



**COLORADO**

**Colorado Water  
Conservation Board**

Department of Natural Resources

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**TO:** Colorado Water Conservation Board Members

**FROM:** Chris Sturm, Watershed Program Director

**DATE:** September 15-16, 2021

**AGENDA ITEM:** Agenda #22, Wildfire Ready Watersheds, Statewide Susceptibility Analysis and Framework Update

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**This is an informational item with no Board action required.**

**Background:** Senate Bill 21-240, signed by Governor Polis on June 15, 2021, appropriates \$30 million to the CWCB “for watershed restoration and flood mitigation grants to restore, mitigate, and protect stream channels and riparian areas susceptible to flood hazards and sediment erosion and deposition after wildfire”. The bill further states “the Board shall expend up to five hundred thousand dollars by December 31, 2022 for a statewide watershed analysis to investigate susceptibility of life, safety, infrastructure and water supplies to wildfire impacts. The CWCB Watershed Health Services Team, i.e. Technical Assistance Team, led by Engenuity Engineering Solutions, is scoped to support the CWCB in this task.

**Discussion:** The CWCB Watershed and Flood Protection section has assisted communities to plan for and respond to floods after fires for many years, and staff are equipped to carry out the task identified in Senate Bill 21-240. The vision for this effort is “Wildfire Ready Watersheds”. The mission will be to assess the susceptibility of Colorado’s water resources, communities, and critical infrastructure to post-wildfire impacts and advance a framework for communities to plan and implement mitigation strategies to minimize these impacts - before wildfires occur. The study goals are to:

- Define and identify post-wildfire hazards that threaten life safety, property, infrastructure, and water supplies.
- Identify the elements of an effective education and communication program that relays the findings, action items, and tools of the assessment.
- Encourage the use of planning and land management actions to protect the health and resilience of watersheds, wetlands, and stream corridors as a strategy to reduce susceptibility to hazards following wildfires.
- Advance a watershed and landscape scale approach to planning and recovery.

Wildfire Ready Watersheds will have a two-part focus: a statewide susceptibility analysis and the development of a framework that communities can use to perform watershed scale planning to address post fire hazards. The susceptibility analysis will be phased as data collection, data development, analysis, mapping, and reporting. This effort will rely on existing statewide datasets for wildfire risk, critical water supplies, populations at risk, and



other infrastructure layers. The identification of post fire hazards using a combination of existing hazard mapping, geologic and topographic data, and other related information to determine potential impacts on values at risk will be evaluated and mapped. Staff will employ a targeted approach to collaboration to identify datasets and other relevant information.

The framework will further describe and provide guidance on how to refine the susceptibility evaluations for local communities to utilize at watershed scales. It will serve as a guide for best planning practices in advance of a wildfire and will also support post-fire mitigation strategies. This includes data collection, permitting and compliance, stakeholder development, engineering/modeling, design, and construction. Design and construction will include project types that can be implemented before and after wildfire. Most projects implemented after a fire are for immediate protection of life, property, and water supplies. Projects constructed before fire provide the same or similar protections while also addressing multiple objectives in watershed health and water supply protection. Regardless of the timing, most implementation strategies will involve a mosaic of different project types employed across the wildfire risk (or burned) landscape.

CWCB staff will provide updates to the Board over the next year as the vision of Wildfire Ready Watersheds progresses. Staff will implement pilot studies using the framework in one or two watersheds if time allows, or in a subsequent phase of the work.

