



In the space of 90 days, Colorado has experienced the three largest fires in its recorded history. The Pine Gulch Fire surpassed the 2002 Hayman Fire as the state's largest on August 27th. After 43 days, this ignominious distinction was transferred to the Cameron Peak Fire, which turned the skies in Northern Colorado an apocalyptic orange. The streetlights came on at 2pm as we brushed whole pine needles and crispy aspen leaves off of our cars. The Grizzly Creek Fire shut down I-70 for 2 weeks, sending semi-trucks over hazardous passes, and cutting off mountain towns from external supplies. The CalWood and Lefthand Canyon Fires outside of Boulder forced evacuations as they grew quickly. The East Troublesome Fire moved at 6,000 acres per hour—that's 100 acres burned every minute. This fire has claimed human life and property in the communities of Grand Lake and Granby, burned through Rocky Mountain National Park, jumped the continental divide, and caused Estes Park to be evacuated. This year's fires have burned in grasslands, sagebrush, lodgepole, ponderosa, and subalpine forest; sometimes all of these ecosystems within a single day. Twice, large, early snowstorms have assisted fire suppression efforts at crucial junctures, though neither storm has fully extinguished the fires. Reading through this litany is overwhelming, and existentially challenging.

We at CFRI have been trying to figure out how to talk about the 2020 fire season. We have had many internal conversations about these fires, as well as conversations with our friends, neighbors, and partners in collaborative groups and land management agencies. We have heard and asked ourselves so many questions: *"Are these fires good or bad?" "Is it all climate change?" "Will the forest ever come back?" "Haven't you been telling us that we need more fire?" "Didn't all that beetle-kill wood need to be cleared out?" "What can we do about this?"* There's going to be a time when we'll put on our scientist flannels and pull out our research questions, load up our field gear and crank up our GIS programs, and engage with these questions with all the rigor and collaborative spirit you've come to expect from CFRI. We'll start talking about historic fire regimes, how fire has typically behaved in different vegetation types, interactions between disturbances like beetle infestation and fire, and how climate change and past forest management may impact all of that.

But first, we want to acknowledge that so much has changed, and these fires have hugely impacted so many people in our state. Our families, friends, and colleagues have been evacuated. Our land and fire management partners have faced extraordinary challenges—not the least of which is the COVID-19 pandemic—to which they have risen with steadfast resolve and fortitude. We grieve with the family of Lyle and Marilyn Hileman, for those who have lost their homes, or lost properties that have provided comfort and escape for generations of families. We feel too intimately connected to these forests, where we've worked and played for decades in some cases.

CFRI and our sister Institutes were established by Congress in 2004, in direct response to similarly then-unprecedented fire seasons across the Southwest in 2000 and 2002. We were created in and for just such moments as these. Moments when the status quo changes, when everything gets thrown into the air and we're not sure where the pieces will land. What we do know is this: we trust the relationships we have built over the last 15 years. We trust our process, our data, our science and management partners, and our ability to convene collaborative groups that are capable of tackling wicked problems. We trust the tools we've built for cross-boundary decision making. We have a wealth of knowledge about prioritization and fuel treatments, spatial fire planning, and strategy for recovery in a post-fire world. Blending science with empathy for diverse perspectives and new ways of thinking is our path forward. We're ready to use all of this. We don't know what exactly the next 15 years will hold for Colorado's forests, but we know that 2020 will be seen as an inflection point for fire in Colorado and across the West. We know that we're ready to do the work, and we're as ready to show up for our partners today as we always have been. It's what we were designed to do.