

Cost-share programs encourage most to mitigate wildfire danger

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Most homeowners are willing to take part in cost-sharing that helps pay for wildfire risk mitigation on their properties, but some of those with the highest wildfire risk are the least likely to participate in those programs, according to a collaborative study by the University of Colorado Boulder and partnering institutions.

Past studies have shown that people who think their properties are vulnerable to wildfires are more open to taking actions that lower the risk, like clearing vegetation around their homes to create a defensible space.

In the new study, published in the *International Journal of Wildland Fire*, the researchers looked not only at perceived [wildfire risk](#) but also at how a professional rated the wildfire risk on individual properties. They found that people whose risk was rated higher by the professional were less likely to participate in cost-share programs for mitigation than those with lower assessed risk.

"This was a pretty surprising finding, and something we were only able to get because of the unique data set we were looking at," said James Meldrum, a research associate at CU-Boulder's Institute of Behavioral Science and lead author of the paper. "It implies that some of the people we would most like to encourage to mitigate might not respond to these types of financial incentives, so wildfire program managers need other ways to reach them."

Meldrum and CU-Boulder's Hannah Brenkert-Smith, also a research associate at the Institute of Behavioral Science and co-author of the paper, got the data for the study through a unique collaboration with the West Region Wildfire Council, an organization working to reduce the threat of catastrophic wildfires in six counties in western Colorado: Delta, Gunnison, Hinsdale, Montrose, Ouray and San Miguel. Members of the council include local, state and federal agencies.

"Partnering with researchers has been an extremely enriching endeavor—as the research efforts have provided an empirical backing to those things that practitioners have to this point only been able to speak to anecdotally," said Chris Barth, fire mitigation specialist with the Bureau of Land Management in Montrose, Colo., and a co-author of the study.

The research team analyzed a survey of 217 residents of the community of Log Hill Mesa near Ridgway, Colo. The vast majority of landowners, 84 percent, said they would participate in a cost-share program for removing vegetation on their properties. Similar programs are offered throughout fire-prone regions of the West.

The study found that the decision to participate in cost-share programs, which bring in experts to thin vegetation on private property, is not just about the money. Study results show that not knowing what needs to be done on one's property was almost as strong a reason to participate in the program as not having the time or money to do the mitigation. At the same time, concerns about mitigation—such as how it might change the look of a property or whether it will actually be effective at reducing fire risk—tended not to influence whether homeowners said they would participate.

"The good news is these cost-share programs are very effective at encouraging some people in the community to reduce their wildfire

risk," Meldrum said. "But they won't fix everything. They should be used as part of a suite of tools."

This information is useful to practitioners who are on the ground working to mitigate wildfire risk, said Lilia Falk, director of the West Region Wildfire Council and a study co-author.

"Research-based findings have helped provide the West Region Wildfire Council with clear direction for shaping some of our programmatic efforts," she said. "As an organization that focuses on promoting wildfire preparedness, prevention and mitigation education, the research has offered us insight that will help strengthen our effectiveness at encouraging action in the communities we serve."

Provided by University of Colorado at Boulder

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