

Residents' Perspectives on Communication and Management Strategies During the 2020 Cameron Peak Fire

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Presentation Overview

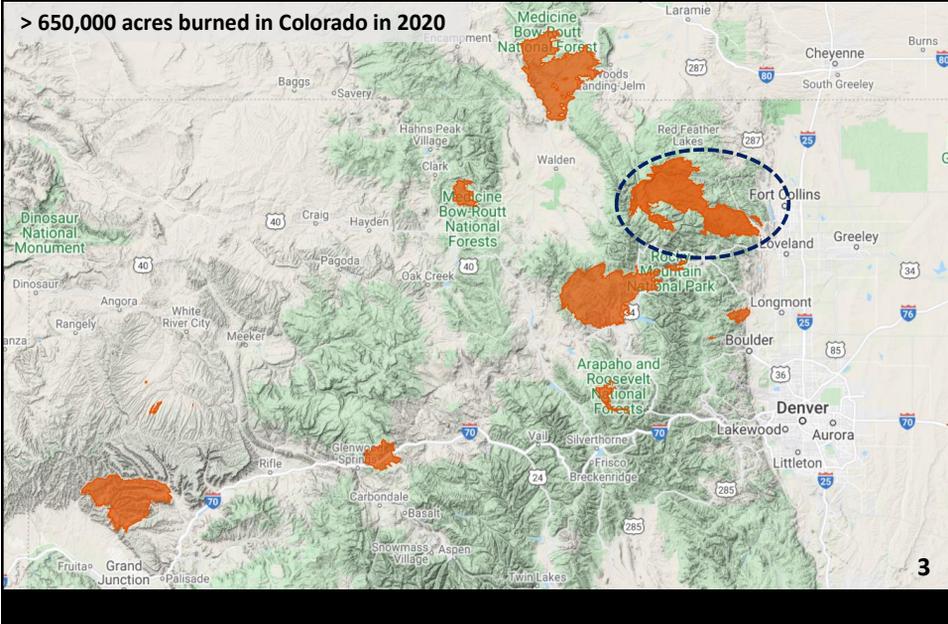
-  **Cameron Peak Fire: Context and Facts**
-  **Research Aim and Approach**
-  **Research Findings**
-  **Discussion and Broader Context**
-  **Questions**

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Major 2020 Fires in N. CO / S. WY

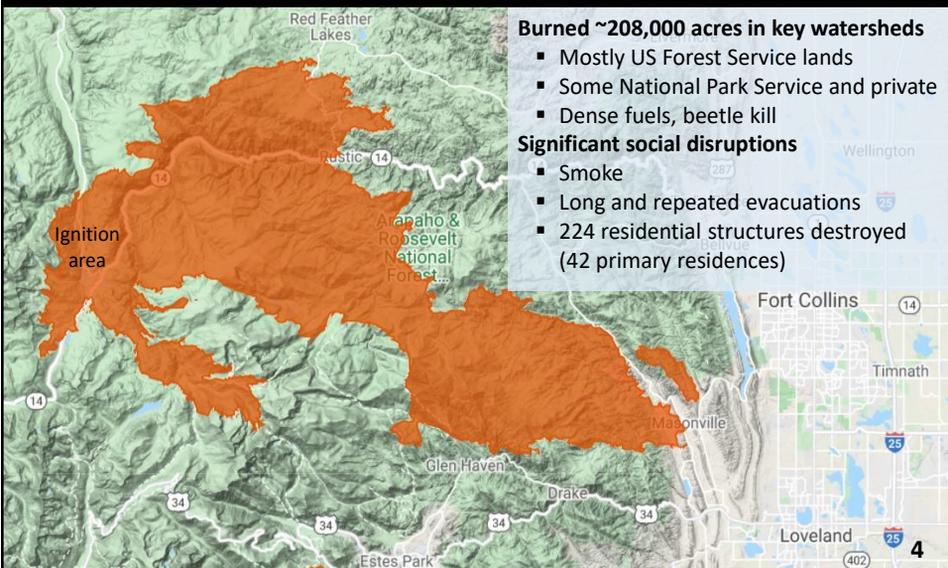
> 650,000 acres burned in Colorado in 2020



