

Boulder County's Wildfire Mitigation Tax 2023: Year One Annual Report

Executive Summary

Boulder County passed a new 0.1% Wildfire Mitigation Sales and Use Tax—one penny on \$10—in November of 2022 with 72% of voters supporting the ballot measure. Tax funding is for increasing the pace and scale of wildfire mitigation efforts across the county. Wildfire mitigation is action taken before a wildfire ignites to reduce its severity and negative impacts such as the destruction of homes. Forest management, home hardening, and defensible space are common wildfire mitigation strategies. Action taken after a wildfire ignites— emergency notification, fire suppression, and recovery programs—are not included in the definition of wildfire mitigation.

Wildfire Partners is Boulder County's wildfire mitigation program—located in the county's Community Planning and Permitting Department (CP&P). Wildfire Partners and CP&P are responsible for managing the Wildfire Mitigation Tax. Launched in 2014, Wildfire Partners is a nationally recognized model for effective mitigation that started in western Boulder County. With the passage of the mitigation tax, Wildfire Partners expanded its programs and services to incorporate the entire county.

It takes time to create new programs and improve existing initiatives. In year one, the county's plan was to solicit public input, hire staff and consultants, and build a solid foundation for future wildfire mitigation efforts. After passage of the ballot measure, the county solicited input from residents on wildfire mitigation funding priorities by conducting a survey and holding an open house. Several community meetings were also held across the county to collect input for the Boulder County Community Wildfire Protection Plan (CWPP) update and help inform future wildfire mitigation efforts. The County received more than 1,600 separate recommendations in its post-election survey and 1,039 responses to its CWPP survey as of December 31, 2023. Residents have also provided regular input to county leaders and staff on wildfire mitigation priorities since the tax measure was placed on the ballot. Some of the key topics identified by community members include fences, junipers, insurance, ditches, real estate transactions, and landscaping. This input is being incorporated into the CWPP, and staff is looking into how to address (or continue to address) these issues in 2024 through existing and new programming.

The tax went into effect on January 1, 2023, and a total of \$8,897,104.55 was collected in year one. The county spent (and allocated to 2023 grant applicants) a total of \$3,245,993 or 36.48%. The remaining funds that were not allocated in 2023 will be spent in future years.

2023 funding was allocated to 11 program areas listed below, representing a significant expansion of Wildfire Partners. Staff also worked to develop more new programs and services for 2024. For example, Wildfire Partners created a new, Youth Helping Underserved People and Communities program by teaming up with the Mile High Youth Corps and TEENS, Inc. to provide free mitigation services to those in need. Additional new program areas—as well as the size and scope of existing programs—will continue to be developed and grow in 2024 and beyond.

2023 Wildfire Mitigation Tax Funding		
Wildfire Mitigation Program Areas	Spending and Commitments	Percentage
1. Strategic Fuels Mitigation Grants	\$ 1,453,946	45%
2. Organizational Support for Partners	\$ 550,000	17%
3. Community Chipping Program	\$ 283,058	9%
4. Open Space - Grassland Management	\$ 201,466	6%
5. Community Wildfire Protection Plans (CWPP)*	\$ 156,214	5%
6. Homeowner Mitigation (Regulatory Program)*	\$ 128,296	4%
7. Homeowner Mitigation (Voluntary Program)*	\$ 126,435	4%
8. Public Awareness Campaign and Education*	\$ 124,903	4%
9. Community Mitigation	\$ 109,298	3%
10. Community Forestry Sort Yards*	\$ 80,691	2%
11. Open Space - Forest Management*	\$ 31,687	1%
TOTAL	\$ 3,245,993	100%

*These programs are also funded by grants and other sources.

The 2023 funding table lists 11 program areas ranked by the amount of tax funding each program area received. Because it was the first item on the ballot and a focus of the campaign, staff started with creating a forest and grassland management grant program—the **Strategic Fuels Mitigation Grant (SFMG) program (1)**. Funding staff positions for local non-profit and local conservation district partners, **Organizational Support for Partners (2)** was another high priority for the county and the first program to receive tax dollars. Making funding available to all county residents (within all municipalities and unincorporated areas) to take immediate action was also important. As a result, the county expanded the scope of its oldest wildfire mitigation program (in existence since 1993) by offering free **Community Chipping (3)** to all county residents. Following a very wet spring, there was an urgent need to mitigate tall grasses on open space properties so the county worked with its municipal partners funding mowing and grazing to support **Open Space Grassland Management Projects (4)**. In 2023, the county also began the process of updating its **Community Wildfire Protection Plan (5)** and awarded funding to local CWPPs throughout the county under the SFMG program. In 2023, these first five efforts listed in the above table received the majority of Wildfire Mitigation Tax funding (82% of the total).

