

Ambitious Partnership Between Vail Resorts, The National Forest Foundation and the USDA Forest Service Aims to Comprehensively Restore Forest Health, Improve Water Quality After Colorado's Largest Forest Fire

Editor's Note: Interviews will be scheduled after 6:30 p.m. MT at the Denver Museum of Nature and Science (or from the Museum) by contacting akemp@vailresorts.com or janellesmith@fs.fed.us. Photos and video of the Hayman fire are available, as well.

DENVER, Sept 28, 2009 /PRNewswire-FirstCall via COMTEX News Network/ -- Today, United States Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack announced a collaborative conservation partnership - "Treasured Landscapes: The Hayman Restoration Partnership - Working Together for Healthy Forests and Clean Water" - between Vail Resorts, the National Forest Foundation (NFF) and the USDA Forest Service, which will be one of the most comprehensive forest health and watershed public-private partnership post-fire restoration projects in the country. Seven years after Colorado's largest and most devastating wildfire this collaborative work project aims to restore forest health and water quality to this critical ecosystem located approximately 70 miles from Denver.

For 20 days in the summer of 2002, the Hayman fire burned a total of 137,760 acres in the Pike National Forest. In its wake, the fire destroyed 600 structures, obliterated forest vegetation and wildlife habitat for threatened species, damaged recreation sites, trails and roads, resulting in frequent closures of Highway 67. To this day, the fire's aftermath continues to severely impact the water supply for more than 75 percent of Colorado residents.

Set to begin in fall of 2009, The Hayman Restoration Partnership is estimated to be a \$4-million effort, with Vail Resorts serving as the private funding catalyst for the work. The Hayman Restoration Partnership is one of several initiated under the National Forest Foundation's *Treasured Landscapes* forest and watershed restoration campaign.

"Thanks to a significant contribution by Vail Resorts, matched by the US Forest Service, we are about half-way to our goal of fully funding this project," said Bill Possiel, NFF president. The goal is to complete the work by 2012 in time for the 10th anniversary of the Hayman fire.

"The health and prosperity of our country relies on the health of our nation's forests. The threats facing our forests require us to change the way we view and manage America's forestlands, not just for our generation but for future generations," said Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack. "The Hayman Restoration Project, spearheaded by the US Forest Service, National Forest Foundation, and Vail Resorts exemplifies our new vision of collaborative conservation, management and restoration of our nation's forests. Through private-public partnerships like this one, we can make our forests more resilient to climate change, protect water resources and improve forest health while creating jobs and generating rural wealth through recreation and tourism."

The total project area for the Hayman Restoration Partnership is over 115,000 thousand acres, with the majority of the work honing in on 45,000 acres of the most severely affected areas in four watersheds that feed into the Upper South Platte River, the main water supply for Denver. Instead of focusing on only one element of restoration, such as planting trees, the Hayman Restoration project will address the entire ecosystem with a multi-faceted and strategic work plan involving restoration and planting of native species in these four watersheds - West Creek, Manitou Park, Lower Trout and Four Mile.

This comprehensive approach extends beyond the on-the-ground work to how the project will be implemented with plans to engage local governments and residents, Vail Resorts employees, conservation organizations and the entire Front Range community. Citizens will have opportunities to help in the restoration work through organized volunteer days. A Local Coordinating Council is being created to help inform the course of the project over the next three years.

The public-private partnership spearheaded by the NFF, the Forest Service and Vail Resorts aims to:

- Plant more than 200,000 ponderosa pine, Douglas fir and other native trees on 1,700 acres;
- Plant native vegetation, such as willows, dogwood, grasses and sedge, for river restoration on 115 acres, across 13 miles;
- Restore habitat for the endangered Montane skipper butterfly and other threatened species;

- Reduce erosion to improve water quality and positively impact the water supply and storage capacity for millions of Colorado residents;
 - Revitalize stream habitats for a gold-medal trout fishery;
 - Enhance or create 18 miles of sustainable recreational trails;
 - Increase the diversity and resiliency of this critical ecosystem to mitigate future fires, insect infestations and climate change; and
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- Create jobs for Colorado youth and engage the community through volunteer opportunities.

Colorado's public lands and natural beauty have long been recognized as defining attributes of the Centennial State, and have served to attract tourists, jobs and economic opportunities making tourism the second largest industry for the state.

"As the largest tourism company in Colorado, Vail Resorts has a unique opportunity and obligation to protect forest health not only for year-round recreational opportunities but also for the environmental and economic vitality of our communities, our state and our country," said Rob Katz, chairman and chief executive officer for Vail Resorts. "The Hayman Restoration Partnership is part of our Company's continuing efforts to take a leadership role in the most pressing environmental issues, which our employees, communities and guests are focused on. There can be no mistaking that "clean water" is absolutely critical to all of our stakeholders."

Katz announced that protecting forest health, including the wildlife, climate change and clean water benefits would be one of the Company's primary environmental efforts in the future and that Vail Resorts would look for additional ways to amplify its actions through public-private partnerships. "We spoke to many leaders in the environmental community and concluded that this was the most pressing issue for our Company to show leadership on. One of the best attributes of the Hayman Restoration Partnership is how our actions will be echoed and amplified, so to speak, as we serve as the catalyst for this project with matching funds from the Forest Service and other entities."

The Hayman Restoration project builds upon Vail Resorts' existing and ongoing partnership with the NFF through the Ski Conservation Fund, which has raised more than \$1.5 million to date for conservation and environmental projects in the national forests that surround its resorts.

According to Rick Cables, US Forest Service Rocky Mountain Regional Forester, catastrophic fires like the Hayman wildfire are just one of the threats to Colorado's forests. Climate change, disease and pests like the pine bark beetle infestation also have led to declining forest health. Cables and other forest health experts agree we need a multi-faceted, collaborative strategy to forest stewardship across the state of Colorado and across our country to tackle complex forest health issues.

"These badly burned watersheds need our help now," said Cables. "The Pike National Forest has worked tirelessly, together with many partners, since 2002 to restore these wildlands we all care about; but much more needs to be done."

Without forest vegetation cover, severe erosion in the badly-burned areas of the Upper South Platte River watershed has led to significant sediment deposits in streams and reservoirs, loss of fish and other native species, and impacts to the majority of Denver's water supply.

The health of our forests here in Colorado and elsewhere around the country are vital to ensuring clean water with 87 percent of our country's fresh water supply originating from forests or agricultural watersheds. "The Hayman burn area is the main watershed for the Denver metro area and 75 percent of the state, which makes this project one of our top priorities for the state of Colorado," Cables said. As a matter of fact, Colorado's National Forests provide water to 10 states and 143 counties.

Healthy and sustainable forests are essential to much that is treasured about Colorado, including high quality wildlife habitat, water supplies and recreation, added Tim Sullivan, State Director of the Nature Conservancy Colorado. "We applaud Vail Resorts for taking the lead on this public-private partnership with the National Forest Foundation and Forest Service and feel it will make a meaningful difference in addressing one of Colorado's most pressing conservation issues."

For more information about the project: "Treasured Landscapes: The Hayman Restoration Partnership - Working Together for Healthy Forests and Clean Water," visit <http://sites.google.com/site/treasuredlandscapes/>.

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