

# Mountain Studies Institute's 5th Annual Forest and Fire Learning Series

June 6th and June 8th, 2022

## The Event

The Forest and Fire Learning Series is an event designed to engage communities in conversations about living with fire on our landscape in Southwest Colorado. The event was hosted over two nights at the Outdoorsy Outpost in downtown Durango. Each night featured a panel of local experts and opportunities to network with representatives from organizations and agencies that provide resources for our communities to learn about and adapt to wildfire.



Panel discussion on June 6th. From left to right: Aaron Kimple (Forest Health Program Director at MSI), Alex Graf, Alison Layman, Gigi Richard.



**Communities**



**Clean water**



**Forests & wildlife**



**Recreation**

## The Theme

The Rocky Mountain Restoration Initiative (RMRI) is a stakeholder-driven collaborative that aims to improve ecosystem resilience across all lands in the Rocky Mountains. RMRI was started in Colorado, where three priority landscapes were identified by stakeholders (Southwest Colorado, Upper Arkansas and Upper South Platte). Southwest Colorado is the marquee RMRI landscape and attracts funding and resources for the region. Stakeholders identified four values that are the heart of all RMRI projects. These values (left) were the theme of the Forest and Fire Learning Series this year. The first night addressed communities and clean water, and the second night focused on forests, wildlife and recreation.

# Impact

## Organizations Represented

Water Information Program, Colorado State Forest Service, Mountain Studies Institute, United States Forest Service, San Juan Mountains Association, Colorado Parks and Wildlife, Wildfire Adapted Partnership, La Plata County, Four Corners Water Center, Mancos Trails Group, Trout Unlimited, Southwest Colorado Cycling Association, La Plata Open Space Conservancy, Four Corners Backcountry Horsemen, Protect Our Winters

## Panelists

- Alex Graf, Coordinator for Wildfire Adapted Partnership
- Alison Layman, WWPF Coordinator for La Plata County
- Gigi Richard, Director of Four Corners Water Center
- Joe Grant, mountain athlete and Protect Our Winters athlete
- Steve McClung, District Wildlife Manager for Colorado Parks and Wildlife
- Dani Gregory, President of Southwest Colorado Cycling Association
- Duncan Rose, Vice President of Dolores River Anglers



Lo Williams, Partnership Coordinator for San Juan National Forest, gives an update on fire conditions in Southwest Colorado.



## Numbers

Attendees:

- Night 1: 30
- Night 2: 40
- 70 total participants

15 organizations represented

7 local experts participated in panel discussions

4 hours of community engagement and education

Update on local fire conditions provided by San Juan National Forest each night

Top: panel discussion on June 8th. From left to right: Anthony Culpepper (Assistant Program Director at MSI), Joe Grant, Steve McClung, Dani Gregory, Duncan Rose.

Bottom: attendees networking before the panel discussion on June 8th.





# Final Thoughts

## Takehome messages

The Forest and Fire Learning Series was started after the 416 Fire north of Durango in 2018, when concerns grew over the localized impacts of climate events such as wildfire. Since then, MSI has continued to facilitate discussions about living with fire through this Learning Series, with the hope of diversifying the partners and perspectives represented each year. This year, the recreation community was involved in the panel discussion and public outreach involving their responsibility to steward the land and develop **sustainable relationships with fire** management and prevention activities across the landscape. As long as we continue to run, hike and bike across our landscape, expand trail networks and improve accessibility to our beloved forests, we will continue to interact with the preparation for, response to and recovery from wildfire. **We are grateful for the integration of this perspective into our Learning Series this year.**

Many good conversations were had at this year's Learning Series. With a startling number of fires igniting within view from Durango this spring, a common theme among attendees was how to prepare their homes for wildfire. They were curious about how to engage neighborhood communities that exist in the **wildland-urban interface (WUI)**, and about specific actions they can take to create **defensible space** around their homes. Needless to say, the folks at Wildfire Adapted Partnership will be busy with site visits this summer!

Another common message included the need to **integrate indigenous knowledge and perspectives into decision-making structures**. While the Tribes are included in land management decisions on adjacent lands, we recognize that they can be integrated in more fundamental ways and that we can always seek to improve our relationships with the Tribes and consideration for indigenous wisdom.

Finally, an overarching message of this years' Learning Series was that we must prepare ourselves for our forests to look different than before. While this can be hard to grapple with, we must also recognize the amazing work being done in our region and **maintain hope for the future of our forests.**

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