

Cooperation Leads to Coordination

Cooperation at local level plays key role in Routt County, Colorado

PLANS HELP.

Plans spell out who will help fight wildfires, what equipment will be available, how local agencies and federal partners will work together, who will cover what territory, who will pay for what, and how the various parties will communicate (down to the level of telephone numbers and radio frequencies and repeaters).

Plans also become long-range planning tools, helping all the agencies involved in fighting wildfires acquire over time the training and equipment most needed in their area.

The state of Colorado thinks plans are so important that it requires them of any county that wants to participate in the state's Emergency Fire Fund (a fund the counties pay into regularly and from which money is available for fighting large wildfires).

But putting together a really good plan is not easy. Just ask the folks in Routt County, Colorado.

All issues considered

In 1990, Chuck Vale became the director of emergency management for Routt County, which surrounds the ski resort town of Steamboat Springs in the northern Colorado Rockies. Three years later, the sheriff asked him to develop a county plan for fighting wildfires. Colorado law gives sheriffs legal responsibility for fighting wildfires, and this sheriff delegated that responsibility to Vale.

Giving the job to the emergency manager proved to be advantageous. Vale says it created continuity. While the sheriff is up for reelection every four years, he has held his position for more than a decade.

"It was one of the great stepping stones of where we ended up," Vale says. "It opened the door for us to figure out cooperative issues."

Vale decided he did not want to create a plan that would just sit on a shelf. He wanted to make a usable document that would be short and to the point. As he says, "If nobody blows the dust off, what did we write it for?"



One of the difficulties in creating an efficient, usable plan is the number and diversity of the groups involved. They include federal agencies (such as the U.S. Forest Service and the Bureau of Land Management), state agencies (including the Colorado State Forest Service), county commissioners, the sheriff, the county and other local emergency managers, mayors and city councilors, and sometimes urban and rural fire chiefs. Some of the participants are primarily focused on land management, some on budgets, and some on firefighting—both structural and wildfire.

Routt County
Emergency
Management Director
Chuck Vale



Oak Creek Fire
Protection District Chief
Chuck Wisecup

Vale noted that in many cases policy makers signed plans while those who would actually be involved in battling blazes didn't even know about the documents. To prevent that, he included representatives from the county's six fire protection districts in the process.

As talks went forward, those present brought their own perspectives to questions small and large. Smaller concerns, for example, included matters such as who would pay for a chewed-up hose. The bigger issue, Vale says, was clarifying how to decide who was in charge of what fires, which is critical for reimbursement issues as well as for

organizing firefights. Whose area a fire is in, he explains, "is not real clear when you look at these wildland fires. The question becomes, 'Am I helping you or are you helping me?'"

The details and the diversity of perspective made for long discussions, but produced good results. Vale sums it up, "If we could get people to focus on their particular issue or gripe and find a solution to it in the document, they were perfectly content."

After hashing "just about every conceivable issue" a plan was developed. In addition to the plan agreed to with the federal agencies, the local participants also established the Routt County Wildland Fire Council, consisting of the fire chiefs, sheriff, county emergency manager, and attorneys representing the city of Steamboat Springs and the county.

All the local parties signed a memorandum of understanding, which committed them to coordinate on a plan for wildfire prevention and suppression, procedures for reporting and fighting wildfires, public education programs, training and budget requests to the county commissioners.

In retrospect, Vale says the plan was readily accepted in part because the stakeholders did not feel that they had anything to lose. During the relatively wet period that ended in the fall of 1999, the threat of major wildfires was minimal, so planning for fire was not a major concern and the wildfire demands on personnel and equipment were relatively few.

But that all changed.

The 'divorce'

On October 25, 1997, a violent wind-storm felled trees on 20,000 wilderness acres in Routt County. In a single day, the county had suddenly acquired a huge potential threat, as the mass of downed trees created the fuel for a possible major wildfire in the rugged hills. The blowdown was a harbinger of the problems to come.

The West was seeing the beginning of what proved to be a multi-year drought. The

incidence of wildfire increased throughout the whole region. In Routt County, the number of wildfire starts more than doubled in a year, from 44 in 1999 to 100 in 2000.

The fact that more and more homes had been built in heavily timbered areas and on steep hillsides also began drawing increased concern.

When the 93-acre Deguine Fire broke out in May 2000, District Chief Chuck Wisecup of the Oak Creek Fire Protection District was able to muster just 60 personnel and 30 pieces of equipment. "And that was pretty much everything in the county," he says. "There is no single entity in Routt County that can handle a major incident on its own."

Suddenly attention began to focus on exactly what resources the county had on hand to fight wildfires.

In November of that year, Vale and the other members of the Wildland Fire Council submitted an 80-page *Report of Findings and Recommendations of the Wildland Fire Council for the Routt County Board of County Commissioners*. The report pointed out "a lack of capacity and capability in... wildland fire throughout the county."

