

Restoration Underway on Spring Creek Fire Burn Scar

by Caitlin Dunn – published in Huerfano World Journal, July 3, 2019

As a result of the 2018 Spring Creek fire, some of the most heavily fire-damaged and now fragile watersheds are those that drain into South Abeyta, Middle, Indian, and North Abeyta Creeks in the Cucharas drainage, and Pass Creek on the Huerfano. Earlier this year, the Huerfano County Water Conservancy District (HCWCD) received approval from the Colorado Water Conservation Board for a \$500,000 grant that seeks to stabilize those watersheds as much as possible to keep rainfall runoff from causing mudslides and damaging floods. The Arkansas River Watershed Collaborative (ARWC) was contracted in April to provide volunteer crew leadership and project management for on-the-ground restoration work on lands not covered by other reclamation efforts.

Work began in April and most of it has been happening primarily upstream of La Veta. ARWC staff and the volunteers they have been supervising have been working on the project for about two months. Their accomplishments are impressive considering, according to Chelsey Nutter, ARWC Executive Director, “Most of the ongoing work is handwork. Not a lot of machines are being used.” A great deal of attention is being paid right now to the areas around Indian and Middle Creeks. Heavy damage is also a concern around Idlewild Creek and the north and south branches of Middle Creek. La Veta Fire Chief and ARWC’s local coordinator Dave Steffan said that, around Middle Creek, certain affected areas were “ankle-deep with ash.”

Accomplishments To Date

Nutter’s summary of the work completed to date on Middle Creek includes: 6,680 feet of stream corridor snagged and cleared; 20.55 acres cleared of debris below the newly installed early flood warning gage; 16.6 acres of hillslope seeded on the burn scar. On June 17, a 16-man SWIFT (State Wildland Inmate Fire Team) crew began clearing, snagging, and doing hillslope treatments above the warning gage and will continue working in that area through July 12. National Civilian Community Corps (also known as AmeriCorps) has also had teams of volunteers working on flood protection projects since April 15.



Along Indian Creek, the teams have installed hillslope treatments including 30 wattles, 73 log erosion barriers (LEBs), and 4 crib walls; 8 acres of hillslope on the burn scar have been hand seeded. Wattles were described by Nutter as logs set into the hillside in order to slow the flow of water downhill and “catch sediment to keep it from getting into the waterways.”

All of the logs being used in the project are being salvaged by the SWIFT sawyer crews from usable burned timber in the adjacent area.

Nutter explained, “One goal of the project is to treat and seed the hillslopes where the fire burned most or all of the existing timber and vegetation.” When that happened, nothing remained on the ground to slow the flow of runoff. One challenge that the work crews have faced is the sheer amount of

debris, such as burned and fallen trees, rocks and boulders moved in mudslides, and various limbs and slash moved by water when there was nothing left to slow its downhill flow. Nutter said that the County



Log erosion barrier

maintenance crew has worked on moving debris piles out of the way of water and working teams, but “there’s a lot of it.” She added, “They are moving up from the [flood warning] gages and getting rid of the debris.” Carrie Adair, GIS Specialist for ARWC, expressed that they are only in the beginning phase when it comes to cleaning up debris, though they have made great progress. “We’re trying to help the local people minimize damage and the risk of flood,” she said. “We have crews to clear stuff out so nothing gets backed up” in case of flooding. Adair gets out ahead of the crew to document conditions pre-treatment, then collects data after the crew moves through a section. She is mapping progress as the project continues.

Next Steps

“The last piece of work,” Nutter said, “will be the construction and maintenance of sediment basins.” Sediment basins are designed to catch rainfall runoff with heavy sediment loads – and possibly ash as well

– before they enter the rivers and clog up water diversions and municipal water supplies.

Steffan said that they are focusing on seeding with native plants around the affected area. “We’ve been having seeding parties,” he said. “We’ve also been setting up wattles to protect houses.” Steffan explained that the SWIFT crew is made up of inmates, and, “The workers have been doing great.” In exchange for their work, the inmates receive a reduction on their sentences. “It’s a chance for them to get outside,” he said. “I’m pretty pleased we’re getting things done.”

ARWC Forester Andy Lerch said, “It’s encouraging how much green we’re seeing.” Young aspens, grass and scrub oak are already growing back on hillsides that have been seeded and treated. Lerch added that fires are actually beneficial to the health of aspens, as it allows new trees to grow from the roots of older ones that may not be healthy in their old age. “In a way, it’s good for them,” he said.

ARWC is tackling the project in tasks, with the current work being part of task 1. ARWC’s Wildland Fire Recovery Coordinator, Theresa Springer, is scoping out treatments for task 2. With the seriousness of the fire damage, there is a lot of potential work on the burn scar. In a race against the unknown, the ARWC teams are trying to set priorities and get as much of that work accomplished as possible before damaging rains occur. The grant project deadline is November 30, 2019.