



Colorado State Forest Service

La Veta District 2016 Annual Report

The Colorado State Forest Service (CSFS) mission is to achieve stewardship of Colorado's diverse forest environments for the benefit of present and future generations.

Your interest in the work we do in the La Veta District is greatly appreciated, and we thank you for checking out our annual report. The cornerstone of the work we do relies on the steady cooperation and collaboration with the many partnering groups, agencies, and private individuals we have in the area. In this sense of cooperation, we look forward to continuing our agency's mission and serving the region in all areas of forestry and forest management in the coming year.

The Colorado State Forest Service (CSFS) is a service and outreach agency of the Warner College of Natural Resources at Colorado State University. The CSFS La Veta District serves Huerfano and Las Animas counties for forestry needs ranging from private forestland stewardship and community forestry to reforestation, State Land Board forest land management, and proactive forest management designed to reduce the risk of wildfire.

The future of our area's forests is front and center as a concern of the district's staff. We want the public to more easily identify the CSFS, and utilize us as a primary source for information and expertise to help promote healthy, productive and well-managed forests in perpetuity. More information about the CSFS and the La Veta District is available on the CSFS website at www.csfscolorado.edu.

New District Forester

The CSFS La Veta District is excited to introduce the newest member of the team. Derek Sokoloski was hired in June 2016 to be the district forester and manage district operations. Derek joins Mark Loveall (assistant district forester) and Lisa Clark (administrative assistant) to make the district office fully staffed for the first time since late 2014.

Derek is an energetic and passionate forester who is excited to be in the region and have the opportunity to work for and with the public and agency partners to promote and improve the overall forest condition. He comes to the CSFS most recently from the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources, where he worked for 10 years in the Northwoods focusing predominately on private lands forest management, wildfire suppression and law enforcement, while also working on state and county forest lands. He also previously worked for the California Department of Forestry and spent some time on private forest management in Virginia. Please feel free to come by or contact Derek and rest of the staff for forestry assistance or to just say hi.



Derek Sokoloski, La Veta District Forester

District Office Remodel and Improvement

Throughout 2015 and 2016, a primary focus of the district was to fix up and improve the condition and public appearance of the office, shop buildings and grounds in La Veta. The office was in poor condition, as updates had not been made to it since it was erected in the late 1970s, and was in need of attention. Also, the grounds had become overgrown and somewhat cluttered over the years, which needed to be addressed to make a more attractive and approachable office location for the public. Great improvements were made in 2015, but notable work also was carried out in 2016.

One big part of the improvements in 2016 came in the form of contractor-performed renovations. The main office building received a much-needed facelift with all new interior flooring and base molding and new paint inside and out. The building also received a new roof, removal of the old furnace and piping, and a rebuilt entrance vestibule. An old hazardous material shed was removed from the grounds, along with two fuel storage tanks and other defunct equipment and material. Also, a new chain-link fence was erected behind the office so as to enclose the seedling tree storage area from the local deer herd and allow the main gate to remain open when staff are present, thus improving accessibility to the public. And tree pruning and hazard tree removal took place in order to improve visibility for the public, and to address tree health.

More improvements, along with projects expected to be bid out to local contractors, are planned for 2017. Please come by and visit the renovated office and grounds at 403 Moore Ave. in beautiful La Veta!

Protecting Water Quality Through Collaboration Stonewall, Colo.

The City of Trinidad and most all of Las Animas County source their drinking water from the North Fork of the Purgatoire River watershed, at the base of

the Sangre de Cristo Mountains. Monument and North lakes are the two water storage bodies that ultimately collect the water before it is sent down to customers via a water supply pipeline.



Members of Stonewall FPD's Wildfire Mitigation Crew working on the North Lake SWA project. (Photo: Derek Sokoloski, CSFS)

This watershed's forest has become overgrown in the past several decades, and more recently has sustained a lot of damage and tree mortality from combined drought and insect and disease outbreaks.

