Pagosa Springs is a community in southwest Colorado with popular natural hot springs. Ironically, pagosa means “healing waters” in the native Ute language and this area has the potential for devastating wildfire. Recent fires have served as warnings. Historic suppression of natural fire in the San Juan National Forest and surrounding private lands has created a hazardous abundance of fuel. This fuel load, and risk to local communities, has been increased by invasive beetles that recently have killed many trees. That risk endangers residents and their property as well as the local economy. The area is dominated by businesses that depend on second-home visitors and tourists who are drawn here year-round. The snow-capped peaks, wild rivers and high-desert mesas of the Rocky Mountains offer rafting and mountain-biking in the spring and summer, big-game hunting in the fall and skiing in the winter. Wildfires would char the stunning vistas, damage trails and decimate wildlife habitat, which means dollars flowing from visitors could dwindle. Water quality would be compromised from erosion associated with wildfire, and residents would suffer. The Joint Chiefs’ project brought partners and agencies together to work across boundaries to protect homes and secure resources vital to the sustainability of the surrounding communities.

**PROJECT IMPACT**

15 BUSINESS VENTURES SUPPORTED

This Joint Chiefs’ project supported 15 new business ventures for equipment operators, mill workers, truck drivers and managers.

Total awarded through the Joint Chiefs’ from 2015-17: $2.4 million

USDA’s Forest Service and Natural Resources Conservation Service are working together to improve the health of forests where public forests and grasslands connect to privately owned lands. Through the Joint Chiefs’ Landscape Restoration Partnership, the two USDA agencies are restoring landscapes by reducing wildfire threats to communities and landowners, protecting water quality and enhancing wildlife habitat.

USDA is an equal opportunity provider, employer, and lender.
Community Efforts Bring Community Gains

“We all understand the forest as we have grown up with it. But that understanding might not be of a healthy forest—it’s just what we have always seen,” said Aaron Kimple, director of the San Juan Headwaters Forest Health Partnership.

Since 2009, the organization has provided a forum to share perspectives and develop top priorities and science-based management strategies in the Pagosa Ranger District of the San Juan National Forest. “People are aware that our forests are changing, and they want to know how to manage them better for the long-term,” said Aaron.

For many years, San Juan Headwaters brought together land managers, industry representatives, environmental groups and others to meet shared social, environmental and economic goals. Yet, budget constraints across local and Federal agencies made implementing plans to meet these goals difficult.

“Funding from the Joint Chiefs’ provided a necessary boost, giving USDA something to offer to make collective progress,” said Fred Ellis, a fire management officer with USDA’s Forest Service. High-school interns conducted research on forest health by helping to monitor and evaluate projects in the District, determining that the forests surrounding the town were overcrowded with trees. Resources for projects in densely populated subdivisions got landowners excited to make their neighborhoods more fire resilient.

“Without the Joint Chiefs’ project, the pace and scale of restoration would be much more limited today,” said Aaron. “The Pagosa Ranger District is positioned to continue this work because they now have public support and a proven track record.”