

Strengthening Collaboration Around Wildfire Mitigation

Routt County

Presented by Spencer Varga

Internship Mentors:

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Introduction

Increasing wildfire risk across the American west threatens everything from homes and lives to drinking water security and local economies. To reduce this risk to local communities, collaboration between private landowners, fire professionals, and relevant stakeholders is essential. Wildfire councils help bring these groups together to collaborate on wildfire management and mitigation priorities.

In 2019, stakeholders in Routt County established the Routt County Wildfire Mitigation Council (RCWMC). This council is composed of a diverse group of representatives from county and city government; federal, state, and local agencies; as well as community groups and private individuals. The RCWMC held its first meeting in December 2019 to start identifying the next steps to create resilient fire adapted communities to mitigate the potential impacts of wildfire.

The RCWMC is a volunteer council that does not have a dedicated staff. I was able to provide a needed capacity to develop community resources and council recommendations during this particularly busy time of the year.

Internship Goals

- Support the development of the newly formed Routt County Wildfire Mitigation Council through collaboration with stakeholders.
- Develop community resources and website content based on findings from other wildfire councils.
- Understand the importance of community collaboration

Educational Application

The skills that I learned and further developed through this internship directly apply to my professional development and future career in natural resources. For example, some of these skills include:

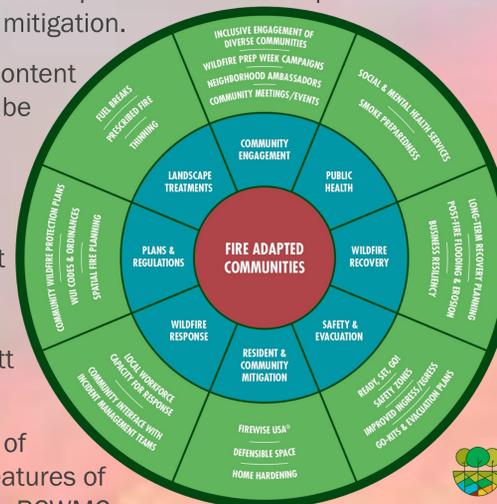
- Manipulation and organization of data sets
- Facilitation of interviews with various stakeholders
- Creation of analytical products
- Implementation and analysis of survey and mapping tools

In addition, the experiences I have gained through this internship have provided valuable insight into what some professions look like in practice. This is personally relevant as I navigate my future career path.

Website Analysis

I researched seven wildfire councils across Colorado and analyzed their website structure and content to inform the future development of the website Routt County Wildfire Mitigation Council website. In doing so, I:

- Organized council programs (such as home assessments, chipping, and cost-share programs) for comparison and potential development of RCWMC equivalents that would engage the community in wildfire mitigation.
- Took note of what educational website content each council provided. This content can be compared across websites to find which information is the most important to present on the RCWMC website.
- Analyzed the sources of information that each council website used. I then recommended the most essential sources to use and suggested local Routt County resources as well.
- In addition to comparing the similarities of these websites, I recorded the unique features of each website that could be helpful to the RCWMC website. These unique features consisted mainly of creative ways to financially support the council or different ways of presenting information.
- I took this information and sorted it into general categories based on the stakeholder group the information applied to. This will support the future development of a website feature where individuals can click on their stakeholder group and be provided with wildfire resources that are specific to them.



Elements of successful fire adapted communities

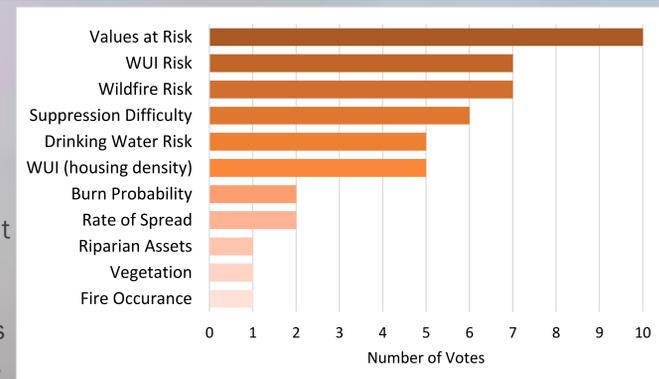
Wildfire Council Interviews

I interviewed leaders from the Grand County Wildfire Council, West Region Wildfire Council, Summit County Wildfire Council, and Eagle County's REALFire Program to provide the RCWMC with valuable insight from more experienced wildfire councils. Below are some of the key messages that were mentioned in more than one interview:

