

Growing awareness of wildfire comes amid renewed planning

By J.R. Logan

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Last April, Toni Hippeli says a neighbor in Pot Creek threw out some day-old wood stove ashes that ended up igniting a small fire in a community of a few dozen homes surrounded by dense national forest.

It was a windy day, but Hippeli says a few people luckily saw the blaze and were able to put it out with some hoses and the help of the volunteer fire department.

It didn't amount to much, but the close call shook her. "It was pretty scary," Hippeli says.

Hippeli says longtime residents of Pot Creek have similar stories of near misses going back decades. She's lived in Pot Creek with her husband since 2006, but only recently did she realize how real the threat of wildfire was. Inspired to do something, she found help from local government to get organized, and a willingness from her neighbors to work together to protect what they love.

"The beauty of being in the mountains comes with inherent risks," Hippeli says, explaining there's a growing awareness and desire to act, both on the part of landowners and government agencies at all levels. "I really get a sense that people are working together for a common cause, and there is momentum and synergy that can make something happen."

That momentum comes at a time when officials in Taos County are updating a 6-year-old wildfire plan meant to quantify risks, identify resources and help everyday people like Hippeli take steps to protect their homes and the nearby environment.

For instance, the 2009 plan rated homes in Pot Creek at a "high" risk of wildfire. The plan called for meetings in the community to explain that rating, and included Pot Creek on lists for treatments on both Forest Service lands and private properties.

When that plan was first being drafted, Taos County convened a "CORE" team of fire experts from various agencies to work together and across boundary lines to address wildfire risks. The result has been years of regular meetings of this team to coordinate efforts, and some tangible work on the ground to mitigate the potential of a catastrophic blaze.

The result of part of that work was an application for \$300,000 federal funding to do thinning work on private land in Pot Creek.

According to the application, submitted by Taos County in January, the plan is to create three “cross-canyon fuel breaks,” which would act as barriers in the case of a fire. Because stands of timber are so thick in the area, these long fuel breaks give firefighters a place to make a stand instead of being forced to watch a blaze march unimpeded across the landscapes.

Similar fuel breaks have been done in Taos Canyon, which is also considered at high risk of wildfire.

The application says the project would likely take three years to complete.

A major selling point of the application is collaboration with the Forest Service, which has committed to do similar work on its side of the fence.

Taos County will likely find out whether it was officially selected for funding later this summer.

If approved, that project could be the southern tip of a massive thinning effort that would run along the base of the Sangre de Cristos, across private, federal and tribal lands, to as far north as San Cristbal. An application to the Rio Grande Water Fund — a program designed to do “landscape- scale” treatments, is currently being revised to be eligible for funding.

Hippeli, president of the neighborhood association, is also part of an effort to get Pot Creek recognized as a “Fire-wise community,” which makes it more likely to get additional grant funding for thinning work. Several communities in Taos County have received that status in the last couple years — something officials see as part of the growing momentum and awareness around fire.

In the meantime, the CORE Team is planning a series of meetings to gather input from the public on what it would like to see added to the existing wildfire protection plan. The first of these meetings is scheduled for June 24, 10 a.m. to noon at the county commission chambers on Albright Street.

Ron Gardiner, the contractor hired to update the plan, has said he’d like to see additional emphasis put on the connection between wildfire prevention and how treatments can protect watersheds and increase the availability of water.

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