The above table lists Wildfire Mitigation Tax funding amounts. However, to support wildfire mitigation programs, the county also obtains grants. For example, the county received \$1 million from the Colorado Department of Natural Resources (for Forest Management), \$860,000 from the Colorado State Forest Service (for Homeowner Mitigation including Youth Corps Services and the CWPP update), \$252,000 from FEMA (for Public Awareness and Education including a Bilingual Outreach Specialist), and \$75,000 from the Fire Adapted Learning Network (for Youth Helping Vulnerable Individuals and Communities). These grants total \$2.187 million and represent a vital contribution to the county’s wildfire mitigation programs. County general fund revenue and other sales taxes also contribute to these programs. This report, however, only includes information on Wildfire Mitigation Tax Funding.

While program areas six to eleven in the above table only received 18% of Wildfire Mitigation Tax funding in 2023, these program areas are very important (and also received a majority of the grant funding). Some of these program areas have been in existence since the 1990s and others are new in 2023. Wildfire Partners **Homeowner Mitigation Programs** offer financial assistance and certification to residents in west Boulder County for both **regulatory participants (6)** (new homes, additions and short-term rentals) and **voluntary participants (7)** (homeowner who choose to reduce their risk). A marketing firm—Vermillion—was hired to lead a **Public Awareness Campaign (8)**—Wildfire Happens Here, and an additional contractor—Advertising Checking Bureau, Inc.—was hired to administer a new \$2.5 million rebate program (\$500 rebates for 5,000 residents) that is tied to the campaign and will begin in 2024. In 2023, the county also launched a new **Community Mitigation program (9)** linked to the national Firewise USA© program that has been in existence since 2002. Funding was provided to support Boulder County’s two **Community Forestry Sort Yards (10)** and Boulder County’s Parks and **Open Space – Forest Management efforts (11)**.

The Wildfire Mitigation Tax provided \$637,988 for Boulder County staff (salaries, benefits, and equipment) to design and implement the 11 program areas listed in the above table. These expenses for county staff equaled 20% of total spending. Even though building new programs in year one was staff intensive, the county was able to allocate 80% of Wildfire Mitigation Tax funding to residents and external, partner organizations. The Community Planning and Permitting Department (CP&P) received funding for 9 staff positions (seven full-time and two hourly employees) and the Parks and Open Space Department (POS) received funding for two, full-time positions. Hiring and training these employees was a major accomplishment. These staff members were instrumental in producing the long list of accomplishments detailed in the rest of this annual report.

Program Details

1. Strategic Fuels Mitigation Grants (SFMG)

The Wildfire Mitigation Tax is funding 10 strategic forest and grasslands management projects submitted in 2023 totaling \$1.43 million. This funding will leverage another \$2.94 million of “matching” contributions for total project costs of \$4.37 million. The 10 projects will treat 888.5 acres. The awards were recommended by the SFMG Selection Committee—five members with fuels mitigation, planning and wildland fire expertise. Wildfire Mitigation Tax funding for staff costs for this program area were approximately \$26,000. Grant awards include:

- Boulder Mountain Fire Protection District: Boulder Mountain Fuels Reduction Project - \$410,812
- Boulder Valley and Longmont Conservation Districts (2 projects): 1) Gold Hill Wildfire Resilience Project - \$153,800 and 2) Ski Road Forest Restoration Project - \$60,913
- Boulder Watershed Collective: Copperdale Community Mitigation Project - \$21,956
- Devils Thumb HOA: The Devils Thumb HOA Grasslands Mitigation Project - \$50,000
- Four Mile Fire Protection District: Eagle’s Drive/Canyonside Fuelbreak Project - \$32,868
- Lefthand Fire Protection District: Upper Ceran Saint Vrain Fuels Mitigation Project - \$287,550
- Longmont (City of): Longmont Spillway Mitigation Project - \$100,000
- Sugarloaf Fire Protection District: Arkansas Mountain Fuels Reduction Project - \$139,899
- Sunshine Fire Protection District: The Dry Gulch South Fuels Reduction Project - \$169,880

2. Organizational Support for Non-profits and Conservation Districts

In 2023, Boulder County provided \$550,000 to three partner organizations for each organization to hire two staff members to increase the pace and scale of wildfire mitigation efforts.

