



# Crossing Boundaries

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

## YMCA SNOW MOUNTAIN RANCH & THE COLORADO STATE FOREST SERVICE: WORKING TOGETHER TO FIGHT BEETLES AND IMPROVE FOREST HEALTH

*"I've heard it said there's a window that opens from one mind to another, but if there is no wall, there is no need for fitting the window or the latch."  
Poet Mowlana Jalaluddin Rumi*

### The Partners

On a sunny day in Granby, Colorado, Julie Watkins, center director for the YMCA of the Rockies Snow Mountain Ranch, and Mike Harvey and Ron Cousineau, Colorado State Forest Service-Granby District, are again discussing the invasion of mountain pine beetles. Despite the seriousness of the topic, it is obvious that the only walls that exist for these three are the ones surrounding the room because as they talk, Julie, Ron and Mike, point and nod in unison.

"When I got here four years ago, the mountain pine beetle was already at work on the ranch," says Watkins. "The previous director had developed a Forest Management Plan with the help of the Colorado State Forest Service and projects were underway. But the plan didn't focus on the beetle."

According to Watkins, people on the ranch liked the visual results of some inadvertent forest management activities on neighboring properties and decided to

develop a Forest Stewardship Plan to guide their management actions. From the stewardship plan came a management plan to treat hazardous fuels. Planned activities included cleaning up the forest floor and thinning and cutting some openings in the lodgepole pine near the developed area of the ranch; a very small area for a ranch that covers 5,000 acres.

Now, working with Harvey, the ranch is concentrating on forest health. And though the number of acres that need to be treated is huge, they are upbeat, despite what Watkins calls, "the unstopability of the beetle epidemic."

### The Focus

"I focus on the great things that come out of our partnership with the Colorado State Forest Service," Julie says glancing around the room at Harvey and Cousineau. "Together we have learned a lot and we continue to gain understanding. It's good to have Mike's expertise because he helps us find the meaning behind the objectives taking place on our land."

As a non-profit, the YMCA is struggling, but thanks to its partnership with the state, it has put limited resources to good use. In addition to the treatments taking place, there is an educational display in the lobby of the main building. This display explains to visitors what is happening because of the beetles' attack and the intent of the forest management activity around the ranch.

"Although I usually wait for visitors to bring the beetles up, instead of getting in my face, people now ask questions about what is happening," says Watkins. "They aren't opposed to cutting the trees, they're just curious. And most donors now believe in the mission we have to protect the forest, especially as they watch more and more trees turn red. Sometimes I think some of our visitors are more informed about the beetles than the people who live here."

## The Action

For Watkins and Harvey, with the education of visitors comes the responsibility to make priority decisions about treatments on the ranch. For example, they are working with the USDA Forest Service to treat public land and ranch land together. And, for the next 10 years, safety will be a concern along trails, because of the threat from dying and falling trees. Finally, trees will be sprayed around the buildings and along the road, where they are an important part of the welcoming scenery of the ranch.

In 2005, the ranch, through the effort of Watkins, Harvey and Cousineau, received a matching grant for treating hazardous fuels. As a result, Watkins says, "they have made a good dent" in treating fuels.

As forest health is addressed, more great things are happening on the ranch. New views have opened up, and though the scenery has changed, it is as beautiful as ever. The beetles have also rallied the

people surrounding the ranch to the healthy forest cause.

"Red trees scare people; they are in your face," says Cousineau, "and the bugs have worked as a catalyst for action. At first, people were reluctant to treat; now they are working together. On the ranch, we want to treat about 250 acres per year, but that all depends on funding. In other locations throughout the county, the bugs are snowballing and they are reaching the "richer" areas in the Valley. Even with all the activity, people are just keeping up—they aren't trying to get ahead."

Therefore, Watkins, Cousineau and Harvey talk about being bold and aggressive. They talk about getting support for the best strategy, and they talk about the wildfire threat caused by the beetle epidemic.

"We had huge fires in Yellowstone in these kinds of trees and we have the same thing here, says Cousineau. "We could have the same kind of fire. But the beetles are worse than any fire, because at least you know a fire will be out in November."



*Julie Watkins and Mike Harvey discuss forest management efforts on the YMCA Snow Mountain Ranch in Granby, which has been hit hard by mountain pine beetles.*

Grand County considers the threat from wildfire a serious issue. With the beetles running rampant they are working to establish Community Wildfire Protection Plans and to involve communities and homeowners in addressing the beetle and wildfire problem. But, like other areas in Colorado, it is challenging to imagine the resources and energy it will take to create a healthy forest.

Watkins talks optimistically about the future of the ranch. “We hope to look into bio-fuels and cogeneration using material we get from our treatments. Our staff has taken field trips to see other places that are trying to do some of these things, but there aren’t a lot of good examples. We are using the wood on the ranch for buck and rail fences on trails, but we are also still chipping and burning piles. Every winter we have lots of little wooden teepees to burn. All of this work is really labor intensive.”

The meeting ends with a silent pause as Watkins looks at Harvey and Harvey looks at Cousineau:

“We can let Mother Nature manage the forest or we can manage the forest, either way it is going to happen,” says Cousineau.

Julie and Mike nod in agreement. Partners, as always, working to improve forest health on the ranch and surrounding forests.



*Rick Caissie, USDA Forest Service, and Mike Harvey, Colorado State Forest Service, look at the results of a thinning project on YMCA property.*



*Top photo: Beetle-infested trees are cleared on the YMCA property in Grand County.*

*Bottom photo: Trees have been thinned near cabins on the YMCA property to reduce fire risk and help restore forest health.*

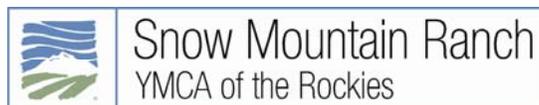
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