



NEWS from the FOUNDATION

The Wildland Fire Fund Enters its 20th Year of Service to Colorado Communities

by Terrance McWilliams – Senior Vice President of Military Affairs and Director of Wildland Fire Fund

Beginning with founders Julie and Spencer Penrose, El Pomar Foundation has always had a conviction to act quickly when difficult times hit our state, acknowledging that our mission to enhance, encourage and promote the current and future well-being of the people of Colorado is most effective when the response is swift. In 2002, this became all too apparent when the most destructive fire in Colorado's history, the Hayman fire, destroyed more than 130,000 acres northwest of Colorado Springs. In response, El Pomar Foundation's Trustees created the Wildland Fire Fund, allocating \$5 million in 2002 and then adding another \$5 million in 2014 to assist with the immediate needs of volunteer firefighting agencies throughout the state, helping them fight and recover from fires that, at the time, were part of the most destructive fire season in Colorado history.

When I joined El Pomar Foundation in 2007 after my retirement from the U.S. Army, we had transitioned from our initial focus: providing \$2 million in grants from the Wildland Fire Fund directly to firefighting agencies in the state. Later, in a second phase, we transitioned into a matching grant program. Today, in the third phase, we focus on supporting volunteer fire and emergency service organizations. Those organizations, made up of volunteers in many of Colorado's rural areas, take on the brunt of firefighting, especially battling smaller fires when resources are allocated to larger fires in other parts of the state. We continue to support firefighting efforts in a variety of ways, from grants to firefighting agencies and volunteer departments, to providing support for rebuilding and reforestation efforts after a blaze is extinguished. Since that initial 2002 fire season, El Pomar has granted more than \$6 million.

While we had all hoped we would never face a fire season as devastating as 2002, we saw how much worse things could get in 2020. The Cameron Peak fire, west of Fort Collins, was more destructive than the five largest fires in 2002 combined and became the largest wildfire in Colorado history. The East Troublesome and Pine Gulch fires also burned massive areas of our state last year. Seeing the devastation, El Pomar acted quickly, allocating \$132,500 in grants to support firefighting and recovery. The Wildland Fire Fund supported crews fighting the fires around the state while also funding local Red Cross chapter efforts to provide relief and resources to displaced Coloradans. We also made a \$10,000 grant to support reforestation efforts by the National Forest Foundation in White River National Forest.

As Command Sergeant Major at Fort Carson and over the course of my career in the Army, I learned the importance of looking at both the bigger picture and the mission at hand. When we overlook the importance of one aspect of our work, we risk the entire mission falling through. The Wildland Fire Fund supports the people of Colorado at times when life can be very uncertain and frightening, and while it is only one piece of the Foundation's work, it enables us to continue doing everything else that makes our work meaningful.

The Wildland Fire Fund will be increasingly important as fire seasons in Colorado get worse. Unfortunately, the Colorado Division of Fire Prevention and Control believes that years like 2020 will continue to happen, including in 2021. As severe drought hits the western part of the state and drier winters continue, we know we'll have to be prepared to activate the Wildland Fire Fund earlier and faster if necessary. Thanks to nearly 20 years of the Wildland Fire Fund's service, we feel equipped to continue supporting the people of Colorado and fulfilling the vision that Spencer and Julie Penrose set for us.