

Millions still being poured into High Park Fire recovery

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Taxpayers' dollars are going toward dealing with the fire's impact on watersheds and roads and will for years to come.

By the numbers

Expenses related to the High Park Fire in watersheds west of Fort Collins include:

- \$1.3 million: Fort Collins' expenditures in 2012, including seeding and mulching of burns areas
- \$3.4 million: Fort Collins' anticipated expenses in 2013, including construction of a pre-sedimentation basin
- \$1.7 million: Larimer County's cost to replace culverts along Rist Canyon Road
- \$2.35 million: Colorado Department of Transportation's cost of replacing six culverts in Poudre Canyon
- \$7 million: Natural Resources Conservation Service funding earmarked for emergency watershed protection

The High Park Fire went out more than a year ago, but millions of taxpayer dollars still are being used to deal with its aftermath.

The cost of addressing the widespread damage done to the foothills and watersheds west of Fort Collins is expected to go on for years to come.

"This problem is big, it's complex, it's expensive, and it's a long-term problem," City Manager Darin Atteberry told Fort Collins City Council members last week. "It's not a quick fix."

The fire, which burned about 87,000 acres and destroyed 259 homes, left some hillsides bare of vegetation and incapable of absorbing precipitation. Rainfall from thunderstorms this summer repeatedly caused flooding and mudslides that closed Rist Canyon Road, Stove Prairie Road and Colorado Highway 14 through Poudre Canyon.

Recovery work in hard-hit areas will be evident this fall as helicopters drop tons of wood mulch on fire-scarred hillsides in hopes of stabilizing them and reducing erosion.

And the Colorado Department of Transportation plans to replace or enlarge six culverts on Colorado 14 through Poudre Canyon with the goal of keeping stormwater off the highway and keeping the road open.

The highway has been closed more than 20 times since the High Park Fire was started June 9, 2012, by a lightning strike, said Ashley Mohr, a spokesperson for CDOT. The length of closures varied from days during the height of the fire to allow access to emergency vehicles to several hours or a few minutes as crews dealt with debris on the road.

This summer, thunderstorms have brought down tons of mud, boulders and trees to the highway several times. The culvert work, which is expected to be complete by January, is intended to address conditions at known trouble spots.

CDOT crews mobilize and stage when the weather looks threatening and the National Weather Service issues flood advisories or warnings for the area, Mohr said.

“We’ve been on call 24-7 since this whole thing happened,” she said.

CDOT spent about \$250,000 last year clearing the road after storms last year, Mohr said. A similar amount is expected to be spent in 2013.