

# All Signs Point Toward Mitigation

*Contest yields old-time jingles*

**M**OTORISTS IN JEFFERSON COUNTY, COLORADO, are likely to encounter a series of six signs spaced a minimum of 200 feet apart along state and county roadways with the following advice:

*Our forests are dry  
Our grass is drier  
Don't be the one  
Who starts  
A fire  
Jeffco Fire Minder*

The message is clear: Wildfire mitigation is an important activity in Jefferson County and everyone is encouraged to participate.

For those who traveled our nation's highways between the mid-1920s until the 1960s, the signs may bring back fond memories of hours spent in the car when the Burma-Shave™ ads helped break the monotony of long drives.

The idea to post messages in the Burma-Shave tradition originated in the fall of 2001 amid early predictions of a severe wildfire season in 2002. Jefferson County Public Information Director John Masson and County Attorney Bull Tuthill presented the idea and sample jingles to the board of county commissioners. (Masson says copyright is not a problem. While Burma-Shave products are still available, the sign concept is not protected.)

The three county commissioners supported the idea unanimously.

Masson immediately took charge of the project, digging in on two fronts. First, he had to find clever slogans to use, and second, he had to bone up on sign construction, installation and maintenance. Support from the commissioners was an important factor in making the project fun and successful, according to Masson.

"People were willing to bend over backward to expedite it," he says. "It helps to have the leadership of the county."

## 'If you have something to say, send it this way'

Masson sought slogans mainly through the Jefferson County Web site. He posted contest information on June 17, 2002, including a description of the roadway signs project, contest rules and how to enter. He also posted sample signs, including the following retired Burma-Shave sign as an example:

*The Blackened Forest  
Smolders Yet  
Because  
He Flipped  
A Cigarette  
Burma-Shave*

By July 15, the contest deadline, 154 eligible entries had been submitted via e-mail from all around the country. Each submission contained a wildfire mitigation message expressed in five lines of up to 20 characters each. Masson's goal was to narrow the field



The inspiration for the Jeffco Fire Minder signs — an actual Burma-Shave slogan from 1960 (photographic reconstruction)

**Burma-Shave** is a registered trademark of American Safety Razor Company

*“This is a positive kind of thing a community can do. This affects everyone.”*

— John Masson

to 12 slogans, one for each of the county’s interface-zone fire protection districts, with one set to spare.

To choose the winners, he enlisted the aid of the county commissioners, along with representatives of Denver’s two major daily newspapers — *The Denver Post* and the *Rocky Mountain News*—and Jefferson County Open Space and Fire Safety Educators of Colorado.

Each judge was given a complete list of eligible entries. Nine stood out as clear winners and the remaining three were selected from among eleven runners up. By the end of October 2002, twelve slogans had been chosen. With the exception of one jingle-writer from Colorado Springs and another from Boulder, Colorado, all winners were from Jefferson County, including one person who penned two winning entries.

Just as the original Burma-Shave signs ended with a tagline, so too did Masson want to find a tagline for the Jefferson County signs. A contest was held among county employees to find one. The public information staff judged approximately 45 entries and Open Space employee Thea Rock won with her entry: “Jeffco Fire Minder.”

All contest winners received \$100 gift certificates and residential fire extinguishers with the following words of gratitude:

*Thank you for your winning entry  
posted on signs that now stand sentry.  
For penning for us this safety reminder,  
we dub you a Jeffco Fire Minder.*

### **Behind the signs: process and protocol**

From a motorist’s point of view the appearance of the roadway signs may seem serendipitous, but the process for getting them there was more complicated than meets the eye. Masson says many factors had to be considered before the idea came to fruition.

**Cost.** This was the first hurdle Masson encountered. The original estimate was \$300 per individual sign—a whopping \$1,800 per

series. That estimate was reduced to \$200 per sign with a volume discount. However, even at that, these estimates —based on using the county’s own antiquated hand-stenciling equipment — were still too high.

“I could have been very easily discouraged,” Masson says.

But he persisted, and when he found out that the county was getting new, state-of-the-art digitized equipment—dropping the cost to \$40 per sign or \$240 per set, including installation—he was encouraged. However, when plans changed to make the signs bigger and sturdier than originally planned, an outside contractor offered the best price—between \$90 and \$100 per sign.

**Color.** Original Burma-Shave signs were red with white lettering, but red is now reserved for stop signs and emergency messages in Jefferson County. Yellow is for cautionary warnings; blue is for information; white is for speed limits and other rules. Masson considered purple and green for the mitigation signs, but eventually chose blue with white lettering.