Bolder Valley and Longmont Conservation Districts (BVLCD): BVLCD secured \$5.9 million in funding to implement mitigation efforts from eight different sources. BVLCD helped plan the following projects on 2,317 acres: Ski Road, Gold Hill Road, Silver Spruce Ranch, Lohman/Hutchins, Button Rock, and Gap Road. BVLCD helped complete projects on 268 acres, including the Camp St. Malo project. (The above metrics include project where BVLCD took the lead and when they collaborated with partners.)

Boulder Watershed Collective (BWC): In 2023, BWC was awarded five grants totaling \$974,000 for wildfire mitigation projects. BWC hosted 50 events attended by 2,022 people. BWC spent \$436,000, treated 97.5 acres, and planned and secured funding for an additional 627 acres. Their 10 project sites include: Gold Hill, Arapaho Ranch, Arkansas Mountain, Los Lagos, County Road 99, Pinecliffe, Copperdale, Porter Ranch, and Miramonte.

The Watershed Center (TWC): TWC was awarded \$900,000 in 2023 for wildfire mitigation projects from six different funding sources. TWC spent \$302,000, treated 28 acres (on 43 properties), and performed planning and coordination efforts with a large number of properties in Raymond-Riverside, Tahosa Valley, Conifer Hill, and Ski Road. TWC continued to lead the Saint Vrain Forest Health Partnership. Staff developed the “Grassland Management in Boulder County” Story Map and began the development of a collaborative, interactive grasslands management map.

3. Community Chipping

Boulder County has had a chipping program since 1993. With funding from the Wildfire Mitigation Tax, we expanded the program and now offer free chipping service to all residents in Boulder County (incorporated and unincorporated areas) with a minimum of five participating residents. Boulder County hired a chipping coordinator in June and launched the program in August. In 2023, 53 applications were approved, 472 homes participated, and approximately 2,173 cubic yards of slash material was hauled away during this short season. The program and its six chipping contractors received fantastic reviews from happy participants—obtaining an average of 4.8 out of 5 stars. The Wildfire Mitigation Tax contributed \$283,000 to the community chipping program. Wildfire Mitigation Tax funding for staff costs for this program area were approximately \$57,000. To learn more and view a map of participating communities, visit: <https://wildfirepartners.org/chipping-program/>.

4. Emergency Funding for Grassland Mitigation on Public Open Space

Due to the wet spring and prolific growth of grasses and other vegetation in 2023, Wildfire Mitigation Tax funding was made available to municipal and county open space departments to address immediate, unmet needs for 2023 only. Wildfire Mitigation Tax funding for staff costs for this program area were approximately \$3,500. The following projects were funded totaling \$197,966.

- **The City of Louisville** completed multiple projects. 1) The city contracted goat grazing for vegetation management and reduction of wildland fuels. Goat grazing took place on open space sites in areas adjacent to homes. 2) The city also contracted cattle grazing, utilizing regenerative grazing practices at Davidson Mesa Open Space. 3) Additional mowing took place to create fuel breaks on public lands adjacent to private property and to create larger buffer zones on native grasslands (\$51,574.00).
- **The Town of Superior** conducted cool weather goat grazing to reduce tall grasses in western facing open space areas near homes. (\$34,000.00).
- **The Town of Erie** purchased a tractor with accessories for fire mitigation work (\$36,154.00).
- **The City of Boulder** purchased cattle collars for virtual fencing. The collars help keep cattle in strategic locations, leaving vegetation at lower levels along fence lines and neighborhood boundaries, thus decreasing wildfire risks (\$40,000.00).
- **Boulder County Parks and Open Space** purchased a mower to complete fire mitigation work. The mower cut tall grasses along open space boundaries, reducing the fuels adjacent to communities and fencing (\$36,237.00).

