

## OURAY COUNTY

# Tree work to protect Log Hill evacuation route

By BILL TIEDJE  
bill@ouraynews.com

Property owners on County Road 1 heading up to Log Hill Mesa have teamed up with West Region Wildfire Council and Colorado State Forest Service to undergo a tree thinning project to reduce fire dangers on this important evacuation route.

"There are only two ways up Log Hill," said Log Hill Volunteer Fire Department Assistant Chief Tom Austin, noting that the steepness of the southern road adds to its potential fire danger.

"The more people we can get to mitigate, the better chance that we have of keeping that escape route open," Austin said.

CSFS Forester Austin Shelby explained that this project complements other landscape scale fuels reduction actions on Log Hill as well as the work done by individual homeowners to create defensible space around their homes.

Since 2012, Log Hill Mesa has been recognized by the National Fire Protection Association as a "Firewise" community because of its emergency planning, preparedness and ongoing fuels reduction work.

WRWC also assisted in creating a Community Wildfire Protection Plan for the area that identified parcel specific wildfire risk as well as provided recommendations to homeowners on how to reduce the fire danger to their homes.

Log Hill residents can view this report by visiting WRWC's website at [www.cowildfire.org](http://www.cowildfire.org) and clicking on Ouray County on the map.

In 2011, a CWPP was completed for Ouray County that identified fire risks and emergency preparedness needs; however, the Log Hill Mesa plan took this planning to a more detailed level.

Lilia Falk, director of WRWC, explained the

ongoing tree thinning project along County Road 1 was funded through WRWC with a community assistance grant from the Department of the Interior and the Bureau of Land Management.

Established in 2007, WRWC is a non-profit organization that coordinates wildland fire efforts among a number of agencies, from national land managers to local fire protection



Tree thinning work along County Road 1 heading up the escarpment to Log Hill will protect this important evacuation route.

Plaindealer photo by Bill Tiedje

districts.

Falk said the County Road 1 thinning would also double as a fuel break to protect Log Hill, since the dominant winds in the area come from the west.

"That's a great success in our eyes," said Falk. "Now, we're having a larger impact."

Falk explained that funding is also available for other wildfire reduction projects including defensible space clearing around homes, community chipping projects and mitigation treatment demonstration sites.

Any property owners in the six county region served by WRWC can apply for funding,

including Ouray, Montrose, Delta, Gunnison, Hinsdale and San Miguel counties.

The CSFS works to scope and create the projects, including structure surveys and operations planning.

A large shaded fuel break was created last fall to the east of the LHVFD station along the Escarpment Trail.

Shaded fuel breaks keep some trees while removing others.

Shelby said that these fuel breaks are important to limit crowning.

"Crowning is when a fire is running through the crowns of the trees," Shelby explained. "We're essentially spreading the trees out to get it on the ground, so we can fight it."

Austin said that once wildfires are forced out of the crowns of trees, they became less intense,

slower moving and less damaging to the environment.

He explained that Log Hill's fire preparedness has benefited significantly from the early participants who performed thinning and mitigation projects four and five years ago.

"You have those first few brave individuals that will do it," Austin said, noting many people initially had concerns with cost, aesthetics and their control over which trees will be cut. But they were more interested after seeing their neighbors start projects.

Austin added that Falk and Shelby are "really good" at working with homeowners to

help create viable projects and satisfactory results.

"We encourage people who haven't mitigated to consider it and take advantage of the grant funds and expertise available," said Austin. "It's important for people to take responsibility for protecting their own homes."

Last fall, Julia Johnson was the first property owner along the switchbacks on County Road 1 to have mitigation and tree thinning work done, with support from WRWC and CSFS.

Johnson said she decided to go ahead with the thinning project after being approached by WRWC for many reasons.

When the house was built, Johnson said, the fire department had recommended that more trees be cleared near the house.

Additionally, because of the prevailing west wind, the thinning work on Johnson's property helped her neighbors to the north on Log Hill.

Johnson said, "By trimming the trees, it gives the firefighters room to fight."

She said that she felt the added fire protection would also likely increase the value of her home.

While recognizing that some others might feel that the thinning took away from some of the forest's aesthetic value, Johnson said, "I don't think they did that."

Johnson explained that Camouflage Cutters, who performed the thinning work on her property, had chipped the trimmings, although they could also cut firewood.

The additional biomass of the mulch will help the understory of the forest to regrow, she noted.

This fall, thinning work in Ridgeview HOA on the north side of County Road 1 was added to the treatment area started by Johnson last year on the south side of the road.