**Placement.** Masson asked the 11 county fire protection districts serving areas that are entirely or partially forested to identify a state or county roadway where they thought the signs would be most appropriate. For maximum effect, it was important to place the signs in high-traffic areas. Other factors included the distance between the signs and the road, and safety.

“If you’re trying to get somebody to read a sign and you’re on a curve, you don’t want them running off the road,” Masson says.

**Regulation and durability.** Requirements vary from city to city and within unincorporated areas of the county. There are rules about sign size, rules about the size of the lettering, and rules about the durability and reflectivity of materials needed to make the signs. Speed limits affect the size of signs and lettering, and then there are rights of way to be considered, managed by the Colorado

Department of Transportation. All of these variations affect cost.

In the end, the signs were constructed from heavy blue aluminum with an anti-vandalism coating. Eight-inch lettering was used (readable at up to 55 miles per hour), and the signs stand 12 inches high and are 48 to 96 inches wide, depending on the number of letters used in each individual sign.

**Installation.** The Jefferson County Road and Bridge Department installed the signs using a county-owned truck especially designed to do the job. Special equipment punches metal footings several feet deep into the ground, then signposts are inserted into the footings.

Masson says each sign required two posts. “They’re big enough in square footage that in a wind they can literally self-destruct,” he explains.

Plans to move the signs from one location to another have been made, so motorists who drive the same route often will get a chance to see several messages over time.

**Maintenance.** The fire protection districts play an important role in maintenance of the signs, reporting any vandalism or need for replacement.

“We want them to be the watchdogs and mentors for the signs,” Masson says. The districts may delegate some of that activity, enlisting scouts and other volunteers to be stewards of the signs.

The project took longer to implement than Masson had originally planned. The fire season started a month early for Jefferson County, and included part of the Hayman Fire, which broke out on June 8 and eventually burned 137,760 acres and 133 homes. It is considered the worst wildfire in Colorado history.

Masson contacted the fire chiefs in each of the 11 fire protection districts early in the summer. Two of them said they liked the program but were overwhelmed by fires. The project was slowed because of the wildfires, but it was not stopped.

The first signs went up in the spring of 2003.

### Signs and sayings for other times and places

Masson can see further applicability for Burma-Shave-style signs beyond wildfire mitigation in Jefferson County.

“Some [of our] emergency providers have called to say there are other messages they’d like to get out, such as safe driving,” Masson says.

Even if the cost of the signs in Jefferson County had been closer to the original \$300 estimate, Masson is confident the commissioners would have supported the project because fire danger was so high and the commissioners were so strongly in favor of the signs.

“Anyone who’s been associated with wildfire knows about the impacts,” he says. “This is a positive kind of thing a community can do. This affects everyone.”

Funding could come from several sources. Masson suggests that businesses, chambers of commerce and volunteer organizations might support the project through direct assistance and fund-raisers.

The signs in production







A Fire Minder sign near Ken Caryl Ranch in Jefferson County

The key factor, he says, is broad community support. Cooperation is essential on the part of elected officials, emergency managers, fire protection districts and transporta-

tion supervisors. In addition, Masson points out that the project can inspire discussion and heighten awareness and all ages can participate. ■

### *The top six winners in the Jefferson County Fire Minder slogan contest*

COLORADO MOUNTAINS	DON'T FLING YOUR BUTT	JUST ONE SPARK
ARE HERE TO ADMIRE	BESIDE THE TRAIL	IT IS NO JOKE
DO ALL YOU CAN	AND WE WON'T FLING	AND ALL OF THIS
TO PREVENT A FIRE	YOUR BUTT	GOES UP
OBSERVE FIRE BANS!	IN JAIL	IN SMOKE
JEFFCO FIRE MINDER	JEFFCO FIRE MINDER	JEFFCO FIRE MINDER
A MATCH OR BUTT	KEEP OUR FIRES	CARELESS FIRES
FROM CARELESS FOLK	WHERE THEY BELONG	IN A FLASH
OUR BEAUTIFUL FOREST	TOO MANY FORESTS	CAN TURN
GOES UP	ARE ALREADY	OUR MOUNTAINS
IN SMOKE	GONE	INTO ASH
JEFFCO FIRE MINDER	JEFFCO FIRE MINDER	JEFFCO FIRE MINDER