

**West Region Wildfire Council
Meeting Minutes
5/11/17**

Last Name	First Name	Affiliation
Austin	Tom	Log Hill Fire
Bennett	John	Telluride Fire
Copeland	Kristin	Colorado Parks and Wildlife
Dinsmore	Jennifer	San Miguel County
Falk	Lilia	WRWC
Gomez	Jamie	WRWC
Haefner	Lee	CSFS
Lewis	Brandon	BLM
Lingenfelter	Ed	Blue Mesa HOA
Megel	Mike	BLM
Menz	Mary	Ouray Plaindealer
Mitchell	Henry	San Miguel County
Odom	Luke	DFPC
Oxford	Ross	NPS
Rogers	John	Log Hill Fire
Scott	Mandy	CSFS
Shelby	Austin	CSFS
Swainson	Roy	Blue Mesa HOA
Tarantino	Mike	WRWC
Tisdell	Ben	Ouray County
Wright	Jeff	Delta County

Presentation of the Rocky Mountain Coordinating Group’s PRIME Award

On behalf of the Rocky Mountain Area Coordination Center, Brandon Lewis presented the Prevention Information Mitigation Education (PRIME) Award to the West Region Wildfire Council. Two PRIME Awards were awarded in 2017, one award in Fire Prevention and one award in Fire Mitigation. The 2017 PRIME Mitigation Award was presented to the West Region Wildfire Council’s Staff and Steering Committee for “outstanding contributions with significant program impact in wildfire mitigation, reducing the wildfire risk to communities within the Rocky Mountain Area”.

Introductions

Lilia Falk facilitated the meeting and initiated a round of introductions. She then introduced Russell Mann, the Fire Meteorologist for the Rocky Mountain Area Coordination Center in Lakewood, Colorado. Russell called in to present a “2017 Fire Weather Forecast” from the Predictive Services Program.

Presentation: “2017 Fire Weather Forecast” presented by Russell Mann, Fire Meteorologist for the Rocky Mountain Area Coordination Center.

Before Russell Mann started discussing this summer’s fire weather forecast he discussed the historic fire conditions in the West Region. Mann presented a graph showing an accumulation of acres burned from large fires in the six counties of the West Region from 1994 to 2016. The 2002 fire season stuck out on the bar graph showing 32,600 acres burned. 2002 was an extreme drought year across the state as most of Colorado’s counties had fire restrictions and numerous devastating fires consumed large chunks of acreage. In the West Region the 2002 fire season hit hard with the Burn Canyon Fire in San Miguel County consuming 30,000. However, over the last three fire seasons there have been zero large fires within the West Region. Mann described that the average acres burned by large fires in the West Region are 3,332 acres, but this average calculated from the arithmetic mean on the graph might be disproportionately high due to the 2002 season. Mann explained that using the median number would depict the more realistic average acreage consumed by large fires in the West Region which is 1,615 acres burned annually.

Next, Mann identified the core fire season of the West Region referring to a graph with data collected from the Montrose Dispatch Center between 1994 and 2012. Historically the core fire season in this area is between June and August. Of the 61 large fires reported by the Montrose Dispatch Center between 1994 and 2012, 46 of them were reported during this core fire season. Using this data Mann explained that there is a shoulder fire season in the West Region in mid-May and late August.

With the typical fire season and intensity of the West Region identified Mann started to explain his fire weather forecast. Before looking into the prediction models for the upcoming fire season he focused on the weather conditions observed in south western Colorado over the winter and spring that may have an impact on the upcoming fire season. Heavy winter systems in December, January and February resulted in above average snowpack throughout most of the state. SNOTEL data from March reported both the Gunnison and San Miguel River Basins at 139% of average snowpack. But by March a considerably warmer and drier weather regime transpired, with many temperatures across the state reporting 8-10 degrees above average. This weather pattern lead to a decrease in precipitation as well. Mann displayed a model showing much of Montrose and Delta Counties experiencing less than 50% average precipitation over a 60 day period in early spring. Mann noted that a drought indicator may exist due to long range (90 day) precipitation deficits from February through early May. Despite these long range deficits in the West Region the National Drought Mitigation Center is not currently classifying the area in a drought, and this is likely due to Southwest Colorado’s snowpack. Despite the early spring precipitation deficits the area’s snowpack was still above average in early May. The latest SNOTEL data that Mann displayed was reporting a 113% snowpack in the Gunnison River Basin. After explaining the recent weather conditions around the area, Mann started to explain the forecasting models created for the upcoming fire season in the West Region.

