

SRFSN co-hosted a workshop in Pagosa Springs, Colorado on June 18th and 19th to provide community and agency reflection on the Little Sand Fire of 2012, and to identify fire-adapted community strategies. Although the fire was entirely on USFS land, it burned an estimated 25,000 acres in rugged and inaccessible terrain for over a month with continuous impacts from smoke affecting the local economy, tourism, and agriculture.

The workshop began with an indoor day. Here, community members and forest experts discussed the impacts of the fire and steps towards preparing for the next fire event. In attendance were local agency representatives, citizens, and business owners. This event could not have been possible without the help of our co-sponsors. The Mountain Studies Institute, San Juan Headwaters Forest Health Partnership, United States Forest Service, Firewise of Southern Colorado, Colorado Forest Restoration Institute, and the Colorado State Forest Service were all committed to bringing this event together. To wrap up the review, attendees created groups to discuss different wildfire issues, including watersheds, forest restoration, community protection, communication and businesses. After taking down a few notes, everyone came together to discuss their concerns and present ideas from their groups. This allowed community members to talk with other residents and experts to see what needs to be changed for the future. Presentations and notes are available on the SRFSN website: [link](#).

On the second day, the group toured several areas from the Little Sand Fire. We were able to see where the fire began, different burn intensities, and why these areas were significant in management of the fire. Scientific bases for fire management were presented as well as scientific facts about the fire, but local citizens and business owners also shared personal experiences. Jon Reed, owner of the Sportsman lodge and campground, recounted his experience of business hardships during the fire. John Taylor, a ranch owner who has lived in the San Juan mountains his entire life, shared lively stories of the ranching days from his youth and how the forest has changed over his lifetime. During all of this, we could watch the smoke plume from the West Fork Fire grow in size every minute. By the end of the day, the plume was so enormous; it had turned into a pyrocumulus cloud that rose above the mountains.

On the drive back to Fort Collins the next day, the cloud of smoke was still growing. Although the signs read highway 160 was open, the gates were closed soon after we had passed them. In front of us was the smoke plume, evidence of extreme fire behavior caused by high winds moving through standing dead beetle kill. It looked huge from beneath. As we drove closer, the wall of smoke loomed over us more and more until we could drive directly under the rising columns reflecting flames on the smoke, creating an eerie orange glow. It seemed almost apocalyptic. Once over Wolf Creek Pass, the Arkansas River Valley was dense with smoke. We could not see more than one hundred feet in front of the van. The smoke stayed with us until we arrived in Denver. It was very interesting to have learned and talked about the Little Sand Fire and how it affected the ecosystem and people and then to have watched this phenomenal newer fire event!