In order to protect the water quality from the devastating effects of potentially catastrophic wildfire in this watershed, multiple groups and funding sources have combined their efforts to better defend against this threat. On the North Lake State Wildlife Area, which is owned by the City of Trinidad, a 45-acre wildfire mitigation project was devised and carried out to reduce the ability of wildfire to carry up the valley and devastate the watershed. With seven different funding sources and six agencies and groups committing time and energy, this project was a real success. The manpower came from the Stonewall Fire Protection District's Wildfire Mitigation Crew, while the CSFS administered and helped direct the efforts to identify which trees should be removed to reduce potential wildfire intensity. Most of the biomass removed was given out as firewood to residents of Trinidad, while some was brought to the Robinson Sawmill near Weston to be sold as horse and livestock bedding.

Due to the success of this project, the cooperating

groups and agencies have teamed up again in order to source more funds to continue on future projects in the watershed. We are all hopeful that this great collaborative effort can continue to treat more acres in order to protect this critical water source.

Trinidad Lake State Park Wildfire Mitigation

Trinidad, Colo.

Trinidad Lake State Park is a beautiful piece of the State Park system, owned by the Army Corp of Engineers but managed by Colorado Parks and Wildlife. For nearly four years a wildfire mitigation project at the park, a few miles west of Trinidad, was planned for implementation to address almost 80 acres of land surrounding the visitor's center, park maintenance shop and Carpios Ridge Campground in order to protect these park facilities. Colorado Parks and Wildlife provided the funds for this project and contracted with the CSFS to lay out and administer its execution.



Oettel Enterprise's mitigation equipment at work at Trinidad Lake State Park. (Photo: Derek Sokoloski, CSFS)

In 2016, the project was awarded to a contractor and the work began to reduce the density of the piñon and juniper forest on these acres by half, so as to reduce the chances of a wildfire threatening the park infrastructure. The contractor was seasonally restricted to only operating machinery between Oct. 1 and April 1 in order to operate in the time period when the least amount of visitors are present to protect public safety. More than half of the machine work was completed

in December 2016, and the remaining acres were completed in January 2017. The contractor operated a "skid steer" with a rotating drum and carbide teeth to mulch or "masticate" the trees in order to reach the project's objective. The operator performed at a superior level, leaving the treated acreage in great shape with little soil damage or damage to the remaining trees.

The project was deemed a success by CSFS La Veta District staff, and multiple members of the public positively commented about the project to park staff. Park Manager Crystal Dreiling and other park employees also expressed satisfaction with the work done, and have noticed a variety of wildlife using the treated acres a lot more regularly than in the past.

Local Partner Honored by CSFS

Paul Branson, currently Huerfano County's wildfire mitigation program manager, was honored by the CSFS in May 2016 for a Special Recognition Award at the agency's annual meeting in Glenwood Springs. The award was bestowed to highlight Paul's continued dedication to increase wildfire hazard awareness and forest stewardship in Huerfano County, through his partnership with the CSFS La Veta District. Paul has been instrumental in the planning and execution of mitigation and outreach to the county's citizens.



Paul Branson was honored by the CSFS for his dedicated work. (Photo: Mark Loveall, CSFS)

Paul is a very effective and persistent county employee. He was one of the primary catalysts in getting the La Veta Fire Protection District Community Wildfire Protection Plan completed and implemented. He also

has been tireless in working to oversee wider-scale landscape mitigation efforts in high-risk areas within the county, by coordinating interactions between multiple landowners and interest groups. His ability to network with and educate a variety of both primary and absentee landowners has been critical to getting the proactive mitigation management message out to the public. Paul continues to implement on-the-ground work in the area with funds awarded from the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA)'s Hazard Mitigation Grant Program. Thanks to Paul for the great and consistent effort!

Windbreak Planting in a Tough Environment

Model, Colo.

Planting trees and shrubs along southern Colorado's foothills where they level off into the High Plains is always a difficult proposition in this hot, dry and windswept region. This was no more evident than in the early spring of 2016 when the La Veta District contracted with a private landowner northeast of Trinidad to plant an approximately 2.5-acre windbreak planting.



