



# Crossing Boundaries

Residents and agencies working together to mitigate hazardous fuels, protect communities from wildfire and restore forest health on Colorado's Front Range

**ENVIRONMENTALIST AND FIRE PROTECTION DISTRICT  
WORK TOGETHER TO KEEP COMMUNITIES SAFE AND  
RESTORE FOREST HEALTH**

## Living a Dream

Ginny Weller is a self-proclaimed environmentalist and a tree hugger—and it's a title she wears with pride. A native of Austria, she is drawn to Colorado's mountains and trees.

When Ginny and her husband, Jim, bought their lot in the Forest Ridge subdivision—a heavily forested area in Park County—they envisioned being surrounded by a wall of green trees without a neighbor in site. That dream nearly became a nightmare when the Platte Canyon Fire Protection District informed the Wellers that they couldn't obtain their certificate of occupancy until they completed wildfire mitigation work, thanks to a fire code within the district's service area.

Cutting trees was not what Ginny had in mind, but after a couple of tense meetings and heated debates with John Pawlik, wildland mitigation specialist with the Platte Canyon Fire Protection District, Ginny reluctantly agreed. To do otherwise meant the Wellers would not be able to build their future retirement home.

Since those first meetings a year ago, Weller and Pawlik have become friends and it's clear that they respect each other.

They still don't agree on everything, but Weller has a better understanding of the need to thin to reduce the risk of wildfires and help keep Colorado's forests healthy. A picture of a forest taken 100 years ago, before the age of fire suppression and urban sprawl, deepened her understanding of the need to thin forests to restore them to more natural conditions. And Pawlik understands Weller's desire for privacy and preserving as many healthy trees as possible around her home. The aesthetics of the area was a major factor in the Wellers' decision to buy their land.



*A view off the deck of the Weller residence*

## It's all in the Approach

The need to mitigate in order to obtain a building permit was a great incentive to do the work, but Ginny is quick to point out that it was the one-on-one educational approach Pawlik and his colleagues took that really persuaded her. Pawlik, a former chemist for Eastman Kodak and a volunteer firefighter, was trained by the Colorado State Forest Service to evaluate and mark trees and he insists that landowners be present when he does the marking.

The crew doing the work in the Forest Ridge subdivision has removed 50 trees from the Wellers' 5.3-acre property. And there's more to do. Ginny recognizes that thinning fuels will help her house survive a wildfire—and keep the land around her from turning into another Hayman burn area. "We can't and don't want to be rebuilding in a graveyard," Ginny says.

Although the Wellers are still at risk because their home sits at the top of a steep slope, they recognize that their chances of surviving a wildfire are better if they can keep the fire on the ground and out of the crowns of the trees they treasure. Ginny is so adamant about mitigation and healthy forests that she now has the crews remove more than just the dead trees.

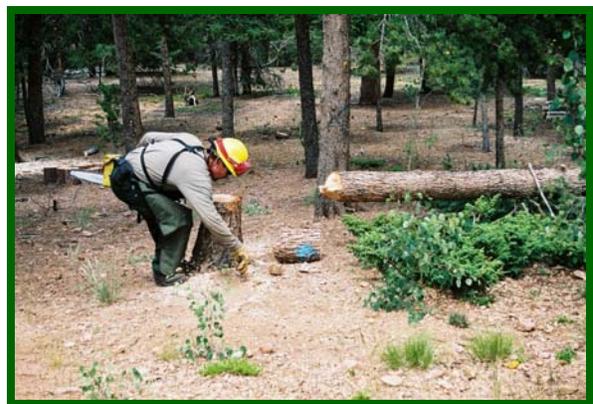
## A Bright Idea, Seed Money & A Few New Friends

Ginny also recognizes the need for her neighbors to mitigate fire hazards on their properties, and the Platte Canyon FPD is working hard to make that a reality. The Wellers' land is part of a 150-acre project being funded by a \$75,000 grant from the Front Range Fuels Treatment Partnership, an idea conceived by Jeff Davis, chief of the Platte Canyon FPD. With the grant and matching funds from the district, the Platte Canyon FPD hired a crew boss and four recent high school graduates to implement a

comprehensive mitigation plan in the Forest Ridge subdivision. The district recruited local students and trained them to safely run chainsaws and fell trees. They also learned the basics about wildland firefighting and are now red-card qualified.

The work is demanding and difficult, but it's the only option for many properties. "If these guys had come in here with big equipment, we would have turned them away," Ginny said. Instead, homeowners credit the crew for changing their attitudes—and potentially saving their homes. "If it wasn't for the knowledge they've given us, we wouldn't have cut any trees other than those that are dead or needed to be limbed up."

