

Ouray County a “model” for wildfire mitigation

BY MARY MENZ
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West Region Wildfire Council staff touted Ouray County’s wildfire mitigation efforts at the council’s meeting on Jan. 11. WRWC shared with stakeholders its accomplishments of the past year and collaborations with regional partners. Of note was the continued partnership with communities that have considerable wildfire urban interface in Ouray County.

Ouray County is home to half of WRWC’s 2017 Firewise sites. Pleasant Valley Vista, Fisher Canyon South and Log Hill Mesa—all in Ridgway—are three of the more than 1400 National Fire Protection Association’s Firewise sites recognized nationwide. NFPA sites meet the standards recommended for reducing wildfire risk through community mitigation efforts.

“Log Hill Mesa is still our banner project,” said Jamie Gomez, one of WRWC’s mitigation specialists. “We find that a lot of folks really want to do mitigation work and reduce wildfire risk to their property, but they don’t know what to do or how to do it. Part of it is that they don’t know what to do with the slash.”

Gomez provided a review of the agency’s 2017 efforts on Log Hill, including the annual chipping program during which 119 homeowners had 400 piles of slash chipped.

Early in the summer, Log Hill Volunteer Fire Protection District and WRWC staff also partnered to evaluate homes for wildfire risk during a rapid curbside assessment of all residences in the Log Hill Village and Fairway Pines areas. Concurrently, WRWC mailed 650 surveys to Log Hill homeowners and netted a 45 percent response rate. The assessment data and survey responses will be compared to the

same data collected in 2011 and 2012.

New this year, however, individual Log Hill homeowners will receive information about their specific property’s wildfire risk.

“The data is still being evaluated, but we’re anxious to see what changes we might see regarding homeowner perception of risks and attitudes toward mitigation compared to actual risks. Log Hill is inherently at tremendous risk for wildfire, but significant progress has been made in some areas. We’re seeing more and more mitigation on building lots, too,” said Gomez.

“Log Hill Mesa is still our banner project.”

Jamie Gomez
WRWC’s mitigation specialist

WRWC’s executive director Lilia Falk said these same kinds of efforts are happening in all six of the council’s member counties including Delta, Gunnison, Hinsdale, Montrose and San Miguel counties.

“Ouray County is a little more advanced in this process and has been a model for other communities to follow,” said Falk.

“Within the priority areas of the six counties we’re reaching somewhere along the line of 5500 to 5600 homeowners,” explained Falk.

In the coming year, Falk looks forward to grant funding that would continue supporting WRWC’s community chipping, cost-sharing and education and outreach programs, but the next step for WRWC staff is to start evaluating structural vulnerability for homes with wildfire urban interface.

Falk and her staff are hoping to develop a field-

driven data collection tool and report generator to document mitigation concerns and structural vulnerability for home and property owners.

“A tool like this will help us provide written documentation and recommendations for homeowners,” said Gomez. He described how the curbside rapid assessments lead to on-site visits where WRWC staff can drill down on specific issues related to defensible space and home hardening strategies. Providing a report to homeowners makes the process more formal by providing specific guidance to homeowners.

“There appears to be a trend, too, that these kinds of programs are starting to be recognized by insurance companies,” said Gomez.

While Gomez reported on the Ouray County projects, mitigation specialist Mike Tarantino did the same for several Gunnison County areas including Taylor Canyon.

“Defensible space is important, especially in these areas with one way in and one way out,” said Tarantino. Tarantino also shared with attendees work completed on roadside thinning treatments along Dave Wood Road and an expanded fuel break atop the Spring Creek drainage in Montrose County, creating more connectivity between existing fuel break treatments.

At the end of the presentation, Montrose battalion chief John Rogers, who is also chief of Log Hill Volunteer Fire Department, thanked WRWC for its work over the years.

“I’ve been involved in this group since the beginning, and I want to say thanks to Lilia and this organization for what we see in my district. Where we are now is the result of your involvement. Your abilities and support are what helps make our district so successful.”

WRWC meets the second Tuesday of every month in Montrose and presents wildfire topics of interest to homeowners, mitigation professionals, firefighters and other related agency personnel.

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