Routt had only two paid personnel and 90 volunteers for all its fire, rescue and emergency medical services. Two departments did not have enough firefighters to meet minimum standards for structural firefighting, and three others barely did, which also meant it was "apparent there are no additional firefighters for mutual aid or wildland fire suppression extended attack." If each department stuck by its commitment to keep a minimum level of coverage in its own district, the report pointed out, then "mutual aid... is non-existent[.]"

The report listed all the firefighting equipment in the county, which illustrated the problems with firefighting capability. As Vale said in reference to one piece of equipment, "If we're going to continue to go into the interface, we're going to have to do better than 1978 trucks."

The obvious problems were bad enough. But the report went one critical step further. It recommended a "substantial budget contribution" from the county and the fire protection districts of approximately \$1.7 million over the next five years. It called for acquiring three engines and adding three seasonal firefighters each year over three years (for a total of nine firefighters).

Vale says projecting that estimate was "probably the biggest mistake of my career."



Steamboat Springs Fire Chief Bob Struble

“Once we got everybody at the table, we made great strides.”

— Bob Struble

Already by that point, as the report records, city officials from Steamboat had said they probably would not sign the 2001 memorandum of understanding with the wildfire council unless the county pledged more financial support. Then, when the report called for the county and fire districts to put up \$1.7 million over the next five years, it seemed to some as if the city was trying to tell the county how to spend its money. As Vale says, “That’s like *me* looking at *your* checkbook and telling *you* how to spend *your* money.”

County commissioners said they were already going above and beyond what was required of them. The dispute sparked by the report resulted in Steamboat Springs pulling out of the Wildland Fire Council.

“This report is what divided the city and county,” Vale says. “This was the divorce decree.... We all agree when it’s a \$100 deal. But things change when you’ve got a \$100,000 deal.”

In practice, points out Steamboat Springs Fire Chief Bob Struble, the city continued to respond to calls outside city limits and participated in mutual aid with the other fire districts. But the split at the policy level halted progress in planning and improvements in equipment and personnel, leaving the overall wildfire strategy in disarray as the drought intensified.

Ironically, the \$1.7 million called for over five years proved to be far less than the actual cost of fighting the fires that erupted in 2002.

Difficult talks lead to ‘group hug’

A year after the “divorce,” Vale says, the various groups realized that “divorce isn’t going to work. We’ve got to work together.” Incumbents and newly elected officials began to talk, thanks largely to the efforts of Vale and the fire chiefs, along with Routt County Commissioner Nancy Stahoviak and Steamboat Springs City Councilwoman Nancy Kramer.

“We went for a year in limbo and fortunately it wasn’t a very bad year [in terms of

fires],” says Stahoviak, a commissioner since 1993. “We needed to figure out a way to get to the table to talk about this.”

She and others invited people from around the county to a dinner. “The whole purpose of the evening was just to have dialogue,” she explains. “It was really a productive evening because the people got to know each other and what the issues were in their areas.”

They decided to hold a series of meetings over the winter so they could come to agreement about the annual operating plan and the memorandum of understanding.

In the meetings that followed, it was as clear as ever that all the parties involved still had their different particular interests. “Each branch of government has different perspectives and responsibilities,” Vale points out. The various county, fire protection district and town organizations he was trying to bring together “don’t even agree on what day of the week it is sometimes.” All of their differences, including personality conflicts, came out.



“I believe petty issues are what tore us apart and I believe petty issues can tear us apart again,” Vale says. Even he had trouble at times keeping the large picture in sight. “I was too close to the forest,” he admits.

The participants got into details such as who calls dispatch, at exactly what point the mutual aid and financial arrangements kick in after a fire starts, and who pays for what, including who pays if one district’s equipment is damaged at a fire in another district’s territory. “Once we got everybody at the table, we made great strides,” Struble says.

The process was helped when a group from the Colorado State Forest Service attended one meeting. Vale says State Forester Jim Hubbard was “like a preacher. He gets people to pay attention, then once they’re hooked, he sells them on the idea of cooperation.” Vale says Hubbard probably used the word “cooperate” 50 times during the two-hour meeting.

“I am convinced in the big scheme of things Jim Hubbard is still correct when he says, ‘cooperate,’” Vale says. “People assume it, but it may be more an assumption than reality.”

In the process, the fire protection districts identified their needs and prioritized them, and then had the county’s support as they applied for grants. Three of the districts won grants after the 2002 agreement was signed, for a fire truck, a new fire station, and an addition to a station.

County Commissioner Stahoviak explains that when they approach potential funding sources, “The question is always asked, ‘How are you coordinating your efforts?’ With all the fires that have gone on recently, they are looking more closely at how well we’re working together.”

The county also supported mill levy increases in some fire protection districts. In another case, the cooperation extended to the county Road and Bridge department renting space from a new firehouse, which meant income in the six figures for the fire district while the department avoided having to build its own facility.



Steamboat Springs
City Councilwoman
Nancy Kramer

Another key step was realizing that the wildfire council would work better in two separate units, one to handle policy and the other to work on more practical field issues.