Mann started his forecasting by looking into the short term forecasts around the West Region. The short term models predicted a low pressure system moving into the area bringing low elevation rain and mountain snow. This forecast proved to be correct as a week after Mann presented the City of Montrose received several inches of snow with higher accumulation in the mountains. Mann’s modeling predicted that this low pressure system will persist over the West Region throughout May bringing an increase in precipitation.

Mann then started to explain some long range modeling. The next slide discussed was a long range upper-air forecast model created from Predictive Services that forecasts the atmospheric pressure throughout the nation over the month of June. The model mapped the movement of low pressure and high pressure areas throughout the month. The map had areas colored blue indicating a low pressure trough and areas colored orange indicating a high pressure ridge. Throughout the month of June the model was forecasting a low pressure trough just to the west of the Rocky Mountains, which implied a wetter than average temperature regime persisting throughout June in the West Region. Conversely the model predicted a high pressure ridge persisting over the northern Great Plains throughout June which could increase the fire danger in that area.

A huge factor that contributes to upcoming fire weather are anomalies in the Equatorial Pacific sea-surface temperatures. The sea-surface temperatures at the equator play a critical role in the formation of the El Niño and La Niña oscillations in the Pacific Ocean. Warmer than average sea-surface temperatures result in an El Niño Oscillation while cooler than average temperatures result in a La Niña. This last winter the sea surface temperatures were slightly cooler than average and we were sitting in a La Niña oscillation. Between March and May 2017 the equatorial sea-surface temperatures rose to their average, and anomalies have been neutral to warm indicating that the oscillation has been neutral. The latest models run last April are predicting this oscillation to move from neutral to El Niño by late summer as the sea-surface temperature increases more than 0.5 degrees Celsius above average.

With the oscillation trends forecasted into the summer Mann started to explain what this might mean for weather during the upcoming fire season. To do this Mann used historical oscillation data in relation to June weather patterns throughout the Rocky Mountain Area. Mann presented historical weather information when the oscillation moved from La Niña to Neutral to an El Niño transition. These oscillation transitions were observed in 1951, 1965 and 1972. In these three years the weather conditions in the Rocky Mountain Area over June were cool and wet. Conversely some of the most extreme fire weather conditions in the Rocky Mountain Area were historical La Niña to Neutral to Neutral transitions. This oscillation trend happened in 1996, 2001 and 2012 and all of these years experienced very warm and very dry conditions. To display the effects of these oscillations Mann compared snow pack data from May 2012 to May 2017. In 2012 the snowpack as of May 1st was less than 25% of average throughout the state of Colorado. This was a highly contrasting to the snowpack data from around the West Region in May 2017, which was reporting between 90 and 125% of average. The 2017 snowpack is a good indication that the oscillation is transitioning to El Niño.

With the transition to El Niño identified Mann started looking into some long range forecasting throughout the United States. The models are predicting cooler and wetter conditions to persist in the Rocky Mountain Area throughout June, July and August. The three month weather outlook from NOAA looking at precipitation probability is forecasting above average precipitation throughout the Rocky Mountains.

After presenting his data Mann gave a summary of his fire potential outlook. Mann predicted a below average large fire risk in the mountains through July. Mann made this prediction due to the above average mountain snowpack through the early spring and a lingering low pressure system in the short term forecasts. He predicted a later than average start to the core fire season at the higher elevations. Mann predicted an average start to the core fire season at the lower elevations due to the springtime precipitation deficits, however Mann noted that the forecasts are leaning towards more precipitation which means a shorter pre-monsoon window for high fire behavior is possible. And Mann noted that because the long range models are predicting at least an average monsoon season the chance of long duration dry and hot periods throughout July will be lowered. Mann did mention though that the monsoonal activity could potentially lead to numerous starts due to lightning activity. Mann also commented that short periods of hot and dry weather are common in between pulses of monsoon moisture. Despite the wetter than average weather forecast, lightning caused fires could have the potential to burn in between monsoonal activity. As the presentation ended Luke Odom, West Region FMO for DFPC, commented that although there may not be a large fire season in Colorado other areas will burn this summer and local firefighters can gain valuable experience by paying it forward and fighting fire in other states.

