

# Partnership Peaks

San Juan National Forest Partner Stories, Opportunities, and Updates

Spring 2023



Scores of migratory birds will soon join our year-round resident killdeer for nesting season

## AGREEMENTS SEASON HAS ARRIVED

*By Lorena Williams*

In the past week, Southwest Colorado has come to life with early signs of spring. Killdeer, meadowlarks, and mountain bluebirds can all be heard at lower elevations. Some days, the strengthening sun makes us think forward to summer, while other days the snow falls hard as ever, clinging tenuously to swelling buds and early grasses.

Spring is also known as agreements season for many San Juan employees and partners. We are cobbling together financial plans and statements of work, putting pen to paper on summer project priorities. Field season calendars already feel crowded. I know how stressful agreement season can be for our partnering organizations with timelines, funding, and capacity ever in flux. It is a spring dance we have come to know well, and it is as predictable as the bluebird's return.

Let's not forget that these days of early project coordination are a great opportunity for us to chat over coffee and dream big together. We can analyze last year's work and discuss how this year's partnership will be better than ever. All of us on the SJNF are grateful for the hard work partners put into these critical relationships. Let's be sure to also take time to celebrate spring before the fast-approaching field season.

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# Leadership Corner

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Sometimes it takes a while to fully reckon with the twists and turns life presents us. I'm honestly still processing the reality that this next step in the adventure--serving as Forest Supervisor for the San Juan National Forest--has actually come to pass. Now that the upheaval of changing jobs, moving across the country in mid-winter, starting to settle into a very snowy Durango, and reorienting with Forest Service staff has begun to feel more regular and normal, I feel like I can again begin to wrap my head around the incredible opportunities and challenges we have here in Southwest Colorado.

As I've said previously, the fundamental role our shared natural resources play in supporting the quality of life we enjoy here cannot be overstated. By my perspective, a common and I think implicit recognition of that fact has led to this incredible array of partnerships, collaborative efforts, and engagement that is beyond what many National Forest managers expect. The challenges we face in addressing forest health and hazardous fuels, the need for sustainable recreation in balance with other resource values, providing for strong local and regional economies, and stewarding the full suite of national forest resources are best met working together--across both physical and values-based boundaries.

Thanks to recent Congressional action, we have, for the first time in many years, the financial capacity to afford an incredible amount of the forest restoration and wildland-urban interface work we need to accomplish. Furthermore, we have many layers of organizations and collaborative groups to support, advise, and assist in facilitating that work. However, the funding streams were not designed to cover every outstanding need or opportunity. So we must continue to work together, creatively and cooperatively, to move the needle together toward a healthier, more resilient forest and a sustainable social and economic future.

I'm excited for the work ahead, and I am confident that you are too. Thank you!

-Dave Neely, Forest Supervisor



Four Rivers Collaborative stakeholders gather at Falls Creek Ranch to discuss community wildfire risk reduction



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# Landscape-Scale Programs: Prescribed Fire

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## INCREASING THE PACE AND SCALE OF ECOLOGICAL RESTORATION

*By Pat Seekins*



**ROCKY MOUNTAIN**  
RESTORATION INITIATIVE

The San Juan National Forest fire and fuels programs have had a busy and productive winter planning and implementing prescribed fire following the National Prescribed Fire Program Pause Review. Beginning in early November to date, Fire and Fuels staff have completed 2,320 acres of pile burning across the forest with additional piles and acres planned as favorable weather conditions allow through snow melt into early spring. For the 2023 spring and fall prescribed fire seasons, current plans are to treat over 12,000+ acres with broadcast prescribed fire.

Prescribed fire is a key component to forest

health, restoration, and resilience. Prescribed fires and less-than-full wildfire suppression strategies cost less than wildfire suppression and yield better restoration outcomes. The SJNF has completed landscape-scale NEPA clearance for 611,000 acres, authorizing the use of broadcast prescribed fire. In 2019, broadcast prescribed fire on the San Juan averaged \$30/acre. Recent SJNF wildfires managed for other than full suppression averaged around \$160/acre and essentially met desired prescribed fire objectives. In contrast, in 2019 the average cost of a large wildfire to the USFS in Colorado was \$1,115/acre.



