

## **Overview**

Managing an active wildfire is complex and involves considering many factors, including weather and climatic conditions, fuel loads, human safety and other values at risk, management objectives, and internal and external support for different approaches. Each decision involves tradeoffs across the different factors, and each tradeoff has consequences that uniquely shape the post-fire social and ecological environments. Better understanding the interactions between fire management decisions, the landscape, and people within that landscape provides key insights that can inform future communication strategies, management decisions, and policy implementation to improve forest health and community well-being across landscapes that can change significantly over time.

An increasing recognition of the natural role or ecological benefits of fire in some landscapes and the 'fire deficit' that has resulted due to suppression has land managers and communities considering fire management strategies other than full suppression. In the past 20 years, there has also been a substantial increase in interest and investment in research about how management decisions, climatic factors, and fire behavior characteristics interact to affect the trajectory of post-fire ecological and watershed conditions. Within this context, relatively little is known about how the public understands decision-making processes and strategies used to manage a fire and how that understanding affects their attitudes about the fire, perceptions of the post-fire landscape, and support for future fire, forest, and watershed management.

## **Approach**

The 2020 Colorado wildfire season provides an opportunity for longitudinal research to explore these relationships. In particular, the Cameron Peak Fire involved many strategies and decisions as it burned for over 100 days across more than 200,000 acres from high elevation, remote, and steep terrains, to the foothills and through residential areas, driven by available fuels and extreme weather. Our research explored whether residents' understanding of the Cameron Peak Fire (e.g., cause, communication efforts, how it was managed, recovery actions) affects their attitudes about the fire, their perceptions about post-fire recovery, and attitudes about future forest, fire, and watershed management.

Our approach was guided by the following research questions:

1. What did residents learn from communication and outreach during or after the Cameron Peak Fire about the decision-making process and the different decisions made and strategies used to manage the fire?
2. What is their understanding about how fire behavior (including fuels, topography, weather), management objectives, risk mitigation, and other factors influenced fire management decisions and strategies?
3. How does residents' understanding of fire management, fire behavior, fire ecology, and forest and watershed health affect their perspectives about the fire and the post-fire landscape, and their attitudes about future forest and watershed management and wildfire strategies?

To address these questions, we interviewed a total of 53 residents and landowners in many different communities or residential areas affected by the Cameron Peak Fire. Participants were recruited through local organizations connected to fire recovery efforts, and through local neighborhood email lists and group pages on social media. Interview questions were developed through conversations with land managers, collaborative groups, and other key stakeholders. The semi-structured and confidential interviews were analyzed for consistent and emergent themes relevant to the research questions. Findings will help inform future communication and management strategies across the landscape to seek common understanding and shared goals for decision making.

## **Timeline**

Spring 2021: CSU/RMRS researchers developed the project with input from managers, collaboratives, and others.

Summer 2021: Participant recruitment and data collection.

Fall 2021 / Winter 2022: Data analysis and reporting (webinar, manuscript, and research brief).

Ongoing: Develop approaches for longitudinal or follow-up research regarding the fire and landscape.

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## **Contact Information for Research Leads**

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