In addition to wildfire mitigation and healthy forests, the Wellers and others in the Forest Ridge subdivision site another reason for thinning trees on their land. Their names are Bruce Stoeber, Morgan Beals, Mike Wilson, Joey Linnehan, Eric Rankin, Joe Burgett, Justin Davis and Josh Tighe. They've not only done the mitigation on the Wellers' land, they're also firefighters, and now they're neighbors and friends. "By having this work done, we're not only keeping our forests healthy, we're protecting the firefighters," Ginny said. "We know them by name and we care about them. We don't want to put them in any excess danger."



*A member of the Platte Canyon mitigation crew cuts a stump after hand-felling a tree*

## Part of the Plan

When asked if she and her husband would have done the work themselves, Ginny said yes, but she also said it would have taken at least two years, or as funds allowed. The Platte Canyon FPD wants to see things happen a little faster than that so Davis plans to apply for additional grant funds to hire another crew and keep them working year-round. Their effort is part of the Harris Park Community Wildfire Protection Plan, a comprehensive strategy to protect the 22 communities and 30,000 acres within the Platte Canyon and Lower Elk Creek fire protection districts from catastrophic wildfire and improve forest health. Wildfires are all too familiar to many residents in these communities who have watched several wildfires char land not far from their homes.

Developed over the past two years, the plan identifies communities most at risk from wildfire and considers factors such as proximity to national forest land. The Forest Ridge subdivision met the criteria in part because it is bordered by the Pike National Forest.

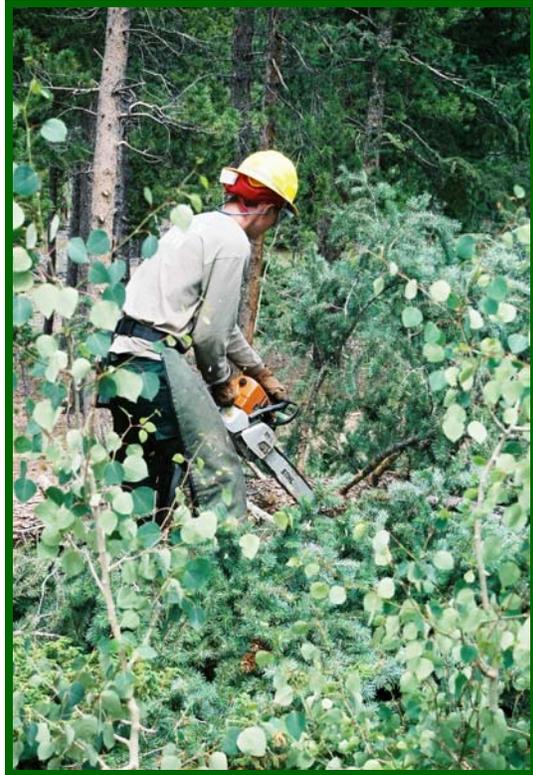
The Healthy Forest Restoration Act provides a mechanism for communities to help determine where the U.S. Forest Service will treat lands. “The U.S. Forest Service said ‘Tell us where you’re starting on the private side and we’ll thin the adjacent land,’” Pawlik said. “When the U.S. Forest Service treats federal land that borders the Forest Ridge subdivision, we can protect 1,000 homes. That’s why it’s important for all sides to thin.”

## Spreading the Word

The Forest Ridge subdivision might be the catalyst for other communities included in the Harris Park plan to thin trees. Word is spreading and interest is high. “I thought there would be more resistance to thinning, but many homeowners are excited and positive about what’s being done. The word is out

and other homeowners want the work done,” Pawlik said.

Weller attributes the heightened interest to Pawlik and the cutting crew. “When they said they’d walk the property with homeowners, it won us over. They got more yes than no answers,” Ginny said.



*Weller attributes the heightened interest in mitigation to the one-on-one approach of Pawlik and the cutting crews*

With Ginny Weller’s help, the Harris Park plan, which is a 5-10 year project, may take less time to implement than anyone anticipated—especially John Pawlik. “Ginny was anti-everything when I first started talking to her,” he said. Now, she considers him a friend and important ally in the fight to keep her home safe and her beloved forests healthy.

“I moved up here for the trees,” Weller said. “Most of the time, I have my mind made up about things, but I’m glad I listened.” So is John Pawlik.

For more information about this project, contact:  
Jeff Davis or John Pawlik, Platte Canyon Fire Protection District, at 303.838.5853  
or  
Scott Woods, Colorado State Forest Service, at 303.445.9043,  
[scotwood@lamar.colostate.edu](mailto:scotwood@lamar.colostate.edu)



Story and photos by Katherine Timm  
Colorado State Forest Service  
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