



Forum #1
Watersheds, Water Supply and Forest Health Issues
for Western Slope Communities
September 25, 2009

A recent forum on *Watersheds, Water Supply and Forest Health Issues for Western Slope Communities* was presented by Schmueser Gordon Meyer in Glenwood Springs, CO. Speakers from around the State shared their experience and expertise related to the current state of forest health as it relates to watershed and water supply protection.

The forest health problems facing Colorado are not just limited to areas impacted by the Mountain Pine Beetle. All of our forests, from the sub-alpine to the aspen and pinion-juniper forests are experiencing major decline and change due to threats that include disease, wildfire, climate change, sudden species decline, human encroachment and increasingly fragmented ownership. Forests in Colorado provide economic benefits related to timber, tourism, recreation and wildlife. In addition, these watershed forests are the primary sources of our water in western Colorado. While large scale wildfires may be a part of the forest ecology and long term recovery, they can and will have major, even catastrophic impacts on human communities, water supply and infrastructure.

Being prepared to provide water for fire suppression and protection during the fire itself is only the beginning. Debris flows, ash, and millions of dead trees will mean long term solutions and maintenance are needed. The Front Range already has experienced these affects in the aftermath of the Hayman and Buffalo Creek fires. It was estimated that following the fires, 10 years of typical sediment was transported into reservoirs in one 2" rain storm. Along with \$8 million already spent on forest reclamation, \$23 million is slated for the dredging of the Strontia Springs Reservoir.

Long range planning and preparation are vital to protect our communities and our water supplies. This entails looking beyond the intakes and seeing the watershed as a whole. Conducting watershed risk assessments and implementing watershed protection plans can ensure that cost effective protections are put in place. Watershed risk assessment methodologies have been developed and are being used to develop these watershed protection plans. The approach includes the development of a composite hazard ranking incorporating fire risk, flood and debris flow risk and soil erodibility within the watershed. Water use, and water treatment and supply infrastructure also are considered in this process.

Watershed protection plans should be integrated into community wildfire protection plans, and therefore require an inter-agency approach to be successful. Watershed protection plans can reduce the risk of catastrophic impacts to water supplies and water treatment and distribution infrastructure, and minimize the cost of reclamation and repair following a wildfire, flood or debris flow event. An array of potential treatment methods is available to protect watersheds and water supplies. Many local, state and federal agencies are actively engaged in this issue. Twelve watershed protection plans have been completed in the State, with an additional 28 in various stages of implementation.

Community water providers in western Colorado need to address these potential threats to their water supplies. Technical and financial assistance are available for these efforts. For more information on how you and your water utility can start planning for total water supply protection, please contact Warren Swanson at SGM, 970-945-1004.

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