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Cameron Peak Fire

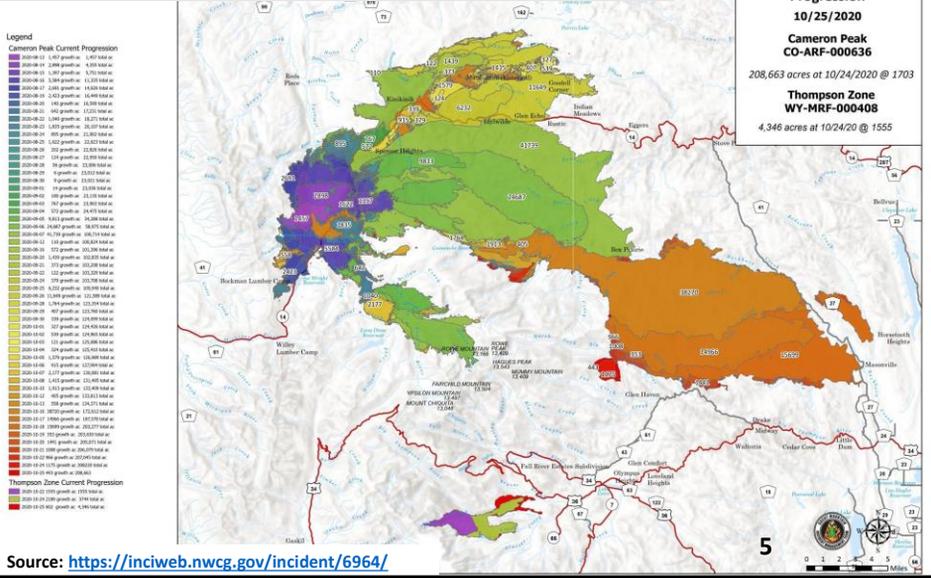
August 13 – December 2, 2020



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Cameron Peak Fire Behavior

Several large, single-day runs driven by high winds and dense fuels



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Timeline: Fire Management



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Research Aim

Complex fire involving many management decisions, and communities

Our research with residents and landowners affected by the Cameron Peak Fire aimed to understand their perspectives on:

- 1) Communication and information during the fire
- 2) Fire management strategies
- 3) Fire impacts, post-fire landscape recovery, forest health, and future management

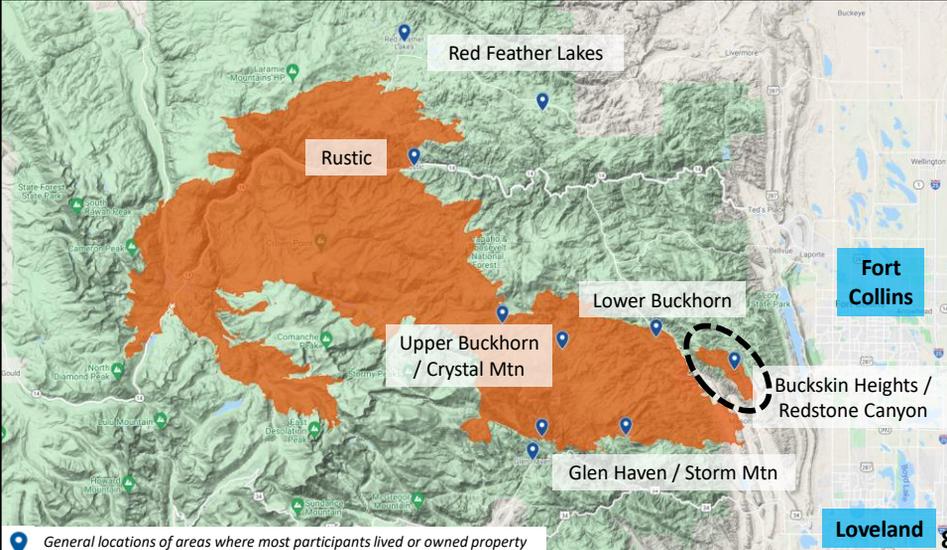


**All photos hereafter are from InciWeb*

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Methods

- 41 interviews w/53 people in Summer 2021
- Discussed experiences, communication, management, fire impacts and recovery



