



Staff Profile:

Mike Caggiano

Research Associate

“The drip torch is one of the most powerful forest restoration tools we have.”

Mike’s Story

What do you do with a B.A. (and an M.A.) in Geography? For CFRI Research Associate Mike Caggiano, the answer has a lot to do with fire. After receiving his undergraduate degree from SUNY Geneseo in upstate New York, Mike headed to New Mexico for an forestry internship to indulge his interest in natural resources. During this internship, Mike worked on his first fire before being sent to Louisiana to do relief work in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. After his experience working in New Mexico, Mike went back to school and received his M.A. from CUNY Hunter. His research focused on wildfire risk in New Mexico, where he returned after earning his degree to work for a non-profit doing defensible space work and community outreach.

In New Mexico, Mike developed an interest in following elk trails in the hope of finding antlers. Between antler hunts, Mike focused on fuels reduction and defensible space work, and began to see prescribed fire as an important restoration tool. Mike describes prescribed fire practitioners as super passionate “students of fire,” who are prepared to do the aggressive planning work needed to use this tool. He learned from these students by participating in prescribed burns himself, and found it to be meaningful and tangible work—you literally get to see the fire making a difference in real time. In addition to on-the-ground fire efforts, Mike worked to get grants that would empower local fire departments to get involved in cooperative prescribed fire, and help with public outreach.

Mike in a Nutshell

Best part of the job: The variety of the interactions with a wonderful mix of managers, scientists, and others. I like the people I interact with, and acting as a liaison, doing technology transfer, and applying restoration principles in a framework.



Most challenging part of the job: The hallmarks of academia. Tireless pursuit of knowledge is exhausting.

Best field snack: The canned dolmas from Trader Joe’s. “They’re juicy, oily, and a mix of textures.” Cold brew coffee in a can, and corn chips, also from Trader Joe’s. Also, supermarket fried chicken.

Favorite plant: “Ponderosa pine. Unique looking, special, quintessential fire adapted plant.”



Peter Brown



“We can’t cut our way out of the problem. Prescribed fire allows you to treat at a larger scale, and it’s cheaper.”

Mike has two children, and moved to Fort Collins because it seemed like a good place to raise a family. Given Colorado's abundance of Wildland-Urban Interface (WUI), Mike's experience translates well to work for CFRI that focuses on WUI research, patterns of home loss, and mapping values at risk within the WUI. He is also interested in strategic planning for wildfire, and does consulting to build capacity for prescribed fire and increase the pace and scale of restoration through prescribed fire.

Mike is learning to become a scientist. "Science" means a lot of different things to a lot of different people, but he follows and incorporates scientific principles into his work. So much of having good science that will lead to improved management is about asking the right question, and many people struggle to articulate good, meaningful questions. CFRI as an organization does a fairly good job of bridging the gap between science and management by actually working on the application of scientific principles. CFRI asks those questions that have the ability to move the needle in the way basic research struggles with.

With his regular day job, two kids, work on his PhD, and consulting all on his plate, Mike thinks of any day in the woods as a blessing. He grew up camping, hiking, and going to National Parks, though he now heads for National Forests to avoid the crowds. Field work is also like a mini vacation, and provides the opportunity to connect with colleagues on a different level and build important relationships. Besides those opportunities, Mike travels to help out with prescribed fires outside Colorado, paddleboards, kayaks, and takes opportunities for multi-day river trips to disconnect. He's also recently started playing video games again, following the realization that now, as an adult, he gets to buy as many games as he wants.



Field Stories with Mike

I was helping with a prescribed burn and igniting slash piles in southwest New Mexico, and the UTV broke down in the middle of the burn we'd just started. The wind shifted, and we ended up having to back burn out around the vehicle to avoid destroying a \$15,000 UTV. Then we had to do a field repair. Turned out a radiator hose had been punctured by slash, and we to fix it with what we had on hand. We ended up cutting out the broken section, took a socket from the socket set and put it between the two open halves of the radiator hose, wrapped it together with duct tape, and limped out of there. I also found some elk antlers that day.



What Mike Wishes Everyone Knew about Forestry:



Fire suppression is not always the most effective way to manage all forests. We need to re-introduce fire in fire-adapted ecosystems.