Aerial view of the 2021 Brockover Prescribed Fire on the Pagosa Ranger District

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# Prescribed Fire

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There is no doubt that prescribed fire is less costly and more effective at restoring forest health and reducing wildfire risk to communities. However, it is far from a simple process. Prior to implementation, years of planning focus on operational safety, maximizing forest health by reducing hazardous fuels build up, and lowering the risk of catastrophic wildfire. The San Juan is home to a robust Fuels program that focuses much of its winter work planning for the upcoming burn season—and that workload is on the rise.



Low-intensity surface fire

The Forest is poised to increase the pace and scale of ecological restoration work. The eight to ten year goal is to treat with a variety of methods an additional 250,000 acres of National Forest, State, and private lands to reduce the risk of catastrophic wildfire. A significant portion of these acres—approximately 150,000—could be treated with prescribed fire. Landscape-scale prescribed fire implementation has been and will continue to be a significant contributor in reducing the hazardous fuels and restoring a fire-dependent ecosystem.

Our partner agencies have been and will continue to be critical contributors to achieving our mechanical and prescribed fire objectives and overall desired conditions across boundaries. The Bureau of Land Management-Tres Rios Field Office Fuels staff has a strong Fuels program carrying out their own important mechanical and prescribed fire treatments on their land adjacent to SJNF lands. Many other agencies also assist and contribute to the successful implementation and outcomes of prescribed fire treatments across the SJNF including but not limited to:

- [Colorado Department of Fire Prevention and Control](#) (CO-DFPC)
- [Prescribed Fire Training Exchange / The Nature Conservancy](#) (TREX)
- Durango Zone Fire Protection Districts
  - [Durango Fire & Rescue](#)
  - [Cortez Fire Protection District](#)
  - [Upper Pine Fire Protection District](#)
  - [Los Pinos Fire Protection District](#)
  - [Pagosa Fire Protection District](#)



Interagency cooperators pile burning

Prescribed fire and fuels-related treatment priorities in Southwest Colorado have



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# PRESCRIBED FIRE

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received steady funding support from the Rocky Mountain Restoration Initiative (RMRI) and the Southwest Colorado Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Program (CFLRP). Now there is a new potential funding source focusing on mechanical fuel break work along POD (Potential Operational Delineation) boundaries. PODs are pre-determined boundaries that fire managers can use as fuel breaks and to assess an active fire and make a quick decision on the values at risk and best locations to contain the fire. The SJNF was one of three forests in the Rocky Mountain Region to be selected as a good candidate to be potentially awarded this Bipartisan Infrastructure Law funding with a Timber/Fuels integrated approach. This SJNF proposal is currently in final stages of review.

The National Forest Foundation is also investing more in on-the-ground projects to improve the health of our National Forests. This will accelerate and broaden our on-the-ground action to restore more acres efficiently across priority landscapes. To accomplish this, NFF is adding more programmatic and forest-level support, spearheaded locally by the new NFF Southwest Colorado Project Coordinator, Nick Olson. "NFF is excited to add additional capacity to the prescribed fire efforts on the San Juan National Forest," said Olson. "From planning to project implementation and monitoring, we are eager to build on and contribute to the great work already happening in the area."

Stay up to date on the San Juan NF prescribed fire program by visiting our [InciWeb](#) page.



Vallecito-Piedra Prescribed Fire, 2021



Pagosa Creek Pile Burn, 2022



Hiking into Haycamp Mesa Prescribed Fire, 2021



2019 Dolores District pile burn

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# Partnership Opportunities & Highlights

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## WOOD FOR LIFE PARTNERS RECEIVE CHIEF'S AWARD

Last week, Forest Service Chief Randy Moore and his staff recognized the Southwest Wood for Life Partnership with a 2022 Chief's Award for outstanding efforts toward Apply Knowledge Globally. The project truly reflects values the Forest Service strives to put forward on behalf of the American people. The award was given to the San Juan, Coconino, and Kaibab National Forests and USFS staff involved from Region 2 and the Washington Office, in addition to the partners listed below:

