

Event overview

U.S. Forest Service Overview

The West Fork Fire Complex of 2013 was composed of three fires that burned more than 109,000 acres (179 square miles) on mostly public lands managed by the Rio Grande and San Juan National Forests.

- **Windy Pass Fire**

- Start: June 5, 2013
- Cause: Lightning
- Size: 1,417 acres (2 sq. miles)
- Comments: Wolf Creek Ski Area was threatened by this fire. There was no loss of structures.

- **West Fork Fire**

- Start: June 5, 2013
- Cause: Lightning
- Size: 58,570 acres (91.5 sq. miles)
- Comments: The fire started on the San Juan National Forest and sent embers over the Continental Divide onto the Rio Grande National Forest on June 19. Driven by 50-60 mph winds, the West Fork Fire spread seven miles on June 20. Although at one point the town of South Fork was threatened by this fire, there was no loss of structures.

- **Papoose Fire**

- Start: June 19, 2013
- Cause: Lightning
- Size: 49,628 acres (77.5 sq. miles)
- Comments: More than 100 summer residences and resort cabins were threatened by the Papoose Fire. Firefighters were able to keep the fire from spreading into the Squaw Creek drainage, thus protecting the major creeks that empties into Rio Grande Reservoir. On July 3, the fire spread more than 11,000 acres in the Trout Creek drainage. Only one small pump house was destroyed in the fire.

Interviewee(s): Kristie Borchers

Date & Time: Dec. 20, 2019, 10 a.m.

Location: via phone

Interview Questions

What is your position? How long have you been in your position?

I was the program manager for RWEACT, the non-profit recovery group that was formed in 2013 after the West Fork Complex fire. I became a Hinsdale County commissioner in January 2019. I have a bachelor of science in natural resource communication, and I worked for both the San Juan and Rio Grande National Forests as the natural resource communication specialist. I also owned a wildfire mitigation business.

Tell us about the disaster event, and how it impacted your community.

West Fork fire was a complex of three fires, all of which were caused by a lightning strike in June of 2013 and during a drought year. We had also experienced a significant amount of die out from spruce beetle, that means our forests were already tinderboxes. We had 800,000 acres of dead spruce trees. That was another factor that just created this massive opportunity for erratic and catastrophic fire behavior.

The fires began on the other side of the Continental Divide, outside of Pagosa Springs, then there was the Papoose fire in Weminuche Wilderness, then Windy gap started on the east side of Wolf Creek Pass.

The town of South Fork was entirely evacuated.

The West Fork Fire affected four counties directly: Archuleta, Hinsdale (Lake City), the upper Rio Grande and Mineral county (home of Creede, which decided not to evacuate, but they did encourage people with health issues to voluntarily evacuate.)

There was never seen before fire behavior -- fire brands traveling four miles.

What resources were most important for your community's long-term recovery? What people, organizations or institutions were most important? Why?

We knew there was a need for coordinated effort to bring assistance from other communities. As the fire was burning, we formed RWEACT (Rio Grande Watershed Emergency Action Coordination Team). We sort of just evolved as a group and gelled really well. We also got governor's order funding which completely changed the equation for our recovery. **Showing up with money and parameters was better than showing up with a list of grants that you can apply for.**

The primary leaders of our region at that time were Commissioner Stan Winery, Travis Smith, Dan Dallas with the Rio Grande National Forest, the chair of the Colorado Water Conservation Board. Other leaders were:

- The county EMs for three counties
- Colorado Water Conservation Board -- stepped up to help governor's orders, provided
- Office of Emergency Management -- funding for economic recovery, was a trial
- The DOLA -- assisted the region, with economic recovery funds.

Did your community have a plan or strategy in-place before the disaster for post-disaster recovery?

There was no strategy in place before the fire for post-fire recovery. Instead, communities banded together as the fire was burning and forged partnerships that they had long been meaning to create. The fire was sort of the catalyst they needed.

How did your community organize itself for recovery?

Hinsdale, Mineral and Rio Grande counties immediately banded together to create a strong lobby to get help from the state and federal government. They also formed RWEACT. The fire occurred on public land and we have communities downslope, and we have a downstream agricultural valley that relies on the Rio Grande river -- five states that depend on it. Our immediate concern was this catastrophic wildfire was at the headwaters and how could that affect the downstream economics of all of our farms, fishing, municipal water supplies.

We are small rural poor counties. We can't do this alone. In Creede, for instance, seven businesses either closed or relocated, and that's a lot of turnover and change. Receipts for the month of July 2013 were down 75 percent in Creede.

So three counties, Hinsdale, Mineral and Rio Grande, did a sales tax analysis. We learned how similar their counties are and it reinforced the idea that as a region that relies on tourist dollars in a big way.

Since the fire, we've developed five economic recovery goals for our region. We are all working towards those goals. The disaster becomes a galvanizing factor.

That foundation helped with the 2018 Spring fire, helped with the 2019 avalanches. I knew who I could call, who would be here, who would help us through this. The common goals of a region helped but also those networks and the partnership with emergency managers and response. And now our new collaborative and emphasis is on trying to as a region work on forest health and economic goals.

Did your community create a disaster recovery “plan” or strategy?

Yes, there were a series of plans that were created post-fire.

From Kristie: “In response to declaring a disaster area for our three counties (Hinsdale / Mineral / Rio Grande), RWEACT (on behalf of the three counties) received a \$100,000 regional marketing grant to fund the plan (link below) to identify strategies for economic recovery as a region. We also received an Executive Order (#2013-17) for \$195,000 through the Office of Emergency Preparedness specifically for Economic Recovery. Using these funds (\$295,000), we worked to 1) increase regional marketing efforts, 2) increase heritage tourism opportunities, 3) increase outdoor recreation opportunities, 4) research biomass opportunities for commercial endeavors, and 5) support existing businesses.

As part of the "support existing businesses" goal, we conducted several projects for Community Assessments. In Hinsdale County, this was a Master Recreation Plan and a Business Retention Plan. In Mineral, this was a downtown Community Assessment and plan through Downtown Colorado Inc. In Rio Grande, this became an updated Community Plan for all the municipalities and a matched grant for \$65,000 for this updated community planning.

RWEACT - in partnership with Rio Grande, Mineral, and Hinsdale counties - received the Governor's Executive Order #2013-022 for \$2,500,000 through the Colorado Water Conservation Board to address fire-caused impacts, improve emergency notification efforts. RWEACT has set up five standing committees to guide this work. In addition to

leadership, we have a Communications Team, an Emergency Managers team, a Natural Resources committee, a Hydrology program, and the Economic Recovery group.”

When you talk to other communities about long-term disaster recovery, what advice do you share? What are the “lessons learned” you can offer?

The take home message for us was that the impacts from public lands are significant on rural communities. We rely on them for our economies. When we did our economic recovery planning our goals as region were to increase outdoor recreation and marketing and increase heritage tourism. But it didn’t really dawn on me until we were in the midst of this (avalanche) disaster that those are still related to public lands. I realized it doesn’t matter if we increase heritage tourism or recreation, we are not not diversifying our economy.

So then, looking at it from that place, let’s step back even further and think, what do we make our economy resilient by adding different or new industries? I don’t know the answer, we are just now talking about some of these things. What does that mean?