5. Community Wildfire Protection Plans (CWPPs)

The Wildfire Mitigation Tax is funding three Community Wildfire Protection Plan update projects submitted in 2023 at \$50,000 per award totaling \$150,000. These project recipients are “matching” this funding with \$210,000 for total project costs of \$360,000. In addition, tax funding will be used to support the updating of the Boulder County CWPP in 2024. The county has received \$225,000 in grant funding from the Colorado State Forest Service to update its CWPP in 2023. Boulder County is working with SWCA Environmental Consultants to engage community members, assess wildfire risk, and identify and prioritize projects for implementation. Wildfire Mitigation Tax funding for staff costs for this program area were approximately \$6,000. Wildfire Mitigation Tax grant awards for CWPPs include:

- Allenspark Fire Protection District CWPP Update - \$50,000
- Boulder Mountain Fire Protection District CWPP Update - \$50,000
- Lyons Fire Protection District and The Town of Lyons CWPP Update - \$50,000

6. Building Code and Short-term and Vacation Rental Requirements (Regulatory Program)

The Wildfire Mitigation Tax funds Wildfire Partners regulatory, as well voluntary, programs. Wildfire mitigation regulations in the Boulder County Land Use and Building Codes exist for new residences, most additions, deck work, and short-term rental licenses. In 2023, our team of Wildfire Mitigation Specialists helped 27 new home, 52 addition, and 23 deck permits perform the required wildfire mitigation, conducting on-site assessments and inspections and providing on-going technical assistance and oversight. The team completed 43 assessments for individuals applying for short-term and vacation rental licenses in 2023. To date, we have performed 143 Wildfire Partners assessments for these rental licenses. Wildfire Mitigation Tax funding for staff costs for this program area were approximately \$128,000.

The wildfire mitigation team is also responsible for reviewing planning dockets for possible ways to mitigate the risk of loss of life and property from wildfires. The wildfire mitigation team provided 80 planning docket referrals in 2023 broken down as follows:

LU (Limited Impact Special Use)	13
SE (Subdivision Exemption)	2
SPR (Site Plan Review)	44
SPRW (Site Plan Review Waiver)	14
SU (Special Use)	2
<u>VAR (Variance)</u>	<u>3</u>
Total	80

7. Individual Home Assessments (Voluntary Program)

In 2023, Boulder County used grant funds from the Colorado Forest Service to support its voluntary home assessment program in the western portion of the county. Wildfire Mitigation Tax funding of approximately \$126,000 was also used to support this program. In 2023, Wildfire Partners completed 404 total assessments, issued 243 Wildfire Partners Certificates, and recertified 82 homes. In addition to recruiting new participants and conducting assessments and inspections in the field, staff provide on-going support for the more than 3,000 participants in the program. Wildfire Partners sends a monthly newsletter and regular updates and communications to 2,334 partners via email and social media postings. Staff developed new technological tools and administrative systems to increase data accuracy, decrease response time, and increase staff productivity. Implementation of these automation activities will reduce the staff time needed to assist participants by approximately 55%. Wildfire Partners also worked to switch our home assessment app and report to ESRI's Survey123 to improve efficiency and program administration.

Again in 2023, Wildfire Partners provided financial assistance to participants (cost sharing and free services) using grant funds. The county joined with TEENS Inc., a Nederland-based youth organization, to provide free mitigation services to residents in need. Over 19 days, 14-member youth crews completed 10 mitigation projects. Boulder County applied for and received a \$75,000 grant from the Fire Adapted Communities Learning Network to hire a coordinator for this program and offer 20 weeks for free mitigation services to vulnerable individuals and communities in collaboration with TEENS Inc., and Mile High Youth Corps. To learn more, visit:

<https://www.9news.com/article/news/local/wildfire/teenagers-help-boulder-county-wildfire-mitigation/73-b13ba135-941d-4493-8700-3db897b7843a>

8. Public Awareness Campaign and Countywide Rebate Program

To support a public awareness campaign and rebate program, we updated the Wildfire Partners website (<https://WildfirePartners.org>) and county's wildfire mitigation web pages (<https://bouldercounty.gov/disasters/wildfires/mitigation>), and we redesigned the Wildfire Partners logo. We hired contractors to develop the campaign and started a procurement process to select additional contractors to administer the rebate program so both initiatives will be ready to launch in 2024. Wildfire Mitigation Tax funding of about \$125,000 supported these efforts in 2023.

