Officials plan Pecos Wilderness burn

Forest Service to use aerial ignition to protect municipal watershed

By Staci Matlock
The New Mexican

Santa Fe National Forest crews will be conducting a controlled burn east of Santa Fe on a portion of the Pecos Wilderness any day now, as soon as weather and soil conditions are right.

Forest officials say the prescribed fire on about 2,100 acres is part of a long-term effort to protect the Santa Fe Municipal Watershed from the risk of a catastrophic fire.

But some residents think the prescribed burn is unwise and unnecessary.

The Santa Fe Municipal Watershed covers 17,384 acres. A total of 6,520 acres of the upper watershed are in the designated Pecos Wilderness. Fire managers worry that a forest fire in the wilderness could spill into the steep forests on slopes surrounding the city's two reservoirs, according to an environmental assessment of the project last year.

A severe wildfire — one that leaves few green trees or live vegetation behind to slow down water draining into the canyon bottom — increases the risks that rain will wash down scorched hillsides, filling the reservoirs with ash, sediment and burned trees. Homes in the lower part of Santa Fe Canyon and downstream along the Santa Fe River would be in the path of any severe flood.

Fire managers worry that, without some human intervention, a lightning-caused fire in the wilderness could outrun the ability of firefighters to control it.

Federal law prohibits the use of chainsaws and other motorized equipment in wilderness areas. Igniting the prescribed burn by hand in the rugged terrain would be difficult and dangerous for fire crews, said Julie Anne Overton, a public information officer for Santa Fe National Forest. "It is steep and rocky," she said. "It limits the access of firefighters."

Fire managers instead will ignite the prescribed burn from a helicopter, dropping plastic "ping pong" balls with a volatile chemical mixture to spark the fire. Potassium permanganate, a salt, is injected with

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ethylene glycol, similar to antifreeze, as the chemical-filled balls fall through the air. The method has proven effective in lighting large areas for prescribed burns in a short time period.

Jan Boyer, a Santa Fe resident, is among a group of people who have fought the Forest Service over prescribed burns and forest thinning for years.

Boyer has a lot of issues with the way past projects have been conducted and said she is suspicious about current ones proposed for the forest.

Boyer said she believes science doesn't necessarily support prescribed burns as the most effective way to prevent bigger fires. She also argues that planned burns contribute carbon dioxide — a greenhouse gas blamed for contributing to climate change — to the air. "Save every tree you can because it is absorbing carbon and storing all the carbon it encountered in its lifetime," Boyer said.

But foresters and a number of tree scientists say many Western forests, including those in the Santa Fe National Forest, are dried out by years of drought and conditions driven by climate change. The forests are going to burn whether fires are started on purpose and controlled by fire crews or started by nature. Fire managers say they are trying to reduce the risks of a major fire wiping out the municipal watershed, which can supply as much as 40 percent of Santa Fe's water.

Under the plan approved by Santa Fe National Forest Supervisor Maria Garcia in 2014, the Pecos Wilderness burn must occur before April 30 to avoid harm to migratory birds and to avoid the spring spawning period of the Rio Grande cutthroat trout. The burn must be conducted at least 50 feet away from the Santa Fe River.

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