

# American Recovery and Reinvestment Act Colorado State Forest Service Success Story

## High-Priority Forest Restoration and Fuels Mitigation Grant



El Paso County, one of the original 17 counties created by the Colorado territorial legislature in 1861, is the state's most populous county, and encompasses more than 2,158 square miles. The Office of Emergency Management, a department within the El Paso County Sheriff's Office, assists other local government entities with emergency preparedness. The Southwest Highway 115 Fire Protection District is one of several fire protection districts and fire departments that the Office of Emergency Management works with on wildfire emergencies.

Created in 1996, the Southwest Highway 115 Fire Protection District covers 20 square miles in southwest El Paso County and the northeast tip of Fremont County. The district abuts federal land on the west and Cheyenne Mountain State Park on the north, and the U.S. Army Fort Carson installation runs the length of the district on the east side of State Highway 115. The open ground adjacent to the highway fractures into steep hills and valleys that contain a variety of shrubs and trees. Vegetation can be dense in the valleys and on north-facing slopes.

The Southwest Highway 115 FPD Community Wildfire Protection Plan was completed in September 2007. At that time, an estimated 1,200 homes were located in the district. Ingress/egress routes topped the fuels treatment priorities listed in the CWPP. On the south end of the district, entry signs adjacent to the highway announce subdivisions. Although the squat piñon pine trees do not hide the homes on knolls and hillsides, the dense groups of trees near roads and homes compromise fire safety. Further north on Highway 115 the vegetation changes to ponderosa pine and Gambel oak. Subdivision signs are absent and some auxiliary roads can be mistaken for wide driveways. Consequently, little evidence exists of the numerous homes tucked away on the narrow roads.

In April 2008, the 9,600-acre TA 25 Fire began east of Highway 115 during military training, prompting residents across the highway to evacuate. Due to the narrow roads, evacuations were difficult at best. Two-way traffic for residents and

fire engines was not guaranteed, as vegetation obscured oncoming traffic and hugged the shoulders of the road. And some roads offered no alternative exit from the area. The evacuation confirmed the need to reduce roadside vegetation.

The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act sub-grant awarded by the Colorado State Forest Service to the Emergency Services Division of the El Paso County Sheriff's Office is being used to reduce the amount of live and dead vegetation along auxiliary roads in the Southwest Highway 115 Fire Protection District. Where landowners have given permission, vegetation is being thinned to provide residents safer emergency passage.





Initially, the county planned to take an active role in the fuels reduction project, but the time required to complete the project did not make it feasible. Knotty Pines, Inc., a local fuels mitigation business, was selected from the Request for Proposals candidates to set up and implement the 145-acre ARRA project. Owner Andrew Notbohm has been in the wildfire mitigation business seven years.

A second Request for Proposals was issued to find a private company to represent the county as project manager. Duties included ensuring grant expectations/standards were met and assisting with landowner contacts. In mid-June 2010, the contract was awarded to Kiva Dog Enterprises, LLC. "We are excited to have the opportunity to work on this project," said Christina Randall, owner of Kiva Dog Enterprises. "Besides reducing wildfire risk and improving evacuation routes, these project areas serve as examples for homeowners. Hopefully, residents recognize the value and will continue to mitigate their properties."

Project outreach began in July 2010. Despite the evacuation of many area residents in 2008, Knotty Pines and Kiva Dog discovered fuels reduction can still be a hard sell. As the team of three contact property owners on a road slated for treatment, the responses range from those who are eager to participate, the few who are adamantly opposed and those who say yes – with conditions. The objective is to create 200-foot wide, treated road corridors. Depending on participation and topography, the road may run through the middle of the corridor, or on the edge.

David Mann of Kiva Dog Enterprises is the contract administrator. Mann, a retired U.S. Forest Service employee, spent his 30-year career in forest management and fire. His experience makes him a good fit for the job. As the person responsible for quality control, he works with landowners and tree service contractors.

Knotty Pines selected Tall Timbers Tree and Shrub Service, a Colorado Springs-based business, to cut and chip excess vegetation. Tall Timbers has been in business since 2000. During the growing season, the business has a spray crew, two residential tree service crews and a crew that works in outlying areas where native vegetation is prevalent. "The El Paso County project made it 100-percent easier this winter," said Dave Carpenter, owner of Tall Timbers. "Instead of employing two to three people this winter, I have been able to employ 10."

Phil Cyprian, foreman for the four-person crew working on the county project, has been a Tall Timbers employee nearly three years. He is a certified arborist and has worked in the tree service business 15 years.

In October, crew members received some homemade gratitude from a local landowner who stopped on the road to give them Rice Krispie® treats, a jug of iced tea and cups. Crew members' eyes lit up and wide smiles spread across dirty faces. The landowner thanked them all, hopped back in her truck and was on her way. It made their day.