9. Community Mitigation

Wildfire Partners always encourages community mitigation. Residents, working with neighbors in addition to work on their own properties, will create community resiliency and enhance the effectiveness of individual efforts. In addition to community chipping, we offer various community mitigation services, including: 1) Community Presentations and Outreach, 2) Community Advising, and 3) Community Mitigation Planning. Mitigation Tax funding of \$109,000 was spent in this area. Visit <https://wildfirepartners.org/community-mitigation/> to learn more community mitigation services.

Community Presentations, Outreach and Advising: Wildfire Partners staff participated in numerous community events, gave presentations, provided information, and served as a technical resource for community members in-person, online and over the phone. We staffed tables and/or gave presentations at community events in Superior, Louisville, Marshall, Boulder, Lafayette, Gunbarrel, Sugarloaf, Sunshine, Porter Ranch, and locations throughout Unincorporated Boulder County. Our Bilingual Outreach Specialist also provided Spanish translation services and education at numerous events at locations such as Superior, Louisville, Sunshine Canyon, San Lazaro, Conifer Hill, and Boulder Rural Fire Protection District.

Community Mitigation Planning: Wildfire Partners encourages communities to participate in the national Firewise USA recognition program that has been in existence since 2002. There are currently six Firewise USA communities in Boulder County: Lake of the Pines was the first (2013) and Lake Valley Estates is the most recent (2023). Because of its Firewise USA designation, Wildfire Partners worked with Lake Valley Estates in 2023 to help implement its action plan, completing 41 assessments. In 2022 and 2023, 16% of the homes in Lake Valley Estates have completed assessments with many more planned for 2024.

As part of its community mitigation programs, Wildfire Partners supported the Four Mile Fire Protection District to pilot a mitigation tools library where residents can check out equipment to complete mitigation tasks.

10. Boulder County Community Forestry Sort Yards (CFSYs)

In 2023, the Nederland CFSY was open from May 5 to November 18, and the Meeker Park CFSY was open from May 17 to October 21 (203 operational days compared to 179 days in 2022). In total, individuals from 1,784 different property addresses used the yards, delivering a total of 7,165 loads (an average of four loads per property). Individuals from 240 new addresses (171 from Meeker Park and 169 from Nederland) used the yards for the first time in 2023 (the 16th year of CFSY operations). The total material processed in 2023 was 1,524.47 tons (wood, slash, chips, and yard debris). The collection of yard debris (pine needles, grasses, and noxious weeds) is very popular and an essential service for supporting Wildfire Partners wildfire mitigation efforts with homeowners. Wildfire Mitigation Tax funding for operations were \$25,000 and staff costs for this program area were approximately \$55,000.

11. Open Space - Forest Management

Boulder County Parks and Open Space (POS) forest planning group completed pre-treatment inventories on the Wallace Property near Allenspark and post-treatment inventories at Caribou Ranch/Sherwood Gulch and Hall Ranch. Forest planning by the numbers: 63 plots, 40 of which are new, 311 acres of pre- and post-

treatment inventory, over 2,000 slash piles mapped, approximately five miles of boundary painted, and 32 fuels samples collected. POS staff also worked on Phase I of the St Vrain Forest Health Project:

- \$1 million grant funding secured
- \$2.3 million total project cost
- ~420 acres mechanical/manual treatment completed
 - ✓ West Hall 116+ acres manual/mechanical treatment
 - ✓ Antelope Park: 20 acres mechanical treatment
 - ✓ North Shore: 22 acres mechanical treatment
 - ✓ Cook Mountain: 132 acres mechanical treatment
 - ✓ Eagle Ridge: 130 acres mechanical treatment
- 4,000 acres planning in St. Vrain Watershed –The Watershed Center
- Involved multi-agency coordination and collaboration with Colorado Department of Natural Resources, The Watershed Center, City of Longmont, Boulder Valley and Longmont Conservation Districts, U.S. Forest Service, Colorado State Forest Service, private landowners and Markit! Forestry Management. LLC (contractor).

Wildfire Mitigation Tax funding for staff costs for this program area were approximately \$32,000. To learn more, visit: <https://dnr.colorado.gov/divisions/forestry/co-strategic-wildfire-action-program>