

[Six Years After Fourmile Canyon Fire, Cold Springs Fire Brings Up Insurance Claims](#)

News KGNU

Recovery continues for folks impacted by the Cold Springs fire last month, which destroyed eight properties and led to evacuations of nearly 2000 others in the Nederland area. With the six year anniversary of the Fourmile Canyon fire on the horizon in September, experts from that fire reflect on insurance claims and lessons learned that provide insight to those impacted by wildfires this summer.

When Bruce Honeyman lost his home during the Fourmile Canyon fire six years ago, he and his family visited the site. Trying to determine whether or not to take the deal their loss adjuster was offering, a friend gave them some advice.

“Don’t look down at the house, look at the ridgeline. Down below, it will heal eventually.”

The Honeyman’s home was next to a canopy Douglas firs and a forest of ponderosa pines. Bruce was fire chief for the Sunshine Fire Protection District at the time of the wildfire. On the first afternoon, another firefighter told him that his house had caught fire.

“I knew that my wife and son and dog were safe and so at that point, there’s not really much to do but continue trying to save other property.”

About 90 percent of property losses took place within the first two days of the Fourmile Canyon fire. A combination of high wind speeds and dry air made the conditions particularly extreme. He took a day to recoup before going back out while his wife met with the State Farm loss adjuster.

Photos of roughly the same area near the Honeyman’s home in Sunshine Canyon. The first was taken one month after the fire and shows the burned foundation and the surrounding area. The second, taken 4 1/2

years later, shows the regrowth and some of the burned area in the background. Most of the burned trees in the more recent photo have now been cut down and the area is meadow.

“I think it was worse than losing everything that we owned in the fire. It was terrible. We didn’t know for months if we’d be financially ruined.”

Part of the struggle, Bruce says, had to do with the claim limit given to them by their insurance company. The number did not match the number the agent gave at the point of sale. The loss adjustor needed physical evidence that their house was worth the claim, except there was none.

“It was almost like the Earth had swallowed up the house. I think it actually vaporized.”

More than 60 percent of folks living in the burned region claimed to be underinsured during the Fourmile Canyon fire. That’s according to a Boulder County homeowner survey the city conducted two months after the fire. Insurance claims for losses topped \$217 million, yet two months after the fire, 55 percent of respondents who had lost their homes hadn’t reached a claim settlement with their insurance company.

Garry Sanfacon was Boulder County’s Recovery Manager for the Fourmile Canyon fire. He says that in the Fourmile fire, the county learned that the claim settlement process for folks up in the mountains “is a marathon.”

“We have many Fourmile Canyon fire survivors say that the claim settlement process was actually more traumatic than the actual fire. Some of these insurance companies require you to itemize every single piece of material, everything you ever owned and put a price on it. And they challenge you on it.”

Kind of like what happened to Bruce. Except it’s important to note that significantly less properties were damaged during this summer’s wildfire. Sanfacon who lives on Cold Springs Road actually had to evacuate. Although he wasn’t in the fire’s direct path, he says that feeling of uncertainty around when he needed to make an exit has stayed with him.

“There were times we felt like we had to get out right away, but we felt that the wind would change again and we felt like well we can stay. And eventually the power went out and that was the point where we

said, there's no more point in hosing down the house, the car's packed, let's just go."

Needing answers, I call up Amy Bach. She's the executive director of United Policyholders, a nonprofit in California advocating for home insurance owners' rights. She says there are lots of ways insurance providers can stiff homeowners.

"The phenomenon of disaster victims being underinsured, it's got multiple causes but I think one of the most significant is that the law protects insurance companies and agents from really having to deliver in full on the promises that they make at the point of sale."

The Colorado Springs Gazette reported last year on the Colorado Department of Insurance's failure to help people who were dropped or couldn't afford the rate increase for their home policies. But Bach asserts that this is an industry-wide problem accelerated by climate change.

"That fear of climate change plus the material cost and labor costs being higher and those factors have put a big scare into insurers. Now and then things like fireline scores and data mining has accelerated this fear to the point where the market in some areas is really suffering."

Bruce has been spreading wildflower seeds on his land before each snowstorm for the last six years. He eventually rebuilt, in order to get the most of his claim. Now his go-to mitigation tool is the weedwacker.

"I think we all say we love nature, but when nature turns ugly we don't like this but part of nature and part of the way the natural world works is these cataclysms so you have to love the bad as well as the good. Fire is part of the way that the ecosystem cleans itself and regenerates and so if you love the good things you have to love the ways in which nature purifies itself."

The Fourmile teaches those impacted by the Cold Springs fire that insurance will be a difficult hurdle, but that recovery is possible. Insurance is a business transaction with a lot of money involved, and in order to be smart about that, it's important to be in a good emotional state. And for Bruce, that took time. Having lived through this, Bruce offers this last advice.

"Heal yourself first, take your time, take as much time as you need within the constraints of the insurance process, be good to yourself, be forgiving for yourself and then you can move forward and do

the things that need to be done.”