General locations of areas where most participants lived or owned property

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Findings



Communication and information



Fire management strategies



Fire impacts, forest health, and future management

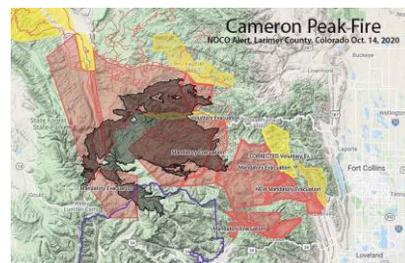
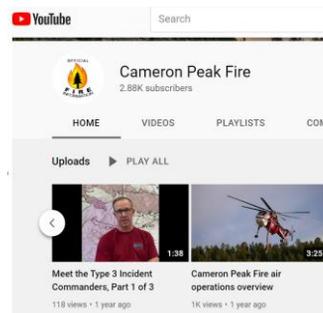
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Communication and Information

- **People consumed a lot of information during the fire**
- **Most common 'official' sources:**
 - InciWeb, NOCO Alerts, Larimer Emergency Telephone Authority, Sheriff, maps
 - Nightly Incident Management Team (IMT) briefings on Facebook/YouTube

 **InciWeb** - Incident Information System



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Communication and Information

Appreciated the amount and accessibility of information

Daily briefings were very helpful overall

- Valued hearing from disciplinary experts and key partners
- Maps and videos added clarity and perspective

Some mixed attitudes about:

- Questions getting answered
- Lack of info about ignition
- Not enough focus on certain communities and active fire areas
- Teams re-learning technology issues or BMPs
- Accessibility issues without internet or Facebook/YouTube

apeakfire #easttroublesomefirethompsonzone
Nov 1 Dozer at work meet the Dozer Boss

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Communication and Information

Other key sources:

- Word of mouth, neighbors, social media
- Interactions with firefighters
- Police or fire scanners
- Personal observation onsite
- Cameras (security, trail, game)
- Real-time active fire mapping sites

Mixed alignment between sources and observations

Cameron Peak Fire
306 km, MOF Oct 15, 2020

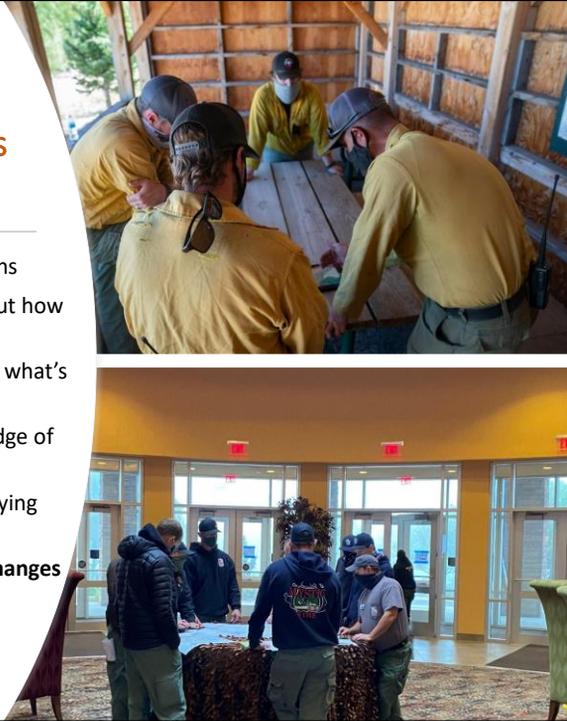
Source: Wildfire Today/NASA/USFS

Source: mappingsupport.com

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Incident Management Team (IMT) Transitions

- Understood the need for transitions
- Curious for more information about how those transitions happen
- Crucial time to get up to speed on what's happened and longer-term plans
- Non-local teams may lack knowledge of terrain, roads, communities, etc.
- Some concern about teams just trying the same things
- **Decision making accountability changes when teams keep changing**



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Communication and Information

"It needed to be real. Forget being polished."

Other insights and recommendations from interviewees

- Empathy, honesty, and realness were key attributes
- Using clear, plain, and consistent vocabulary about strategies and place names was preferred
- Wanted earlier, official notification about impacts to their homes or property
- Information about evacuations was generally clear and helpful, some wanted to know more about evac triggers and decisions to return
- Some prefer in-person meetings

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Forest Health, Fire Behavior, and Management Strategies

Interviewees described a combination of factors that influenced fire characteristics and behavior

- Unhealthy forest conditions resulting from fire suppression and limited management
- Forests characterized by dense, dry fuels, and widespread beetle kill
- Drought, high temps, and winds led to uncontrollable fire
- Awareness of fire-dependent landscape and role of fire
- But fire in this landscape would not be normal

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Pre-fire Mitigation Effectiveness?