Spring 2016 windbreak planting on private property in Model, Colo. (Photo: Ryan Cox, CSFS)

At the time, Mark Loveall was the only field forester working out of the district, so he sent out a plea for help on this project, and he received it. CSFS employees from various offices throughout the state answered Mark's call to come and assist.

The day of the planting saw an incredible weather opportunity with cool temperatures and solid cloud cover to keep the sun from baking the trees as they were planted and surrounded by weed-barrier fabric. The planting operation was a success, and the irrigation system was set up and ready to help forge a great future for the planting.

Even with the diligent monitoring and care by the landowner throughout the growing season, the inhospitable environment on the High Plains was overpowering. Not only did the hardwood shrub species receive heavy defoliation from grasshoppers, but the planting was devastated by a severe early-August hailstorm, which heavily damaged the majority of the stock. The persistent landowner did not give up, however, and replanted some heavily impacted portions of the planting; he intends to do the same in the spring of 2017. With the dedication shown so far by the landowner, the district has high confidence that this windbreak planting will ultimately be a success.

State Fire Assistance Grant Projects

Starkville & Cuchara, Colo.

Significant wildfire mitigation work was completed with State Fire Assistance grant money in the district again this past year. Project work was completed at Santa Fe Trails Ranch, south of Starkville, and in the Spanish Peaks Community in the Cuchara area. The intended goal of each of the projects was to thin and reduce fuel loading adjacent to homes and road infrastructure in the communities, to ultimately allow firefighters to more easily defend homes in the event of a wildfire.

Creating shaded fuelbreaks was the mechanism employed to thin forests and reduce fuel loading in the identified areas. Nearly 70 acres were treated on Santa Fe Trails Ranch, while close to 15 acres were treated to protect the Spanish Peaks Community. The Santa Fe Trails Ranch project work was completed in dense, mixed forest of piñon pine, juniper and ponderosa pine, while the Spanish Peaks work addressed incredibly dense and diseased mixed-conifer stands.



Tree damage can be caused by many different agents, and awareness of the forest condition is key to addressing concerns. (Photo: Derek Sokoloski, CSFS)

The end goals were to see the fuel loading on the ground reduced to near nothing, remove ladder fuels that could carry fire into the treetops, and reduce the crown closure of the overstory trees.

Not only did these objectives reduce wildfire threats, but they also significantly mitigated existing and potential insect and disease issues to promote forest health. This was very evident in the Spanish Peaks project area, where lack of management in dense forests led to a dramatic increase in the effects of spruce budworm damage and mortality.

The efforts were extensive, but very successful. Both communities had support from their citizens in order to make the projects possible. Progress will continue to move forward in both of these areas in the coming years. Other sources of funds will be sought, and in the case of Santa Fe Trails Ranch, privately funded projects continue to be implemented. Many thanks are in store for all of the great and passionate citizens who see the benefits of these projects and support them.

Trinidad Water Festival

Trinidad, Colo.

The Fifth Annual Trinidad Water Festival took place in May 2016 and was a great event to educate kids of all ages about the benefits of water supplies and the need for taking care of them. The La Veta District’s Assistant District Forester Mark Loveall and CSFS



Trinidad Water Festival emblem.

Volunteer Program Coordinator Nancy Dadisman attended, and were presenters of an educational program that provided students with a series of exercises to illustrate the connections between trees, water, air, land and people.

The annual festival typically is a very well-attended event which regularly receives great public feedback

for outreach and education. The CSFS continues to be a proud presenter, and will again attend in 2017. A big thanks and encouragement goes out to the festival's directors and volunteers who make it happen!



Proactive forest management is a key to a healthy forest. (Photo: Mark Loveall, CSFS)

In Closing

The La Veta District staff would like to thank you and our many other customers, partners and cooperators who help us achieve our mission. We look forward to a productive 2017, and hope to continue to serve and work with you all. Please feel free to contact us with questions or if you need assistance with forestry and/or tree-related issues.

For More Information:

If you have any questions or need assistance with forestry-related issues, please contact us:

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