- National Forest Foundation
- Alamo Navajo Fuels Crew
- Ancestral Lands Conservation Corps
- Southwest Conservation Corps
- Navajo Nation Chapter Houses – Chinle, Red Mesa
- Honanie Family/Koho for Hopi
- Chizh for Cheii
- Hopi Villages
- NAU Ecological Restoration Institute
- The Nature Conservancy
- University of Arizona Tribal Cooperative Extension



[Click here to Learn more](#) about the Wood For Life program

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The San Juan National Forest works to sustain the health, diversity, and productivity of this region's forests and grasslands to meet the needs of present and future generations. One way to achieve that is through partner connection. Our partners include land management agencies across all levels of government, nonprofit and for-profit entities, tribes, and community groups. By working with partners with diverse backgrounds and knowledge, we are increasing the resiliency of our natural resources and strengthening the community that enjoys and works in these lands. For information about partnering with the USFS, follow this link: <https://www.fs.usda.gov/main/sanjuan/workingtogether/partnerships>



To become a partner with the San Juan NF or for questions, contact SJNF Communications Specialist Lorena Williams by email at [lorena.williams@usda.gov](mailto:lorena.williams@usda.gov) or by phone at (970) 422-2939.

For general questions about the San Juan NF, call (970) 247-4874, visit the **[forest website](#)**, or follow us on social media:



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# Welcome New Employees

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## **Caleb Schutz**

### **Assistant Fire Management Officer Dolores Ranger District**



Caleb started his career with the Forest Service in 2002 as a crew member on an engine for the Dolores RD / San Juan National Forest. In 2007 he was promoted to the engine Captain for the BLM also in Dolores and filled that position until 2009. After working in Dolores 7 years he moved to Arizona as an Engine Captain on the Lakeside Ranger District on the Apache Sitgreaves National Forest. In 2021 he moved to Colorado Springs, CO as the Fuels Tech Position working on the South Park Ranger District for the Pike & San Isabel NF. He looks forward to working in this new role leading and assisting landscape scale prescribed fire planning and implementation on the district. He is joined by wife Jessica and son Dustin. In his spare time, he enjoys everything outdoors including hunting, fishing, and camping.

## **Pat Seekins**

### **Fuels Program Manager - Forest Headquarters**

Pat started his career with the Forest Service in 2000 as a member of the Blue Ridge Hotshot crew on the Coconino NF in Northern AZ. After 7 years of service with the crew he moved to Texas in 2007 as an Assistant Fire Management Officer for the National Forests and Grasslands in Texas. In 2010, moved to Canon City, CO as the Interagency Assistant Fire Management Officer (Suppression) for the Pike & San Isabel NF until 2015. In 2015 he moved to the San Juan National Forest in Dolores, as the Interagency Fire Management Officer. Pat looks forward to working in this new role leading and assisting landscape scale Prescribed fire planning and implementation across the forest. Pat is joined by wife Sunshine and two sons Trey 21 and Tru 19 who both graduated from Dolores High School and are now off to other adventures. In his spare time, he enjoys everything outdoors including hunting, fishing, and camping.





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# Welcome New Employees

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## **Sheryl Gunn**

### **Shared Stewardship Project Coordinator**

#### **Forest Headquarters**

Sheryl is coming to us from Montana where she's spent two decades as a practicing silviculturist and forest ecologist focused on landscape-scale vegetation project planning, implementation, and stakeholder engagement in the greater Missoula sociopolitical area. She has actively worked with partners, collaboratives, and communities to design and implement cross-boundary solutions for 20 years. Her FS career spans 29 years, seven national forests, in four regions across the West. She holds a Graduate Certificate in Natural Resources Conflict Resolution and a MS in Forestry from the University of Montana, and a BS in Forestry from Colorado State University. She's super excited to return to the Rocky Mountain Region and Colorado. She most enjoys hiking, biking, cross-county skiing, ice hockey, fishing, and scuba diving. Sheryl, her partner, and their two dogs, are looking forward to exploring the trails, aspen forests, and ancient civilizations surrounding Durango.



