



STAFF REPORT

To: Summit County Council and Park City Council

From: Janna Young, Summit County Deputy County Manager
Jessica Kirby, Summit County Public Lands Manager

Date of Meeting: June 28, 2022

Type of Item: Discussion regarding watershed protection and BRIC grant possibilities

BACKGROUND

Summit County and Park City have a long history in environmental stewardship, water source protection, and active land use management, placing a high value and emphasis on the conservation of land and preservation of water to protect the values that residents share about living here. As such, both entities have acted, either with partners, like state and federal forestry divisions, other cities, special districts, or on their own to protect the natural resources that sustain the local character, economic livelihood and the world class recreation opportunity that support our county's population and tourism base.

While not a new occurrence to the intermountain-west, wildfire has become increasingly frequent and has been intensified by the changing climate bringing more drought and higher temperatures to our region leading to a significant increase in wildfire risk countywide. In fact, virtually all of Summit County is at risk to the impacts of wildfire. While wildfire itself is an inevitable and normal ecological process, especially to a fire-adapted landscape such as Summit County, when fire is removed from a landscape for many years highly flammable vegetation becomes overstocked. At the same time, development expansion into the WUI have increased the number of homes in high-risk areas. Overcrowded conditions, threaten life and public safety, degrade overall forest health and threaten the freshwater security provided by our forest ecosystems.

While the cause of this ever-increasing wildfire risk is widely agreed to be in response to fire exclusion, the accumulation of fuels, a warming climate, and the expanding development in the wildland-urban interface, collective action has fallen short due to fragmented planning, constrained budgets, and limited capacity to implement. With 400,000 acres identified as high-extreme wildfire risk, 20,000 homes residing within the Wildland Urban Interface (WUI), and the headwaters of seven (7) major watersheds providing fresh water to four (4) western states, there is an urgent and immediate need to change the wildfire paradigm in Summit County to produce the resulted effect of reducing wildfire risk by diminishing the far-reaching effects on human health and community well-being, and long-lasting associated impacts on the economy and the environment.

Research shows that structure loss from wildland fires is primarily driven by two equally important factors, 1) the vulnerabilities of buildings that make them prone to ignition (Embers cause 80% of wildland fire home ignitions), and 2) the vegetative fuels within 100ft of structures, the area referred to as defensible space. Outside of the 100ft defensible space zone, surrounding

wildland fuels in the larger landscape also play a significant role in structure and ecological system degradation, as fire and embers can spread from nearby wildland areas into communities frequently several miles from the fire line. It is in this area that a third mitigation strategy comes into play, otherwise known as the landscape-scale fuels treatment or vegetation management. Landscape-scale fuels treatments refers to actions taken to alter natural vegetation, or plant communities, that abut WUI communities or comprise a health watershed system, usually on the scale of 10s to 1,000s of acres.

Like wildfire, landscape-scale fuels treatment do not recognize boundaries. The approach is all encompassing, holistically treating the entire landscape with the goal of meaningful and impactful reduction of wildfire fuels and post wildfire related ecological impacts. Treatments include use of prescribed fire, prescribed grazing, timber harvest techniques, invasive plant removal, and mechanical treatment to remove fine fuels, dense stands of fire-prone species, shrubs, and dead and dying vegetation. Fuels are reduced in order to create "fire resilient zones" to restore ecosystems to less flammable conditions. Strategically placed fire resilient zones can be effective at creating more desirable conditions by slowing the rate of fire spread, shifting fire behavior from crown fire to surface fire, decreasing fire severity, providing safe anchors which firefighters can use to stop forward progress of the fire, and supplementing and supporting nearby structure mitigation strategies.

OVERALL WATERSHED PROTECTION DETAILS

Although land use, plant communities, topography, weather, and soils vary across the landscapes of Summit County, notable patterns for wildfire mitigation are evident in past and future fire behavior. Approaches to manage this behavior is often referred to as restoring the land to fire resiliency. To be successful, these actions will require taking existing techniques and actively deploying them at a **landscape scale** in order to impact **whole communities**. Mitigating large-scale loss of life, property, and ecosystem function can be achieved by deploying relatively well-established techniques of home hardening, defensible space and vegetation management at the scale of **whole communities** and the natural landscapes they are embedded in.

To tackle this cross-boundary **whole community** wildfire treatment issue, the Summit County Resilience Fund (RF) has been created in a united effort by local and regional partners. Current supporters include Summit County, Weber Basin Water Conservancy District, Mountain Regional Water District, the US Forest Service, Utah Department of Forestry Fire and State Lands, Utah's Watershed Restoration Initiative, Utah's Shared Stewardship, the National Forest Foundation, Blue Forest Conservation, the National Turkey Foundation, Trout Unlimited, Sageland Collaborative, the Weber River Partnership, the Utah Department of Water Quality, the Utah Department of Wildlife Resources, Utah Department of Agriculture and Food, the Utah Public Lands Policy Coordinating Office, Park City Fire District, and the World Resources Institute in collaboration with the Cities4Forests initiative, to name just a few. The Resilience Fund pools funding from stakeholders to 1) fund the upfront costs of watershed restoration and forest health treatments across public and private landscapes, and 2) invest in the long-term maintenance costs of watershed protection through an endowment to increase community resilience in the Weber watershed. To date the fund has successfully raised \$5 million dollars and is primed to contribute \$100k to the endowment in its first year.

