

# Cameron Peak Fire, Colorado State Legislative Needs

## SUMMARY

- Largest wildfire in Colorado history burning more than **208,000 acres** in Larimer County.
- 90% of the fire burning on U.S. Forest Service lands.
- Increased flooding and erosion will significantly damage the quality, reliability and infrastructure of the Northern Front Range's water supply, which together with the East Troublesome fire, is putting over **1 million people's water supply at risk**.
- Greeley, Fort Collins, Northern Water, Larimer County, local water districts, NGOS, the Coalition for the Poudre River watershed, and post-fire experts are invested and have been coordinating recovery efforts.
- Mitigation projects have been identified for a minimum of 6,000 to 10,000 acres at a cost of **\$20 to \$35 million** and will take *several years* to complete.
- Post-fire mitigation can protect life, property, infrastructure and water supplies. Work is ready to commence but **funding is limited**. State funds are essential to fill this gap. Timing is critical to mitigate the damages from these wildfires.
- Post-fire mitigation will create jobs. The money spent on mitigation will benefit Coloradoans as our economy recovers from COVID-19 impacts.

## KEY ASKS

- Increase appropriations to the state's Colorado Water Conservation Board grant programs to support fire recovery for the next five years. Recovery will take years but there is a near-term watershed protection priority that requires immediate funding. The likelihood and timing of federal funding support is highly uncertain, and state money can jump-start mitigation in 2021.
- State-level advocacy for increased federal appropriations to the Arapaho and Roosevelt National Forest to support post-fire mitigation of Forest Service lands for water quality protection and to administer regulatory requirement to support mitigation.
- State-level advocacy to the U.S. Department of Agriculture for increased appropriations to the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), Emergency Watershed Protection (EWP) Program and advocacy to allow EWP funds to be used on U.S. Forest Service lands.
- Direct COVID-19 stimulus money to fire mitigation, which will aid the local economy by increasing jobs and support local businesses that provide materials necessary for mitigation. Current budget allocations are insufficient considering the scale of recovery needed.



# BACKGROUND

## The Impacts

- Higher runoff from burned areas will increase the risk of flooding and associated loss of life, damage to infrastructure, and impacts to downstream communities.
- Erosion will cause significant impacts to water quality, water supply reliability, and water supply infrastructure for years to come.
- The fire will increase the amount of sediment and ash in the river by 10 or even 50 times the natural amount.
- Sedimentation will create water quality issues resulting in higher treatment costs or may even preclude the ability to treat water supplies.
- Sedimentation will fill in and decrease the volume of water reservoirs can store and may even render them inoperable.
- Post-fire mitigation, such as mulching and sediment traps, can reduce flooding and prevent erosion, but they are expensive.
- The Northern Front Range's economy depends heavily on the availability of clean, reliable water - something that only a restored and healthy watershed can support.

## The Need

- Early estimates of recovery from the Cameron Peak Fire will cost well over \$20 million.
- Local communities that rely on water from the burnt watersheds cannot bear such costs, especially while still dealing with the financial impacts of COVID-19.
- Federal programs are available to assist communities but are underfunded. Agency restrictions on the use of funding also hamper post-fire recovery efforts as noted in the examples below:

**U.S. Forest Service:** 90% of fire is on Forest Service lands. The Forest Service plans post-fire mitigation through the Burned Area Emergency Response (BAER) program but these mitigations are limited.

- » The program does not focus on watershed-scale flood and water quality risks and may not fully address the extensive downstream post fire impacts.
- » To fully address flooding and water quality impacts, the Forest Service requires supplemental appropriations.
- » Basin partners want to work with the Forest Service to expand recovery and are willing to partially fund these efforts.

**Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS):** The NRCS's Emergency Watershed Protection (EWP) provides reimbursements to local communities in post-fire recovery and is the best federal tool available to assist impacted basin partners.

- » Currently available EWP funding is insufficient.
- » EWP funds are typically used only on private land, but given the expanse of the fire on Forest Service lands and the limited ability of BAER funds to fully address the impacts, partners need advocating at the federal level for the NRCS and Forest Service allow EWP funds to be used on federal lands.