“The policy and field expertise had been getting mixed up,” says Nancy Kramer, a Steamboat city councilwoman who was elected in 2001. “One group was trying to take care of both and it wasn’t working.”

She recalls a meeting when an epiphany occurred that establishing the two groups would be an appropriate approach. “The lights went on,” she says. “There had been enough great work done that things slid into place. We’ve got all the parts. We just have to put them in the right place. In fact, we’ve got great parts.”

Under the new organization, the policy group consists of elected officials and some staff and meets approximately twice a year to discuss issues like taxes and overall policy. An

advisory group consists of fire chiefs and representatives of federal agencies and sometimes meets as often as twice a month to discuss issues like planning for fires and training. The two groups meet together at least twice a year and can schedule special joint meetings as needed.

At the end of the renewed discussions, the fundamental conflicts had been resolved, Vale says, and all the parties came together in “a big group hug.”

Process is ongoing

The true value of developing a detailed plan for firefighting in Routt County became clear in the summer of 2002, when Vale could see five columns of smoke from his office in Steamboat Springs. The firefighters were in for the biggest, longest firefight in the county’s history.

They faced 85 fires that summer, which burned more than 40,000 acres in federal land alone. But instead of infighting through that long season, the media reported cooperation and teamwork. “All summer there were positive stories and discussions about how ‘they came together and worked together’ and the end result was that we all worked well together out in the field,” according to Vale.

Struble agrees that the coordinating group meetings had made a tremendous difference. “Our elected officials were aware of what was going on,” he says. “They understood the issues.” He adds there was also a good understanding of the relationships and responsibilities of the six local fire protection districts and the federal agencies.

District Chief Bryan Rickman of West Routt Fire Protection District says the smooth operations were “really a culmination of all the work we did [the previous] winter.”

A success to be sure, but a plan that is really used is never finished. Vale is eager to keep working on the plan to make it even stronger. Particular areas where he sees a need for more specific planning include:

Emergency notification and evacuations.

The 911 call system became so overloaded when the 2002 fires broke out that people began calling the local officials they knew on their cell phones. The firefight also raised questions about evacuations: Who calls for them—the police chief, the sheriff? Can officials force people to leave? Physically, who conducts the evacuation? If a local area has one police officer and 150 homes, how does it get more officers quickly?

Clarification of county priorities.

Evacuations were impeded because one route was being resurfaced. In addition, the plan called for the water supply of the county’s Road and Bridge department to be available for fighting fires, but when fires actually occurred Road and Bridge needed its water. Firefighters had to rely on private water trucks, which had incompatible fittings.

Mutual aid. Vale feels that those who make commitments to mutual aid need to “be serious about what they’re writing down.” A provider may promise all of a department’s personnel, though some may be on other assignments or vacation. One source said three bulldozers and pumps would be available, but Vale says, “When I got ready to use them, I didn’t have any.” Further, in a hot, dry season like 2002, otherwise likely donors may themselves be in need of support. For maximum benefit, it’s important that a recipient of mutual aid know the capabilities of donated personnel and equipment. Vale says they are finding this problem to be deep and widespread.

Pay. Pay provisions among the fire districts were contradictory. According to one, everyone doing similar work on the fire would receive the same rate of pay. According to another, workers’ pay might depend on their position outside the particular fire.

Federal assistance. A series of small fires before the big ones provided opportunities for local officials to gain experience with federal paperwork requirements. But after those smaller fires, Vale says, “I thought the

fire chiefs were going to hang me. They were at the end of their ropes. How much more bureaucracy can you bring me?" The experience paid off when larger fires occurred. Still, the match between local needs and federal aid is imperfect. For example, the federal system works on a rotating schedule, bringing in new firefighting teams every 14 days. Consequently, on big fires the local teams must deal with new federal partners every two weeks. As Vale puts it, "Will you come and stay with me for the entirety of the fire, or will you just stay an hour? This is a huge issue."

Contracting. Purchase agreements set up in advance from the interagency dispatch center in Craig, Colorado, provided for portable toilets from across the county. Vale is interested in arranging such services through providers as close to the fire as possible. Similarly, he worked during the 2002 fire to have firefighters fed by guest ranches that were suffering a loss of tourism business, and would like to see that become standard policy.

Vale feels that the increased population in the wildland/urban interface zone and the accompanying increased fire risk call for a more robust response capacity, with more firefighters with expanded skill sets. A well-thought-out annual operating plan, such as the one in Routt County, can be an essential component of a robust response. It leads to better training, more personnel, more equipment, better coordination and tactics in fighting a wildfire, greater efficiency due to area coordination, better morale and better public support.

However, he cautions that the process for arriving at such a plan is apt to be uncomfortable. In Routt County, it involved disagreement and personality conflicts, as well as cooperation and compromise. Vale says it is important to come to the table ready to have disagreements. Working through them is a vital part of the process.

"The experience of going through the divorce helped," he says. "I'm pleased with the work we did in our county even though it was darn near suicide." ■

