

Forest officials plan burns in S.F. watershed

Fires planned in Santa Fe National Forest and in Los Alamos County

By **Staci Matlock**
The New Mexican

Forest managers plan to conduct prescribed burns in coming weeks around the Santa Fe National Forest near Santa Fe and in the Jemez Mountains.

Crews will set fires designed to clear out fuels and reduce the risks of large, catastrophic wildfires in areas including the Santa Fe Municipal Watershed.

"Prescribed fires are one of the most effective tools available to resource managers for restoring fire-dependent ecosystems," a statement from Forest Service officials said. "These fires mimic natural fires by reducing forest fuels, recycling nutrients and increasing habitat diversity."

Prescribed burns are conducted when weather forecasts, wind, temperature and moisture conditions meet criteria set by fire managers.

The first prescribed fire, scheduled for Saturday through Monday, will burn vegetation debris piles in Deer Trap Canyon

within Los Alamos County Open Space land. The pile burn will be east of the town of Los Alamos and is a joint effort between the Los Alamos Fire Department and the Santa Fe National Forest.

Crews conduct prescribed fires regularly near the town in an effort to reduce the risks of major fires like the ones that burned in the area in 2000 and 2011.

Smoke from the pile burns likely will be visible from the communities of Santa Clara Pueblo, Española and Santa Fe, as well as from N.M. 502 and U.S. 285. Contact the Los Alamos Fire Department at 695-6729 for more information.

Beginning Feb. 23, Santa Fe National Forest crews will start burning piles on portions of 450 acres on Virgin Mesa, about one mile west of Jemez Springs. The piles will be burned a few at a time to reduce smoke. Crews will burn piles through March 31, depending on weather.

Smoke from the Virgin Mesa prescribed burn will likely be visible from Jemez Springs, Cañon, La Cueva, Sierra Los Pinos, Jemez Pueblo, San Ysidro, Zia Pueblo, Bernalillo and Rio Rancho. Visibility may also be



impaired in areas off U.S. 550 and along N.M. 4 between La Cueva and the Valle Grande. For more information, call the Jemez Ranger District at 575-829-3535.

Beginning March 1, fire managers plan a burn in the watershed east of Santa Fe, where crews will treat about 844 acres by igniting fires by hand and from the air.

The burn will be conducted through May 31, depending on weather. Fire managers estimate ignitions will take two to three days. Once the prescribed burn area has been ignited, smoke may linger in the area for a week and could drift into the city. Smoke will likely be visible from Santa Fe, Tesuque, Glorieta, Pecos Can-

yon, Eldorado and Interstate 25. The burn was postponed in September due to an unfavorable weather forecast.

The prescribed burn is part of a decade-old effort to thin trees, remove vegetation and reduce fire risks within the 17,200-acre upper watershed, where water is impounded in municipal reservoirs. The ongoing effort to improve the health of the watershed is a collaboration between the Forest Service, the city of Santa Fe, the Nature Conservancy, the Santa Fe Watershed Association and New Mexico State Forestry.

For more information about the planned burn in the watershed, call the Española Ranger Station at 753-7331.

Officials encourage people with respiratory problems and smoke sensitivities to stay indoors if possible when they see smoke.

Information on air quality can be found online at the New Mexico Environment Department's website at nmtracking.org/fire.

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