's under consideration in the USPP watershed.
- The USFS is slated to begin treatments on National Forest land in

the Jerome Miller project area—this 1,100-acre project also has potential for another Good Neighbor Authority agreement.

#### Youth

- The USFS executed a 2021 agreement with the Mile High Youth Corps. The winter burn crew consists of 20 members of the youth corps working and burning piles in the Upper South Platte Watershed. These efforts will increase opportunities for future prescribed fire projects.

#### Funding

- Several projects are being developed with future potential funding mechanisms. The Colorado State Forest Service (CSFS) with the Jefferson Conservation District submitted applications for the Forest Restoration & Wildfire Risk Mitigation (FRWRM) grant program.
- The USFS submitted a Joint Chiefs' Landscape Restoration Program application.
- The Elk Creek Fire Protection District received a grant to support their chipping program.
- The Jefferson Conservation District is working with Denver Mountain Parks and Jefferson County Open Space to apply for a Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) grant.
- The CSFS with the Jefferson Conservation District submitted applications for the FRWRM grant program.



**Christina Burri**  
Denver Water

#### ***The Upper South Platte Partnership predates RMRI. What collaborative work are you most proud of in 2020?***

Wildfires don't know boundaries, so when it comes to forest management in Denver Water's and Aurora Water's priority watersheds, we take an all hands, all lands approach. The McArthur Gulch Forest Restoration project highlights the amount of successful collaboration of the USPP.

The implementation of this project promotes forest resilience, watershed and community protection, wildlife management and recreation resources in a high priority area as determined in the 2020 Forest Action Plan and in a collaborative 2009

Upper South Platte Watershed assessment.

This project will build off previous state and federal treatments, and contribute to the goal of creating an effective fuelbreak across the landscape aimed at protecting communities, forests and essential water resources. It will also be a great opportunity for cross-boundary collaboration with involvement from the Upper South Platte Partnership and the Rocky Mountain Restoration Initiative and serve as a catalyst for future mitigation projects in the area.

