



Crossing Boundaries

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

WILDACRES HOMEOWNERS SURVIVE WITH THE BEETLE

A Survivor

In the wild, survivors must learn about their surroundings. They need to know what is there and how to use it, whether it is food or cover. Once survivors know their surroundings, they develop a sense about them. They know when they can relax and when it is time for action.

Living in what some would call the wild, Beth Chambers senses something is wrong. The beetles are invading her land, and as a survivor she feels a need to act.

Beth Chambers is president of the Wildacres Subdivision Homeowners Association, Inc. In the past three years, with Vice-President John Riel, Secretary Keith Graham, Treasurer Don Bergal, and Directors Judy Hemp, Nancy Nickel, and Terry Jonason, she has been guiding the subdivision through the attack of the mountain pine beetle.

"In order to survive this dilemma, we realized the need to invest a great deal of personal time, the need for education and the need for a lot of money," Chambers says.

Initial Feeling of Helplessness

Almost everyone goes through denial, a sense of 'it can't happen to my trees,'" says Chambers. "People don't like change. Many bought property here with the vision of living or spending weekends in a storybook forest, dense and magical with oversized trees and complex

underbrush. It wasn't easy watching the trees die in our little paradise, especially the nice big ones." She remembers the trees fading and turning red, slowly at first. But then it seemed within months, they were losing trees exponentially. First a handful, then a hundred, then three thousand. They were all vulnerable because the beetles don't care about property boundaries.

Leading by Example

But Chambers and her colleagues changed things in the neighborhood. In 2003, the association took a tough stance. A committee of volunteers consisting of directors and owners marked for removal every dead and infested tree in the subdivision, on private lots and common areas. "We would pick beautiful spring days," Chambers recalls, "so the task wasn't completely negative. Dogs and kids especially had a good time."

The total cost of logging was shared. Owners were also encouraged to engage the association-sponsored forest clean-up contractor and spray their remaining trees to protect them from beetle attack the following year. Forest clean-up involves removing excess debris and logging slash that can contribute to the spread of wildfire. Deciding for the owners what trees needed to be removed wasn't always well received. Emotions ran high,

from disappointment to anxiety and despair, even anger. The directors preceded and followed the mandatory logging effort with FireWise brochures and other mailings, guest speakers, and informal discussions with neighbors.

The following year, volunteers again marked and counted trees for removal, only this time, owners were billed for the trees removed on their own lots. The concept of owner accountability was emerging.

Alarmed at the now rapid tree mortality, directors turned to a strategy of protection by widespread spraying. This was the first year they selected 1,000 of their finest remaining trees in the common area to spray. They also created an incentive for owners to mark and spray their own trees by offering a sign-up program. The directors arranged for the volume discount from the sprayer to extend to owners if the association would manage the sign-up, billing, and money collection. Owner participation was gratifying. Discussions about fire mitigation and logging plans continued to occupy a lot of space in association mailings and at the Annual Meeting.

In 2005, the directors took accountability a step further. Owners were expected to mark and count their own trees for spraying and removal, and pay in advance. Volunteers marked and counted only the trees in the common areas. Up to this point, volunteers had been generous with their time and energy—learning, educating, directing efforts, and performing many tasks for the owners. It was time to cut loose. With few exceptions, owners took an active role in treating their own property.

“Some owners preferred to make their own arrangements for all their fuels reduction activities, rather than use the association-sponsored contractors, but that’s okay” Chambers says. “The point is to convince people of the serious need to take action and make their own decisions about forest health. Three years of education has really paid off.”

FireWise to Forest Health

Forest health and the expense associated with it is a relatively new idea to Beth and her neighbors. You no longer can invest in forested property and do nothing to maintain it. You must be actively involved. In her area, the idea was introduced by way of the mountain pine beetles that were killing trees and creating an extreme fire hazard.

“Fires scare the living daylights out of you,” says Chambers. “We learned that firefighters decide which homes to save in a wildfire based on how safe the home is; like how easy they can get to and from the house or how dense the trees are surrounding the house. We started by reacting to the fire threat. Now we can talk about forest health because people are seeing the results. After three years of heavy logging, the neighbors see grasses, ground cover, and wildflowers they hadn’t seen before. There is more wildlife in the meadows, and you can see a fox running through the woods.”



Homeowners in the Wildacres subdivision have noticed more wildlife in the meadows around their homes since trees have been thinned.

This subdivision evolution did not come about without sacrifice. Currently, through its contractors, Wildacres treats 62 acres, and 20 acres are in common areas. In 2005, the association spent approximately \$39,000 treating common areas. Owners spent an additional \$36,000 treating their own private lots. Treatments included logging, spraying and forest clean-up. Also important was the 755 hours of volunteer time homeowners spent marking trees and burning slash — a contribution worth almost \$19,000.

“We were blessed with \$47,000 of grant money from both the Colorado State Forest Service and the Bureau of Land Management,” says Chambers. “Thank goodness for people like Colorado State Forest Service employees Mike Harvey and Ron Cousineau, and Billy Sumerlin from the Grand County Department of Natural Resources. They helped us work our way through the somewhat confusing grant processes to explain our need in terms that made us competitive. We couldn’t have been successful without them.”

It might also be noted that granting organizations look more favorably toward those who have already proven that they are willing to help themselves.

“I’m really proud of our owners for stepping up to the plate, doing the right thing for their own property, as well as helping to protect their neighbors,” Chambers adds. “The beetle problem in this county will not go away soon. We are in the midst of an estimated 120-year cycle. The beetles will continue to destroy trees. The foresters tell us that by thinning and removing infested trees, we are essentially simulating a forest fire. In that sense, the beetles teach us something. Spraying and removing trees has been a major project for several years. The task is more manageable now because most of the big trees are gone, and there aren’t as many to spray.”

Chambers reminisces. “We’ve been through a lot and we’ve learned a lot. We are several years ahead of other subdivisions that are just now experiencing their first beetle hits. But we are survivors. We still have trees, and more wildflowers, and more light comes in through the windows. The best of all worlds.”



Two years after extensive logging, native grasses and wildflowers replace the beetle-infested trees that once occupied this open space in the Wildacres subdivision.

Following are some observations from the Wildacres HOA, courtesy of Beth Chambers:

1. Recognize and appreciate what is going on around you in the mountains.
2. Be prepared for change. Nature must take its course.
3. Work together. Treatments are more effective if everyone is involved.
4. Stay informed. Ask for professional input and find people and agencies that can help.
5. Talk to people in the neighborhood and find out what they are thinking and feeling.
6. Spray trees to save what you can.
7. No matter what, remember, this is a beautiful place to live.

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