

Fire officials recall past wildfires

Chiefs meet in Glenwood, look cautiously toward upcoming season

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A somber gathering of firefighting officials from across Colorado Friday served as a reminder not only of Glenwood Springs' tragic history of wildfires, but of the dangers that lie ahead.

The Colorado State Fire Chiefs' Association is holding its quarterly meeting in Glenwood Springs and on Friday afternoon members laid a wreath at the Storm King Memorial in Two Rivers Park. The memorial honors the 14 firefighters who died during the wildfire on nearby Storm King Mountain on July 6, 1994.

Also on the minds of firefighters Friday was the Coal Seam Fire of 2002, which destroyed some 30 homes in the Glenwood Springs area. The five-year anniversary of that fire is Friday.

"It's hard not to remember. We certainly see the scars of what fire can do," said Paul Cooke, executive director of the association, as he glanced toward the burned areas Coal Seam left behind on Red Mountain.

The chiefs got together at the start of another Colorado wildfire season.

"We know the risks are great," said Dave Parmley, the association's vice president and chief of Lake Dillon Fire-Rescue.

He pointed to threats resulting from the urban-wildland interface, and from deteriorating forest health - an increasing problem in Colorado thanks to beetle infestations.

The urban-wildland interface refers to residential development into wildfire-prone areas. A recently released community wildfire protection plan for the region served by the Glenwood Springs Fire Department found that 70 percent of neighborhoods on the edge of wildlands have at least a very high wildfire hazard rating.

The Storm King and Coal Seam fires both proved the potential for local wildfires to quickly grow to catastrophic proportions in dry and windy conditions. The deadly Storm King blaze continues to resonate in the firefighting community as an example of the importance of safety on the fire lines. Chris Farinetti, operations specialist for the Rifle-based Upper Colorado River Interagency Fire Management Unit, said a Hot Shot wildfire training crew from Redding, Calif., came to town this week as it does every year to hike the trail up Storm King Mountain and get a firsthand look at some of the lessons learned from that disaster.



Firefighting officials join in a moment of silence at the Storm King Fire monument Friday to honor the 14 firefighters who died in the 1994 blaze. Pictured from left are Daniel Qualman, past president of the Colorado State Fire Chiefs' Association; Glenwood Springs fire chief Mike Piper; and Cal Wettstein and Ross Wilmore of the White River National Forest. The four stand by a wreath placed by the association in remembrance of the fallen firefighters. **Post Independent/Dennis Webb**

"They think it's such a powerful learning tool for their firefighters," he said.

Despite such lessons, fatalities continue to occur in fighting wildfires, including 24 last year in the United States. Although none of those deaths involved such a collective catastrophe as Storm King, "still it was a devastating year last year," Parmley said.

Many of those in attendance Friday had personal connections to Storm King. Farinetti knew eight of those who died, and got one of them, Roger Roth, into smokejumping. Cooke was director of the state Division of Fire Safety at the time of the fire and remembers hurrying over from Denver to Glenwood Springs after hearing the first reports of the tragedy, when officials had feared as many as two dozen had died.

Doug McBee, chief of the West Metro Fire District in the Denver area, recalls that the chiefs association got together in Glenwood Springs in a prescheduled meeting just days after the Storm King Fire, and ended up hiking onto the mountain for a firsthand look.

"It was just quiet, real eerie. Surreal is the better word for it," McBee said.

Friday's remembrance came as Farinetti and other firefighters wait for the brunt of Colorado's annual wildfire season to arrive. While it's been fairly quiet locally to date, Farinetti said there has been a lot of grass growth that should create the fuel for wildfire activity.

"It will pick up once we start getting some lightning," he said.