- 1-on-1 interaction with homeowners is the best way to communicate wildfire mitigation principles because you can provide a property-specific context that makes the information directly relevant to them.
- Develop a network of partnering agencies and advocates across the county to more efficiently deliver the messages of the council to a wider audience.
- Present information through a variety of methods and provide clear access to more resources. These efforts must be persistent to get the most people involved.
- Reach out to Fire Adapted Colorado (FACO) since they help support the development of wildfire councils across Colorado.

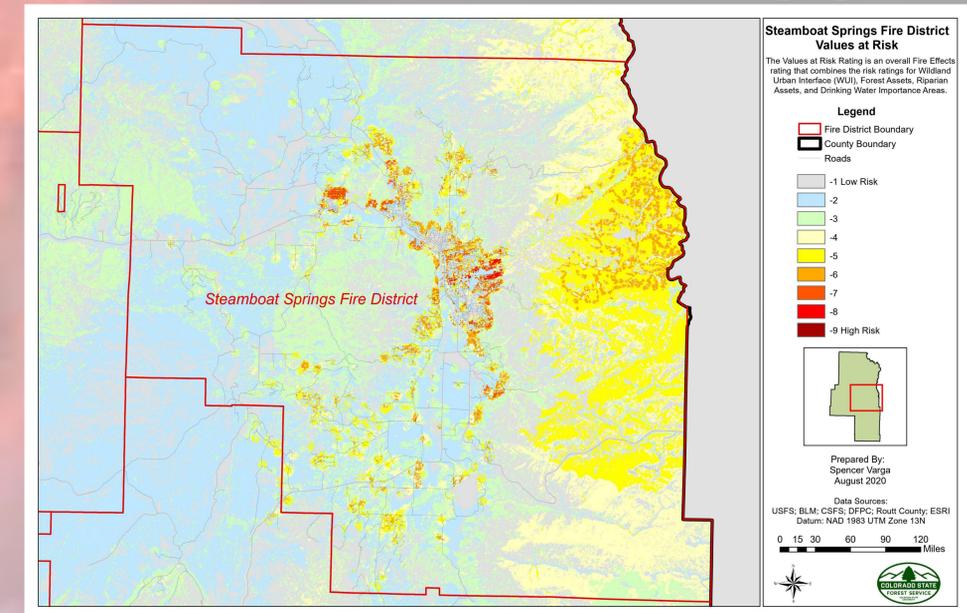
Wildfire Mitigation Priorities Survey

I created a survey to understand what factors different agencies and stakeholders consider when prioritizing wildfire mitigation efforts. In this short survey, I asked RCWMC members what they believe are the top 3 most important criteria to have when prioritizing regions to conduct wildfire mitigation.



Mapping the Survey Results

One of the regional Routt County maps I created using the survey results is shown below. This map illustrates the values at risk for the Steamboat Springs region.



Next Steps

- Continue to develop an RCWMC website, providing a go-to source for wildfire information. Utilize a combination of the commonly cited resources from other wildfire councils and local resources outlined in spreadsheet deliverables.
- Create a section where identified stakeholders can view information that applies specifically to them.
- Work towards establishing wildfire mitigation programs (such as home risk assessments and chipping or slash removal) for Routt County stakeholders by continuing to connect with other fire agencies. This could include collaborating with Fire Adapted Colorado.
- As the RCWMC continues to establish itself, take advantage of the advice given from interviews with other experienced wildfire councils.