2011 Track Fire
New Mexico/Colorado

The Track Fire began 12 June 2011 and was caused by carbon exhaust flakes from an ATV trespassing on Burlington Northern - Santa Fe Railroad lands, northwest of I-25 near Raton, New Mexico. Within the first 24 hours, the fire burned almost 22,000 acres. The fire was contained on 27 June 2011 with light rains and increased humidity aiding control efforts.

The fire easily jumped I-25 and caused its closure for four days. Additionally, the fire caused the shutdown of the railroad and a nationally critical fiber optics line, as well as damaging a natural gas trunk pipeline. A significant portion of the Raton Watershed that feeds the city water system was compromised by the burn, including the Segerstrom and Schwachheim Creek drainages. Eight homes and 11 outbuildings were destroyed by the fire. The 2011 Track Fire burned on state, city, and private lands between Raton, New Mexico and Trinidad, Colorado.

Photo courtesy of Mark Loveall

The fire was initially managed with City of Raton, New Mexico State Forestry, and Las Animas County resources. Much of the focus was on protecting structures and evacuating residents. Many of the initial resources were structural fire or law enforcement, supplemented with wildland resources. Command was later passed to the NM Type 2 Incident Management Team (6/13/12 – 6/22/12). Suppression costs were approximately $7.5 million dollars.

In New Mexico, the State Forestry Division represents all private lands for coordinating wildland fire response, while in Colorado the County Sheriff is responsible for all fire responses. Colorado was in difficult fiscal straits at the time, having to get daily approval for wildland fire expenditures from the capitol.

2011 Track Fire At-A-Glance

Dates: 12 June to 27 June 2011

Cause: ATV carbon exhaust flakes

Size: 27, 792 acres total (NM 19,970; CO 7,822)

Location: Colfax County, New Mexico; Las Animas County, Colorado

Vegetation types: Grassland on mesas, pinyon-juniper oak woodland (FM 6), ponderosa pine with oak understory/oak leaf litter (FM 9), and mixed conifer with heavy dead and down (FM 10)

Burn Severity	Acres	% of Area
High	7,111 acres	26%
Moderate	10,461 acres	38%
Low	7,055 acres	25%
Unchanged	3,226 acres	12%

The fire was mostly stopped in open grasslands on the mesa tops, but slopped over the mesa in several places in Colorado where it was caught on a north slope by hand crews and aircraft in mixed conifer logging slash. It was also caught by hand crews working with helicopters in thick Gambel oak stands in the upper end of the watershed canyons. It burned actively in the grasses. The extensive Gambel oak forests in the area were difficult to mop-up and put out.

Lake Maloya from above on 6-15-11. Photo courtesy of John Peirson.

This fact sheet and corresponding maps are available online at swfireconsortium.org

POINTS OF INTEREST

Pre-Fire Thinning

Sugarite Watershed collaborative restoration efforts began in 2005 on City-owned land. By 2010, approximately 2,700 acres had been mechanically thinned to reduce the threat of large, high-intensity wildfires that could severely impair the City water supply, while creating forest structures more similar to historical conditions. A prescription for treatment was developed in conjunction with the collaborators group during the pilot treatment project in 2005, and the Sugarite Stewardship Plan (2008) provided updated treatment prescriptions by vegetation type.

Vegetation in the Sugarite Watershed is composed of primarily ponderosa pine, mixed-conifer and oak forests. The forests in the watershed had been logged during the historic coal mining era, so were patchy natural re-growth conifers with a heavy gamble oak component. Pre-treatment, average adult tree densities were 194 ponderosa pines per acre, 178 Douglas-fir per acre, and 395 oaks (primarily Gambel oak) per acre. Treatments lowered tree density to 50-80 trees per acre in ponderosa pine stands and 70-100 trees per acre in mixed conifer stands. Fuel breaks were also cut on ridges and between treated and untreated areas to slow the spread of high-intensity fire.

Fire Operations

The extreme fire conditions at the time of initial attack was difficult and hazardous to the initial attack forces, which included dozers, engines and hand crews. The fire escaped and spread rapidly, jumping to the east side of I-25. The fire spread was north and east and threatened Raton. A Type II Incident Management Team (IMT) was ordered. That afternoon, orders for evacuation were issued for residents on the north side of Raton. On 13 June, the Type II IMT operational group began arriving. The group shadowed Type III forces deployed initially and gathered intelligence over the fire area. An incident command post was established in Raton.

Aerial seeding results 1 year post fire (7-03-12). Photo courtesy of Amy Ewing.

2011 Track Fire Resources

Peak Total Personnel: 888

Resources: 28 Crews; 40 Engines; 12 Water Tenders; 8 Dozers

Air Support: 7 Helicopters; 10 Retardant Tanker Airplanes; 579,035 Total Gallons of Water; 207,000 Total Gallons of Retardant

Suppression Cost Total: $7.5 million (as of 21 June 2011)

By the morning of 14 June the NM Type II IMT was delegated the authority to take over command. On the morning of 21 June, the NM Type II IMT handed back the fire to Type III forces from Colorado and New Mexico as the fire involved both sides of the Colorado/New Mexico state line.

Post-Fire Efforts

The City of Raton and collaborators have been engaged in multiple post-fire emergency efforts focused on protecting Lake Maloya, the City's primary drinking water supply, from erosion. These efforts have included:

- Intercepting sediment and debris (using the upstream reservoir Lake Dorothey as a catchment basin, as well as seven other newly constructed sediment catchment basins) before it reaches Lake Maloya
- HydroAx mulching of dead trees to provide organic matter for vegetation regrowth
- HydroAx mulching of dense, scorched oak brush within the upper Segerstrom Creek drainage, where some of the large ponderosa pines survived the fire (in order to protect these trees as a valuable seed source for natural regeneration of future forests)
- Securing logs on contour and installing wattles and silt fences to stabilize slopes
- Aerial seeding to enhance revegetation