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Jamie Gomez, WRWC Mitigation and Education Coordinator, spoke about upcoming activities he has planned for Ouray County which includes a re-assessment of the wildfire risk in Log Hill Village. Jamie also mentioned the numerous mitigation projects that he is coordinating.

Mike Tarantino, WRWC Mitigation and Education Coordinator, explained his plans to complete a wildfire risk assessment for the Taylor Canyon in Gunnison County, an area that was not included in the counties CWPP. Tarantino also announced that the Council will be collaborating with the Gunnison County Association of Realtors to host a Wildfire Mitigation Event in Crested Butte on June 29th.

Ouray County Commissioner, Ben Tisdell, announced that he has been working with the planning department and is planning to review the wildfire codes in June. Tisdell also recommended inviting a speaker to present about DOLA at a Council Meeting. He also proposed recommending changes to the Emergency Fire Funds.

Jeff Wright, Delta County Emergency Manager, thanked county commissioners for being involved in wildfire mitigation activities. Wright also announced that an ICS 400 training will be hosted in Delta on June 2nd and 3rd and a Management 318 Course, Communications During a Disaster, will be held June 18th and 19th.

Henry Mitchell, the new San Miguel Emergency Manager, introduced himself to the Council. Mitchell is an alum of St. Louis University with a degree in disaster management. Mitchell's previously worked as an Emergency Planning Coordinator in Boulder where he assessed shelter structures during recent wildfires in Boulder County. Mitchell is excited for his career to evolve from the behavioral health field to broader emergency management.

Log Hill Fire Chief, John Rogers, announced that the Log Hill Fire Department was in the process of completing fire refreshers and getting red cards for all his personnel.

Austin Shelby, forester for the Colorado State Forest Service, discussed fuels mitigation projects and CSFS timber sales currently in progress. He discussed the MCH program that is being completed in Ouray, Lawson Hill and Elk Meadows. And he announced that his primary role will transition from wildfire mitigation to the Good Neighbor Authority Forester working on the Little Cone Timber Sale.

Telluride Fire Chief John Bennet announced that his department is getting crews up to specs and trained on two new engine tenders.

Lilia Falk, director of the West Region Wildfire Council, stated BLM will be conducting a fuels review and will be looking at projects completed by the WRWC using BLM Community Assistance Funds. Lilia also directed people to go to fireadaptedco.org to learn more about FACO membership opportunities. Falk also announced that the Council recently submitted a proposal for a SFA Grant.

Mike Megel, BLM Engine Captain, stated that the BLM has hired all of their seasonals and are getting trainings done and engines ready. He also announced that there have already been a few single tree wildland starts this season.

Rusty Stark, BLM Fuels Manager, announced that the BLM burned 90 acres in five units last month and he stated that they are hoping to burn another 90 to 100 acres. He also discussed some of the fuel moisture data that the BLM collected in their Rx Units. Fuel moistures in sage are currently at 150-180%, fuel moistures in Pinion-Juniper are only at 80% which is lower than normal, and 1,000 hour fuels had a 10-15% moisture.

Ed Ligenfelter, with the Blue Mesa Subdivision HOA, wanted to thank everyone involved with the West Region Wildfire Council.

Many Scott, Assistant District Forester with the Grand Junction CSFS Office, announced that this has been her second week working in Grand Junction and announced that she will be assisting the Council in Delta County.

Luke Odom, West Region FMO for DFPC, stated that his crews have been busy assisting with federal prescribed burns. He said that the first helicopter contract will start on 5/15 in Canon City, the Montrose Helicopter will start 6/12 and a Western Slope SEAT contract will begin on June 1st. He also announced that DFPC will have a Global Engine 747 air Tanker available with an on-call contract, this 747 will be available nationally. Odom also mentioned that spots are still available in next month's Colorado Wildland Fire and Incident Management Academy.