

Structure Protection at Elk Stream Ranch: *The First 48 Hours of the Weber Fire*

By Pam Wilson, Fire Information Officer

Elk Stream Ranch residents have had their serene East Canyon location threatened by many fires – Cow Camp, Menefee Mountain, Cherry Creek and others -- over the years.

“We knew it was just a matter of time before we had a fire that would drop over the hill and threaten our homes,” said resident Philip Walters, who serves as a FireWise Neighborhood Ambassador along with neighbor Odin Christensen.

Local firefighters as well as public land agencies also had concerns about their ability to protect the homes in East Canyon during a wildfire. “We’ve recognized for some time that with the way the canyon aligns with slope and prevailing wind direction that it could be very difficult to protect those communities,” said BLM Mitigation Specialist Craig Goodell, who also serves as the Incident Commander for the Durango Zone interagency fire management team.

East Canyon is a long, narrow, north-south canyon nestled in the La Plata Mountains between Durango and Mancos, just west of the La Plata/Montezuma County line. The canyon is also currently the eastern boundary of the Weber Fire which began on June 22.

Years ago, Walters, who has been involved with FireWise of Southwest Colorado for nine years, recognized that if the property owners didn’t take some action to create a healthier forest that “Mother Nature was going to get impatient and send fire and bugs in here to do it for us.”

In 2007, Walters started working on a Community Wildfire Protection Plan for the subdivision. The CWPP, completed in 2008, was the first subdivision-level CWPP completed in both Montezuma County, and in southwest Colorado. The CWPP contains two main areas of focus: educating residents and reducing fuels along Elk Stream’s one way in, one way out road.

Four years ago, Walters applied for and received a grant from the Colorado State Forest Service to create a shaded fuel break along the roads in East Canyon. Homeowners either did the work themselves or hired a contractor to reduce the ladder fuels and thin out vegetation 150 feet from the centerline of the road, where terrain permitted, resulting in a 300-foot fuel break.

The fuel break wasn’t tested against a fast-moving crown fire but it did give firefighters a leg up on defending homes in the Elk Stream subdivision, according to Structure Protection Specialist Rich Graeber, who headed up the crew protecting the homes immediately after the Weber fire began.



Firefighters getting ready to engage the fire as it approaches the road.

“We had asked for 10 engines and only got 5,” he said, “so we were especially grateful to see that fuel break.”

“The fuel break increased our safety factor by several notches,” said Graeber. “It gave us more time to work in the area before potentially having to leave, and it allowed us to commit crews to work on potential threats to homes because we had a large defensible space in which to maneuver engines.”



A line of retardant was dropped just above this home to slow the fire's spread. Note the good defensible space below the house.

Graeber said many residents had done some outstanding mitigation work around their homes; at others, there was more work that could have been done. “We spent maybe 30 minutes at each house doing a little more mitigation – limbing trees, removing ladder fuels, or cutting grass.”

As the fire burned on the steep hillside above the homes, constant ember showers kept firefighters leapfrogging from home to home battling spot fires as the main fire moved north up the canyon. Of the 28 homes in the canyon,

about half of them were directly threatened by the fire. Firefighters took direct action at seven of those homes. Actions included digging fire line around homes, laying hose, and foaming a couple homes.

The mitigation work done by residents also allowed firefighters to safely conduct a burnout operation between the homes and the encroaching fire. The crew intentionally moved past some green vegetation near homes, where possible, before starting their burnouts. The burnouts help even out jagged fire lines making it safer for firefighters to work.



Fire moving downhill behind Walters' home in East Canyon.

Graeber and his crew were also impressed by the building materials used at many of the homes. Most had a stucco finish and metal roofs. Many homes also had enclosed soffits, another Firewise recommendation, which prevents embers from entering the roof eaves.

“The proactive actions these homeowners had taken allowed us to do defensive work from an offensive position,” said Graeber. “As a firefighter and a structure protection specialist, I greatly appreciate their efforts.”