By ROBERT PIERCE

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On June 19, a forest fire started on the east side of the Spanish Peak mountain range and spread to the Spanish Peaks Scout Ranch in Colorado.

The first week of camp was in session with more than 265 Scouts, adult leaders and camp staff members who were evacuated to nearby Walsenburg, Colo.

After everyone was safely evacuated to a Red Cross Shelter, the decision was made to close the camp for the 2013 season, but Spanish Peaks' executive board leadership has committed to opening for 2014.

Michael Stewart, executive with the Santa Fe Trail Council in Garden City, was at Liberal's Trinity Faith Church Thursday to discuss what has been going on since the destructive fire.

Stewart said most of the recovery effort has been focused on camp sites at the scout ranch, which he said took the brunt of damage from the flames.

“We didn’t lose any of our major buildings, other than the medical lodge,” he said. “That means we can open next summer. What we’re doing is rebuilding tent platforms. We’re putting together brand new picnic tables. All the tents are being replaced. We’re getting everything together there in the campsite area. The water system has completely been replaced.”

Stewart said many major things have been done in the past three months, and more will be known in the coming weeks regarding needed materials for the rebuilding of Spanish Peaks.

“We’re going to spend most of the winter really preparing for a big move of a lot of this equipment,” he said. “It’s moving along actually rather briskly, particularly with our fundraising and people supporting us.”

Stewart said Boy Scout leaders are working with local and area high schools, particularly with welding students, who are helping make the tent platforms used at the camp.

“We buy the metal,” he said. “A lot of these kids are struggling to get money together to build their welding projects, which is one of the requirements to pass the class. We buy the material, give them the design. They weld it up, they pass, and at the same time, we get our tent platforms and bring them to camp for kids to use.”

Stewart said he feels the partnership is a great one, and he noted students in both Sublette and Liberal are participating in the welding project.

More than 60 percent of Spanish Peaks’ 485 acres were burned in the June fire, and the forest in the camp’s mountains sustained serious burning from the disaster. Stewart said work is being done to bring the forest back to life, however.

“What we started about two weeks ago is we hired a company to come in and actually put down on the ground,” he said. “The trees that are dead are obviously not going to come back. We’re actually getting our scouts involved in a couple of weeks to go out there and pull soil up against

the trees and at the same time, put the limbs that came off of these trees on top of them."

Stewart added terraces are also being built to help slow a growing problem in the camp – erosion in the valley of Spanish Peaks.

"That's really our biggest threat right now," he said. "If we don't get this erosion under control, it's going to be difficult on camp next summer."

Stewart said preventative measures are being made based on recommendations from the U.S. Conservation District in Colorado to reduce the risk of a future fire.

"The company we're using is certified by them to do that kind of work," he said. "They're doing similar measures on federal lands as well. We're going to seed the area with grass to at least hold some of the soil in place. We're going to start addressing the issues in Bear Creek, where a lot of the erosion is currently going on."

In addition to Boy Scouts from Kansas, Colorado, Oklahoma, Texas and New Mexico, Stewart said Spanish Peaks brings in troops from places much further away as well.

"This summer, we had troops coming out of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania," he said. "Previous year, we had them out of New York City. We've had them out of Jacksonville, Florida, Tampa. We've had them from long distances to what's called a destination camp. There's not many of the 500 Boy Scout camp properties across the country that have that designation. This just happens to be one of them."

In fact, less than 20 camps have been given the destination tag, according to Stewart.

"We have that, and that's why we're wanting to get our camp back up and running because people really like going up there," he said.

Stewart said the camp has experienced significant growth over the years.

“People like that Rocky Mountain adventure,” he said. “There’s such unusual opportunities up there to do rock climbing and the trek program. Units really come there for that particular program.”

Something new Stewart said will be done at Spanish Peaks is the creation of a trout fishing habitat in the Bear Creek which runs through the camp.

“Now, it’s running close to seven feet deep and about eight feet across,” he said of the depth of the creek’s waters. “It’s a lot of erosion. One of the ways you correct this erosion is you build these pools and small check dams down in there to catch the soil and cause it to come back up.”

Stewart said building a fish habitat involves the same process.

“We’re going to introduce trout in that area, and that’s approved by the state of Colorado,” he said. “They’re real interested in seeing us being able to accomplish that.”