- Many had done mitigation; appeared to help in some cases, not in others (wind, chance)
- Some familiarity with mitigation on public lands; uncertain but curious about effectiveness
- General perception of limited USFS management
- Some frustration about different expectations for mitigation activities on public vs private lands

Firefighting strategies were influenced by forest and climatic conditions, fire behavior, limited resources, difficult terrain, and prioritization processes

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Mixed Perspectives on Fire Management

- General agreement on factors and conditions contributing to uncontrollable fire behavior
- Appreciation and trust for the experts, professionals
- Overall, consensus that it could or should have been put out sooner
- More aggressive or direct at the beginning and after it snowed
- Use of local resources, support from locals

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Questions about Fireline Placement and Indirect Attack

*"Nobody wanted to go fight this fire, they wanted to set up lines and let the fire come to the lines and hope the lines held. ...It just didn't seem like they were interested in fighting the fire. ...**They were so concerned with safety, that they lost their ability to fight the fire.**"*

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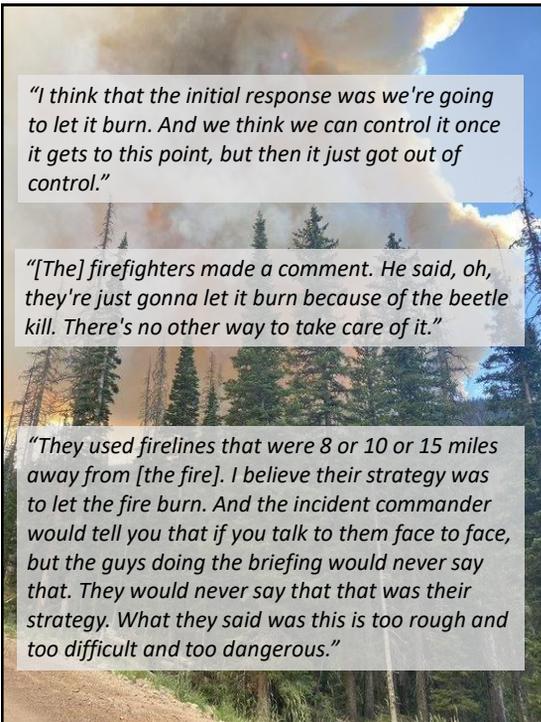


Risk Acceptability, Expectations, and Observations

- Most do not expect firefighters to risk their lives for property protection, and trust professional decisions
- Others expect more aggressive attack, especially in hindsight (would 'bending the rules' have helped?)
- Seeing evidence of fire management activities (or not) during or after a fire affected perspectives on management
- Observing fire fighter activity in person or on webcams, or word of mouth
- Some interaction with fire fighters left mixed messages

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"I think that the initial response was we're going to let it burn. And we think we can control it once it gets to this point, but then it just got out of control."

"[The] firefighters made a comment. He said, oh, they're just gonna let it burn because of the beetle kill. There's no other way to take care of it."

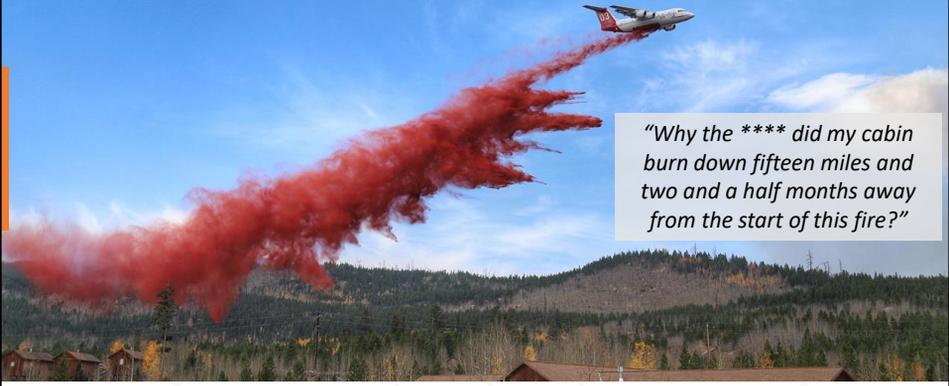
"They used firelines that were 8 or 10 or 15 miles away from [the fire]. I believe their strategy was to let the fire burn. And the incident commander would tell you that if you talk to them face to face, but the guys doing the briefing would never say that. They would never say that that was their strategy. What they said was this is too rough and too difficult and too dangerous."

