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## Deer Valley Estates: *CWPP Helps Residents with Wildfire Preparedness*

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Les Kole never imagined when he volunteered to write a wildfire plan for his Colorado subdivision in 2007 that the task would take him more than two years.

Deer Valley Estates' Community Wildfire Protection Plan was approved in December 2009, the first such plan to gain official sign-off in La Plata County. The 32-page document comes complete with graphs, tables and photographs, and also contains five maps, seven appendixes and a further 27 pages of reference material.

"It's a good feeling to have it done," said Kole. "We're much better prepared."

Kole volunteered for the job after attending a meeting of the FireWise Council of Southwest Colorado in 2006, then being named Deer Valley's FireWise Ambassador by the subdivision's board of directors. He had written plenty of reports and proposals during his 35-year career as a parks and recreation manager and had also served as a wildland firefighter. He had been evacuated for wildfires four times while living in California.



*Volunteer limbing trees cut for shaded fuel break.*

Located 25 miles east of Durango, Deer Valley Estates is a 360-acre parcel of land, heavily timbered with Ponderosa pine and thick with Gambel oak underbrush. With 34 of its 84 lots jutting up against the San Juan National Forest, the community is considered at high risk for catastrophic wildfire.

The Healthy Forest Restoration Act of 2003 encourages all communities within the wildland-urban interface to examine their risk of wildland fire and develop action plans to reduce their exposure. The priorities laid out in these Community Wildfire Protection Plans (CWPPs) influence how local, state and federal funds are spent.

Kole spent a lot of time reading CWPPs written by professional companies for communities throughout the West. "I did a lot of research," Kole said. "I worked on it every morning four or five days a week."

A \$2,000 grant from its local FireWise Council allowed Deer Valley Estates to hire a firm to produce the maps for its CWPP. The community also distributed laminated sets of maps to local dispatchers, first responders, the sheriff's department and others.

The CWPP recognizes that Deer Valley Estates, which includes about 150 year-round residents, can be damaged merely by the presence of wildfire, even if homes are not destroyed. "When views are seriously eroded, much of the intrinsic value of the residences will be lost," the plan

says. “Large areas of heavily burned, charred forest are objectionable, whether or not the structures burn.”

Installing standardized, reflective address signs on all lots, so emergency workers can easily spot them, was the top priority identified as the plan was under development. The signs, provided by La Plata County, were in place even before the CWPP was approved. The community also



*Volunteers working on the shaded fuel break.*

installed two 10,000-gallon underground water tanks, plumbed to the fire district’s specifications. Residents rely on their own wells for water, as Deer Valley has no fire hydrants.

Creating shaded fuel breaks by thinning vegetation along seven roads was another priority. The right of way extended an additional 15 feet on each side of the 30-foot roads, allowing for a 60-foot-wide fuel break. Roads, especially those running along ridges, give firefighters a chance to halt a fast-moving wildfire.

With the help of a \$12,050 grant from the Colorado State Forest Service, 27 volunteers worked more than 500 hours on the project. They removed brush, stumps, deadfall, and a total of 265 Ponderosa pines along almost four miles of roads.

“We’ve opened up the right of way to the fullest extent,” said Kole, “so that gives us extra protection if a fire comes towards us.” The work hasn’t detracted from the area’s natural beauty either. “Actually when you drive through, you can’t even tell where those trees were taken out,” Kole added.

Mitigation work will continue in and adjoining Deer Valley Estates for many years. The CWPP divides the subdivision into six zones where the Ponderosa pine will be thinned and lower-growing ladder fuels will be removed. The work will be done in stages, with the final zone slated for treatment in 2016. The plan also calls for constructing hammerhead turnarounds at the end of dead-end roads to improve emergency vehicle access. The San Juan National Forest mitigated a 200-foot strip on three sides of the subdivision in 2004 and is getting ready to hydromow that area again. An additional 3.8 acres of Forest that has never been treated is scheduled for thinning in 2017.

Almost all Deer Valley Estates property owners have already cleared or reduced fuel and vegetation on their own property to slow the spread of wildfire toward their home and reduce the intensity of the fire as it passes.

The CWPP did, however, identify two homes that were only marginally defensible. Having wildfire hazards laid out in such chillingly detailed fashion has changed mindsets, said Kole. Long-time residents who had never cleared any brush on their property are now taking action.

*Les Kole has been a FireWise Neighborhood Ambassador since 2006 and currently serves as Chairman of the FireWise Council’s Steering Committee as well as heading up Deer Valley’s Firewise Committee.*