Building the RF requires Summit County to consistently seek community support and long-term stakeholder investments to champion this progressive and innovative campaign. Fuel reduction

and endowment contributions for the RF can be made to Summit County and will help promote fire resilient landscapes, wildfire adapted communities, and a proactive watershed defense. In addition to the RF, Summit County is actively pursuing ongoing funding opportunities and large Federal and State grants to leverage RF funding upon need. Wildfire resiliency efforts need to be deployed at the scale of **whole communities**, targeting ecosystem function in order to achieve a balance where we can live with fire as a natural, ecological process without large-scale disruption and loss of life and property. The County's approach is intentional comprehensive and inclusive, showcasing a wide-ranging partner network, (Federal, State, County, City, Private and NGO's) and a **whole community** landscape scale extent that focuses on reducing wildfire risk countywide. Given the discrete number of major communities in Summit County, the overall goal is to develop an approach to fire resiliency that can be deployed across all of County's major population areas, connecting landscape and improving prevention measures. Goals will be achieved by:

- Strategic Approach: Identify tactical locations for fuel reduction and forest health treatments by utilizing science-based applications and modeling tools.
- Collaborations and Coalitions: Working with partners across jurisdictions to develop and implement projects that are cross-boundary, landscape-scale, and that have true long-term community investment.
- Fire Adaptive Community Focus: Supporting planning and investments in fire-adapted communities, promoting mitigation efforts that supports private landowner personal responsibility and adapting a community centric "common good" philosophy.
- Green Energy from Biomass: Promoting innovation and incentives, providing opportunities, and encourage economic development to increase capacity, grow a needed workforce, and investment in industry to allow for scalable and long-term success.

BUILDING RESILIENT INFRASTRUCTURE AND COMMUNITIES (BRIC)

Building Resilient Infrastructure and Communities (BRIC), a Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) administered program, encourages and supports countywide community hazard mitigation projects that reduce the risks faced from disasters and natural hazards, such as wildfire. The BRIC program guiding principles support communities through capability- and capacity-building; encouraging and enabling innovation; promoting partnerships; enabling large projects; maintaining flexibility; and providing consistency.

Summit County, in partnership with Park City, have created a steering committee looking collectively and cross-boundary at a countywide pilot project targeting the **whole community** approach to wildfire mitigation. The project is proposed to support cost share defensible space and home hardening programs within three pilot areas, promote landscape scale fuel reduction to promote drinking water security within the Weber Basin Watershed and support County and City Emergency Management goals for public safety measures countywide.

Currently, the committee has submitted our Notice of Intent (NOI) and have received encouraging feedback from the State FEMA official that our project is in line with grant expectations, checking the boxes for large landscape scale, community engagement, multijurisdictional partnerships, and capacity building.

Draft Due Date: August 2022

Final Due Date: January 2023

Grant request:

- \$50 Million (to be spent over 3 years, funded October 2023)

Matching requirements:

- 70% FEMA (or \$35M grant dollars)
- 30% Summit County and partner contributions (or \$15M matching dollars, can be in-kind contributions)

DISCUSSION

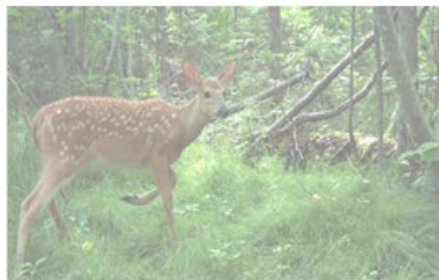
Staff requests any questions and/or discussion regarding:

- Council support for innovation and collaborative spirit
- Desired support for collaboration on countywide watershed restoration and fuel reduction efforts
- Interest and/or support for the Summit County Resilience Fund and Endowment contribution
- Interest from two City Councilmembers to join the Resilience Fund coalition (Glenn Wright and Malena Stevens represent County Council)
- Direction from both councils for continued pursuit of the BRIC grant funding opportunity
- Standing commitment to matching funds, this can include use of in-kind hours and community cost share dollars
- Commitment and contribution from Councilmembers to assist in drafting grant request language, countywide funding governance and equitability of grant dollar distribution.
- Project support letters for prominent community members and government officials
- Interest from City Council in pursuit of project supporting innovative approaches to project biproduct, such as biomass facility
- Ongoing support to provide and for the tools needed for success
 - Increased capacity/staff resources (can be funded by grant dollars)
 - Investigation of long-term funding opportunities – support for a community resilience funding mechanism.
- General questions and/or concerns

WHAT'S AT STAKE FOR SUMMIT COUNTY



- WATER QUALITY, QUANTITY AND AVAILABILITY
- DISPLACEMENT OF COMMUNITY, WORKFORCE AND TOURISM
- LOST REVENUE AND LIVELIHOOD
- HABITAT LOSS AND SPECIES COMPOSITION
- LOSS OF LIFE



- HEADWATERS OF 8 MAJOR WATERSHEDS
- IMPACTING 3 STATES
- PROVIDING WATER TO 11 UTAH COUNTIES
- **1.2 MILLION** DOWNSTREAM WATER USER IN UTAH