Consistent Speculation that the Forest Service "Wanted to Let It Burn"

- Strategy to "clean up the forest," focus on other areas, or inevitable
- Rumors, hunches, talking to neighbors, social media, talking to fire fighters in person, perceptions
- A few people agreed with that strategy
- Others questioned the ability to safely 'let it burn' (terrain, weather, fuels, homes and other resources)
- Lines were too far from the fire
- A lot of confusion, curiosity, and interest: Was fire management influenced by land management objectives or risk/safety?

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*“Why the **** did my cabin burn down fifteen miles and two and a half months away from the start of this fire?”*

Key Points of Contention

- Some people in communities with more immediate damages are upset - too much focus on certain areas
- Duration and extent unacceptable, should not have reached the point of being uncontrollable
- Not aggressive or active enough w/good weather
- Lines were too far away
- Uncertainty about decision making hierarchy, accountability and prioritization processes

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Fire Impacts and Post-Fire Management

Social Impacts

- Traumatic and emotional experiences
- Unhealthy, long-term smoke
- Rebuilding / insurance stress
- More communication, support, and bringing people together
- Organizations supporting recovery
- Learning experience for many, leading to more proactive work (Firewise)

Ecological Impacts

- Tree mortality, erosion, flooding, water quality, fish and wildlife, invasives

Post-fire Management

- Clearing, planting, and erosion control on private lands
- Strong support for activities on public land, recognize limitations though

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Post-fire Landscape Recovery, Forest Health

Many factors affect recovery trajectory, interest in learning

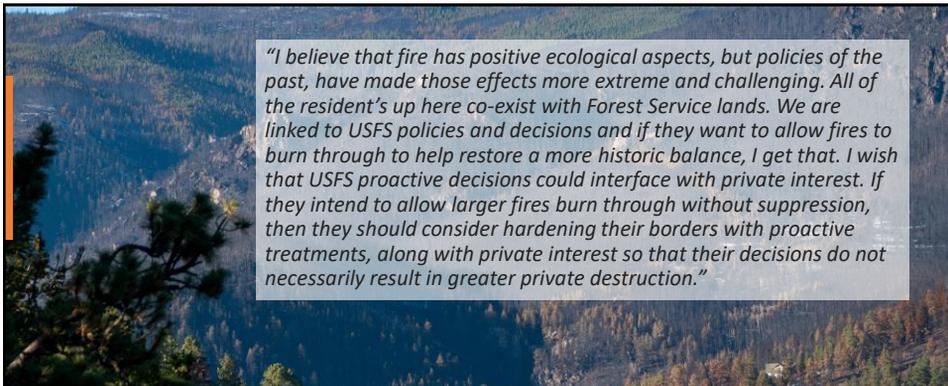
- Fire behavior/severity/intensity
- Hydrophobic soils, seed source
- Climate is different, invasives

Attributes of a healthy forest

- Tree density, abundant wildlife, wildflowers, water
- Support for thinning and logging
- May include lower severity fire
- Some cautious support for prescribed burns

