
Kelly Rogers, District Forester,
Colorado State Forest Service

The Plan in Action



A heavy air tanker drops slurry on the Southwest corner of the Wolf Park Fire. Teresa Pagone took from this photo within the city limits of the Town of Hotchkiss.

On July 9 2007 at 3:30 p.m., Hotchkiss firefighters were paged to a fire on Coal Road. This fire, named the Wolf Park Fire, would ultimately test and validate every facet of the Community Wildfire Protection Plan.

Firefighters were able to respond immediately to the call because they had just returned from assisting at a car wreck. The dual-purpose clothing worn by firefighters at rescues is also used for wildland fire fighting. As units began to near the scene of the fire, they began to report conditions: heavy black smoke and 20-foot plus flame length visible from a distance.

All of the Hotchkiss firefighters were familiar with the area based on previous experience fighting fires in the vicinity, in addition to training scenarios developed from the North Hotchkiss Preplan. That Preplan identifies several risks that a wildfire presents in that area: the ability to grow into a large-scale fire endangering homes and lives, and the risk from flash floods to the Town of Hotchkiss from runoff of burned lands.

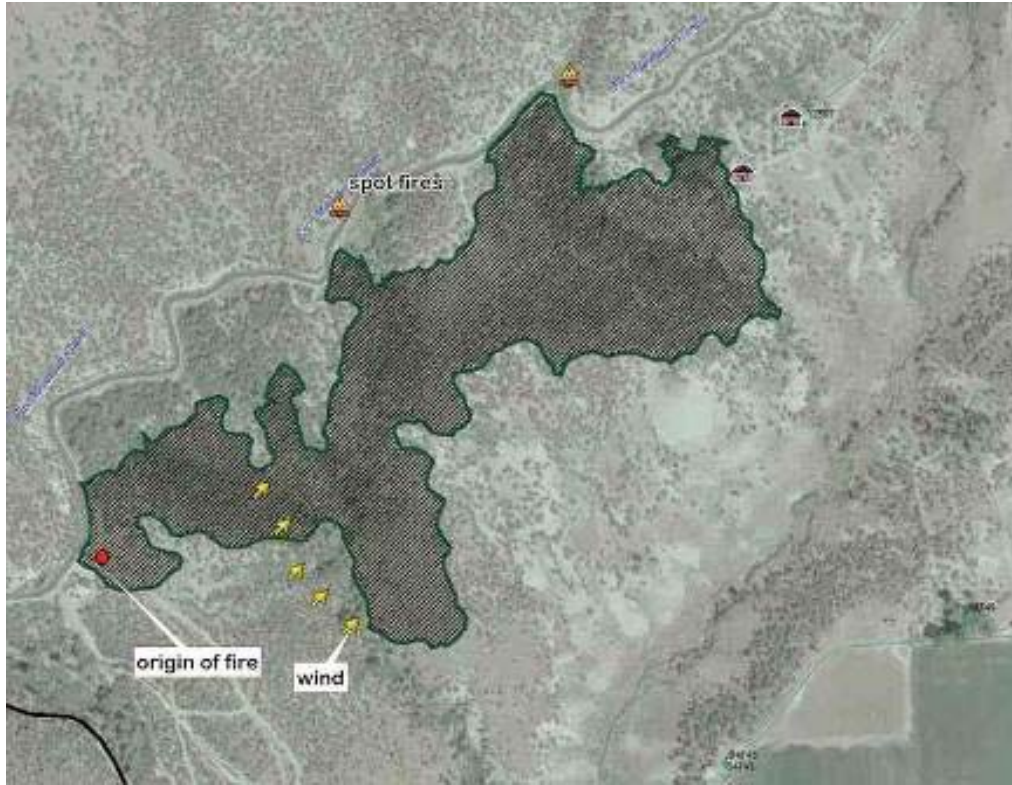
Based on this information, the Fire Chief requested heavy air tankers to combat the fire even before he arrived on scene. Two Hotchkiss fire engines engaged the fire using nozzles mounted on the truck but controlled from inside the cab, pumping water and moving alongside the fire at the same time. This action, taken at the area that the fire started, stopped the spread of fire to the South. Meanwhile, the Fire Chief realized fire was spreading to the East and ordered all remaining units to respond to Powell Mesa Road. A Command Post was established at the intersection of Powell Mesa Road and Wolf Park Road.

Two fire engines were assigned to protect the house at 12507 Wolf Park Road, which was in the direct path of the fire. Firefighters sprayed water on and near the structures and drove out just as a large wall of flame approached the home and garage. Fire slowed down right before it got to the homes and a large air tanker dropped slurry on the fire, saving the home and outbuildings. Fire engines were ordered back to the residence to support the airdrop, making sure the home was safe. The homeowner later reported that he had thinned junipers and other trees near the structures, because of the Fire Chief's encouragement at previous small lightning fires on that property.

