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OPINION

Guest Commentary: Get ready for wildfire season now

By [Mike Lester](#) and [Tom Fry](#)

POSTED: 01/22/2016 01:30:00 PM MST

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The middle of winter is usually not a time when Coloradans think about wildfires. And while they may realize that the snow we see atop the peaks now represents much of our future water supply, they may not realize how forests and fires impact this supply.



A slurry bomber makes a drop on the Eightmile Fire, north of Canon City, on July 14, 2014. (Michael Ciaglo, The Colorado Springs Gazette via The Associated Press)

Fires that burn with catastrophic severity can destroy our watersheds and the natural storage and filtration systems that Colorado forests provide. This leads to runoff, mudslides and clogged reservoirs.

Now, and not at the height of wildfire season, is the perfect time for policymakers in Washington to act to protect our watersheds. We need national responses to bolster existing watershed-protection tools in Colorado, like the Healthy Forests and Vibrant Communities Act and the Colorado Water Plan.

A recent report by the American Forest Foundation (AFF) lays out two things that can help better protect our forested watersheds: We need the effective involvement of private landowners, and we need to ensure we have the necessary resources to accomplish these tasks.

Acres at "high fire risk"

Using data in part from the Colorado State Forest Service (CSFS), the report found that Colorado has more than 5.6 million acres at "high fire risk." Over 2 million of these acres are in important water supply watersheds.

While the federal government owns a majority of these acres, almost a quarter are in private hands. These lands often adjoin each other. While the law may respect legal boundaries, wildfires do not. This is why it's critical we complement forest treatments on public lands with action on private land — and vice versa.

Like the rest of the state, the Upper South Platte watershed is a mosaic of public and private land. This watershed supplies water to 1.3 million Coloradans.

It also has been the site of several major wildfires over the past 20 years. The Hayman and Hi Meadow fires may be distant memories, but residents southwest of Denver can still see plentiful reminders of what happens when a fire starts in an unhealthy forest.



national, state and local government agencies, researchers and non-governmental organizations to form the Upper South Platte Partnership (USPP)



(USPP).

The USPP's mission is to increase the resiliency of our Front Range forests and communities. It works with both public and private landowners to restore forest conditions and help protect water supplies. Fortunately, as the report notes, these landowners want to help.

The USPP is important because the federal government can only do so much. The U.S.

Forest Service, the primary agency dealing with these issues, is all but bankrupt by wildfire problems.

\$3 billion to fight fires in 2015

Fighting wildfires is expensive. The Forest Service estimates it spent almost \$3 billion to fight wildfires on public and private lands in 2015. This was more than 60 percent of its total budget, and more than three times what it was 20 years ago. But, as in seven of the last 10 years, this still is not enough.

As a result, the Forest Service is forced to borrow from other non-firefighting accounts to make up the difference. This strategy of robbing Peter to pay Paul interrupts programs that pre-emptively reduce risk and restore forest health before the next fire strikes. This includes programs that address private forestlands, like the USPP.

Before Congress adjourned for the year, legislators considered a bipartisan reform proposal. It would have treated the most severe wildfires the same way as federal budget rules currently treat other natural disasters, such as tornadoes. This would give the Forest Service extra flexibility to continue funding key programs throughout the year.

Unfortunately, the proposal was dropped from the budget at the last minute.

Even though the high country is cloaked with snow, now is the time for lawmakers to resolve this important issue. Congress needs to make it a top priority early this year.

Mike Lester is director of the Colorado State Forest Service. Tom Fry is the Colorado-based director of Western Forest Conservation with the American Forest Foundation.

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