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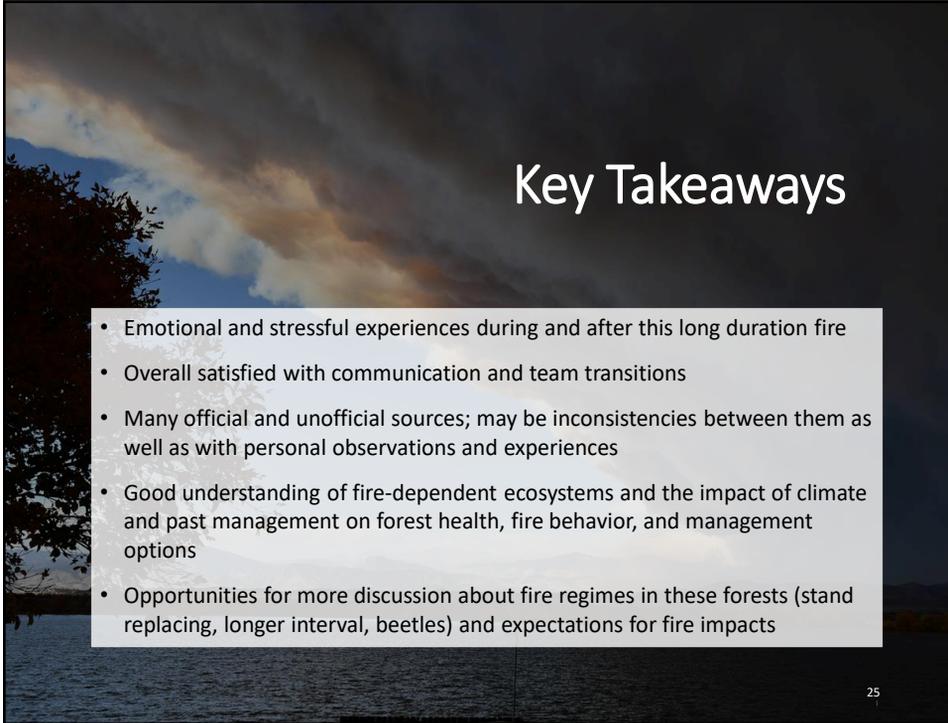
"I believe that fire has positive ecological aspects, but policies of the past, have made those effects more extreme and challenging. All of the resident's up here co-exist with Forest Service lands. We are linked to USFS policies and decisions and if they want to allow fires to burn through to help restore a more historic balance, I get that. I wish that USFS proactive decisions could interface with private interest. If they intend to allow larger fires burn through without suppression, then they should consider hardening their borders with proactive treatments, along with private interest so that their decisions do not necessarily result in greater private destruction."

Future Management

- Understand that there will be more fires
- Some focus on personal responsibility to mitigate risk and expect that living in a fire-dependent ecosystem could result in significant disruption
- Others expect more active fire management, especially when involving the intersection of public and private lands
- Interest in better alignment between expectations for mitigation and accountability across public and private lands
- Desire for more proactive and cross-boundary engagement

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Key Takeaways

- Emotional and stressful experiences during and after this long duration fire
- Overall satisfied with communication and team transitions
- Many official and unofficial sources; may be inconsistencies between them as well as with personal observations and experiences
- Good understanding of fire-dependent ecosystems and the impact of climate and past management on forest health, fire behavior, and management options
- Opportunities for more discussion about fire regimes in these forests (stand replacing, longer interval, beetles) and expectations for fire impacts

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Key Takeaways

- Generally, many trust the experts and professionals
- Frustration and anger due to less attention, resources in some areas; strong perception that extent of damages could have been avoided
- Confusion about the management strategies and influence of risk/safety or other factors to be less aggressive or “let it burn”
- Need for better alignment between evolving USFS strategies for pre-fire planning (PODs, response zones), risk-informed management, land management objectives, communication, and public expectations

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Introduction to the Northern Colorado Fireshed Collaborative [Webinar]

- USFS is developing and using strategies to support collaboration, expand response options
- Many residents support collaborative, cross-boundary forest restoration and fire management approaches
- Opportunities for more transparent decision making and shared accountability across landowners, USFS, and others

NORTHERN COLORADO FIRESHED COLLABORATIVE

BIG THOMPSON WATERSHED COALITION

THE Ember Alliance

COLORADO STATE UNIVERSITY EXTENSION

Mountain Studies Institute SAN JUAN MOUNTAINS COLORADO

COLORADO STATE FOREST SERVICE

COALITION FOR THE POUDE RIVER WATERSHED

LARIMER RECOVERY COLLABORATIVE

CENTER FOR COLLABORATIVE CONSERVATION

FOREST SERVICE U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

NFFA

FIREWISE USA RESIDENTS REDUCING WILDFIRE RISKS

FACO FIRE ADAPTED COLORADO

The Nature Conservancy

COLORADO FOREST RESTORATION INSTITUTE

SOUTHERN ROCKIES FIRE SCIENCE NETWORK

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Thank You !!!

Project Website

- Webinar recording, a forthcoming research brief and manuscript (see chat)
<https://sites.warnercnr.colostate.edu/courtneyschultz/cameron-peak-fire/>

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**All photos were from InciWeb or Chad Kooistra*

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