

Garfield commissioners critical of forest management approach in signing on with regional wildfire collaborative

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A helicopter makes an air drop over the Lake Christine Fire in July 2018.
Anna Stonehouse/Aspen Times file

Garfield County is on board with the new multi-agency Roaring fork Wildfire Collaborative, but not without some criticism of state and federal land managers' approach to forest management.

County commissioners on Monday signed a memorandum of understanding (MOU) joining 17 other area local governments, fire districts and state and federal land agencies in the formation of the collaborative.

The collaborative is “an informal, unincorporated collaborative organization, in which the members set mutual goals and priorities, utilize existing forest management tools and legal authorities, and align their decisions on where to make the investments needed to achieve the mission and objectives (of the group),” according to a statement of purpose included in the MOU.

The collaborative includes entities in Garfield, Eagle, Pitkin and Gunnison counties, along with the U.S. Bureau of Land Management and Forest Service offices, the Colorado State Forest Service and Colorado Parks and Wildlife.

“The Roaring Fork Valley presents especially complex boundaries with the sheer number of agencies involved, so completion of this MOU is a major step forward to effective collaboration,” Bureau of Land Management Colorado River Valley Field Office Manager Larry Sandoval said in a December news release [announcing the formation of the collaborative](#).

Garfield County had already signed the MOU in the fall, but wanted to make some revisions to go along with its participation in the effort.

“A lot of the emphasis is coming from Pitkin and Eagle counties and the Forest Service to do more forest management, which from my perspective is more than just prescribed burns,” Garfield County Commissioner Tom Jankovsky said at the Monday commissioners meeting.

Specifically, Jankovsky said he would like to see equal mention of logging, thinning and other “more aggressive” forest management methods alongside the practice of prescribed burns.

“I find it ironic that this group talks about climate change, yet they look at forest management as burning the forest, which has the same effect as if we have a forest fire, just to a much smaller degree,” Jankovsky said.

On that note, Jankovsky also asked to remove the word “climate” from one reference in the MOU, where it states among the common interests and goals:



“Active management to enhance forest health and reduce wildfire risk based on the best available data and contemporary science to inform the development and application of on-the-ground activities including landscape scale and cross boundary projects where needed.

“This includes the use of the best available climate science that will help stakeholders understand how a changing climate will impact our landscapes and ecosystems, while also looking for opportunities to improve understanding through local research.”

Jankovsky wanted the phrase “best available climate science” to be revised to just “best available science.” Commissioners John Martin and Mike Samson agreed to go along with the wording change.

The MOU does not bind the participating entities to any financial obligations, but Garfield County is inclined to provide \$10,000 in available grant money to the efforts, the commissioners said. Another purpose of the collaborative is to pool resources to be able to go after various other state and federal grants aimed at wildfire mitigation.

New Deputy County Manager Bentley Henderson was assigned to be the county’s administrative liaison to work with the collaborative, which intends to meet on a regular basis.

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