Other fire engines were assigned to protect the other homes in the area, and to control the spot fires that had jumped the Fire Mountain Canal. Eventually, the perimeter of the fire was secured by use of further airdrops, a bulldozer line, and a wet line created by numerous fire engines. The fire was held to 43 acres, with about 70% on BLM lands, the remainder on private property.

Throughout the firefighting operation, the Hotchkiss Fire District worked closely with the Delta County Sheriff, the County Emergency Manager, Montrose Interagency Fire, Air Attack Coordinator, and other responding fire districts, utilizing the Incident Command System

In the days following the fire, plans were made to prevent mudslides and flash floods originating from the burned areas. On the BLM property, burned trees were limbed, cut, and laid across the slope of the land. The homeowner, on some of the remaining parts of the fire, hired a machine to mulch burned trees down to the ground. Both actions were taken to prevent erosion from heavy rains



The Wolf Park Fire



Looking east from the fire to the buildings at 1207 Wolf Park Road. Note the green roof of the outbuilding has nearly been completely “painted” by fire retardant.



This photo, taken from further west, illustrates both the slope and potential runoff problems due to damage of the soil from the fire.

On Thursday, July 12 at the Hotchkiss Town Council meeting, Fire Chief Fritz addressed potential flooding issues that runoff from the fire could cause in Short Draw. The Community Wildfire Protection Plan was also discussed. On Friday, July 13, a local newspaper reporter was given a tour of the fire, and an excellent in-depth article concerning Defensible Space and Community Wildfire Protection Plan was published in the Delta County Independent on the following Wednesday. Other newspaper and television reporters were given access to the fire scene and briefed on Fuel Reduction and Defensible Space issues as they related to the Wolf Park Fire.

The media coverage of this and other nearby fires generated much interest in Fuel Reduction and Defensible Space. On August 1, a roundtable discussion on those issues was broadcast on KVNF, the local public radio station. Members of the roundtable were Maggie McCaffrey of the Southwest Fire Center, Kamie Long of the Colorado State Forest Service, Rob Fiedler, Emergency Manager of the Delta County Sheriff's Office, and Fire Chief Doug Fritz. Numerous inquiries from homeowners regarding wildfires have been fielded by those organizations as a result of the media coverage of the fires.



Radio interview/discussion of the CWPP, Defensible Space, and tips for homeowners. 8/1/2007 left to right: Kamie Long, CSFS, Maggie McCaffrey of the Southwest Fire Center (BLM), Doug Fritz, HFD, Daniel Costello, KVNF, Rob Fiedler, Emergency Manager of the Delta County Sheriff's Office.

Summary:

- Firefighters suppress the Wolf Park Fire using equipment designed to be successful in the Wildland/Urban Interface: pump and roll trucks, remote-controlled nozzles, foam units, wildland fire fighting suits designed for quick donning, GPS radios.
- Advanced training for Wildland firefighters made possible an accurate initial size-up of the fire and allowed for timely crucial decisions to be made very early in the incident.
- The North Hotchkiss Preplan maps allowed the Incident Commander to select strategies to suppress the fire, protect structures, and minimize evacuations.
- The use of the computer based preplan and the firefighters GPS radios allowed the Incident Commander to “see” the firefighters’ positions and helped in determining the fire’s size, shape, location and origin.
- Contact with the landowner at small lightning-caused fires on his property in previous years convinced him to do fuel reduction work near his home, which was an important factor in the successful outcome of the incident.

- Measures were taken to prevent problems with storm-water runoff from the fire, an important component of the Community Wildfire Protection Plan.
- An important member of the Community Wildfire Protection Plan, the Town of Hotchkiss Board of Trustees were briefed on the issues concerning wildfire in one of the County's most critical areas- North Hotchkiss.
- The media provided excellent coverage of the fire with a high profile front-page photograph in the regional newspaper, and numerous articles about Fuel Reduction and Defensible Space. Media outlets included television, newspapers and radio.
- The publicity generated large numbers of requests for information from homeowners.

Conclusion:

After more than seven years of effort on Wildfire/Urban Interface issues, including obtaining grants, mapping, planning, training, Fuel Reduction projects and the writing of the Community Wildfire Protection Plan, the Hotchkiss Fire District has developed good working relationships and partnerships with other Agencies, fire districts, the media, and, most importantly, the public. This partnership was critical in the successful management of the incident, from suppression through to reclamation.

Our Partners in the Wolf Park Fire:

Colorado State Forest Service

Bureau of Land Management

Southwest Fire Center

Delta County Sheriff's Office

Delta County Emergency Manager

Delta County GIS Department

Delta County Road and Bridge Department

Town of Hotchkiss

Delta County Independent

The Cedaredge, Paonia, Crawford, and Delta Fire Districts

The American Red Cross

Fuel Reduction Contractors

KVNF

Local citizens, especially those who have undertaken Defensible Space and Fuel Reduction Projects