## **Lorena Williams**

### **Shared Stewardship Communications Specialist**

#### **Forest Headquarters**

Lo started her career with the USFS in 2001 on the Boise NF before moving to the Bridger-Teton as a heli-rappeller and eventually to the Coconino NF in Recreation and Fire Prevention. She came to the San Juan in 2015 with Durango Helitack prior to moving into Dispatch then the Partnership Coordinator position in 2019. Lo has an MFA in Environmental Nonfiction from Chatham University in Pittsburgh and has taught college creative writing, composition, ESL, and rhetoric. She never dreamt her degree would land her a job anywhere, let alone with the agency. When she's not working on her farm in Ignacio, Lo can be found in the desert backpacking and mountain biking. She looks forward to developing proactive internal and external communications products for the SJNF and alongside partners.





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# Welcome New Employees

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## **Kenar Houghton**

### **Climate Fellow - Forest Headquarters**

Kenar has recently accepted a position as a Climate Fellow with the D.C. Resource Assistant Program. Throughout her 8 month term, she will be working on integrating climate practices and policy into various projects across the forest, as well as training to become a NEPA planner. Kenar has experience as a fire mitigation sawyer and loves using a chainsaw. She went to school in Colorado Springs and just recently graduated with a degree in Geography and Environmental Science before relocating to Durango for this position. In her spare time, she likes to read, play piano, and do anything related to the outdoors.



## **Jason Mosher**

### **Forest Land Surveyor - Forest Headquarters**

I started my federal career with BLM Cadastral Survey in 2006 working out of the Colorado State Office in Lakewood CO. During my 16 year career I've performed a variety of surveys in 9 different States across the western US. I was given the opportunity to come to Durango in 2017 as the Boundary Program Manager under agreement with the Forest Service. I served most recently as a Lands and Realty Specialist, and I'm excited for my new adventures here on the San Juan National Forest.

In my free time I enjoy hiking, biking, camping, skiing, and exploring public lands with my wife and two daughters.



## **Erin Christensen**

### **Realty Specialist - Forest Headquarters**

Erin is the new Realty Specialist for the Columbine District, returning to the USFS after a year hiatus spent working as the Staff Manager for an outdoor education company. Previously, she spent 8 years working Wildland Fire for the USFS and NPS, most recently on the Dolores District. She is excited about this new opportunity and is glad to be working for the Forest Service again. In her free time, Erin enjoys skiing, mountain biking, hiking, fly fishing and making pottery.



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# Welcome New Employees

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## **Julia Adams**

### **Realty Specialist - Pagosa Ranger District**



Julia joins the Pagosa Ranger District as the district Realty Specialist. Originally from Missouri, she moved to Pagosa Springs five years ago. Julia started her career with the Forest Service as a seasonal trail crew member on the Columbine District and then as crew lead on the Pagosa Trail Crew. In her free time Julia enjoys skiing, camping, and paddleboarding with her husband and two dogs.

## **Daniel Chavez**

### **Realty Specialist - Dolores Ranger District**

Daniel Chavez will be duty stationed in Dolores and will primarily work on lands projects on the Dolores District. Daniel comes to us from the BLM's Tres Rios Field Office where he has been a range technician since 2018. He also has experience in wildlife, recreation, and cadastral survey.



## **Garth Nelson**

### **Rangeland Management Specialist Dolores Ranger District**



Garth started his career as a Range Technician and Biological Science Technician on the Dixie National Forest in Southern Utah. He graduated from Utah State University with a degree in Rangeland Resources and worked from 2009 to 2015 as a Rangeland Management Specialist on the Caribou-Targhee National Forest in Soda Springs, ID. He moved to Dolores in 2015 to work for the BLM Tres Rios Field Office and Canyons of the Ancients National Monument as a Rangeland Management Specialist. Garth and his wife just celebrated their 16th anniversary. They have 2 children. Past times include: hiking, 4 wheeling, running, wood working, DIY home upgrades, working on vehicles, and helping friends with big projects. "If it is outside sign me up."