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Planning effort considers broad effects of catastrophic wildfire

By J.R. Logan

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On June 8, 2012 strong winds carried embers from a small fire caused by lightning in the White Mountain Wilderness near Ruidoso. Fanned by 40-mph-hour winds, the Little Bear Fire erupted and charred 15,000 acres and destroyed more than 200 houses by the end of the next day.

For fire planners around Taos, the Little Bear Fire is a cautionary tale: an example of what a catastrophic fire can do, and how broad-reaching the effects can be. And as Taos County seeks public comments and support while updating a community wildfire plan, it's trying to emphasize the point that planning and public participation is vital.

Dan Bryant's home of 26 years was one of the houses torched by the Little Bear Fire. Bryant was well aware of the wildfire risk in his neighborhood and he went to great lengths to thin trees and brush on his property. But it wasn't enough.

"The house looked like it burned out from under itself," Bryant said in an interview, explaining that even his stucco exterior couldn't withstand the incredibly intense heat of the blaze.

The effects around Ruidoso were brutal. Hundreds of people lost their homes. For two months of the busy summer season, the town was dead because images of the fire on TV drove tourists elsewhere. The fire also did \$14 million worth of damage to the city's drinking water system.

Three years later, Bryant says the ecological and economic devastation of the Little Bear Fire has led to a lot more participation from residents who know firsthand what a wildfire can do.

"I see a community that has awakened and is engaging in the process," Bryant says, arguing that long-established Forest Service policies need to make more room for input from the public, and the public also needs to get involved. "We were asleep at the wheel. We didn't participate in the process. But now we're paying a whole lot more attention."

In Taos, fire planners would like to see similar engagement.

"We're making plans for the next 15 or 20 years to guide how we live with our forests and how we treat our forests," says Ron Gardiner, a watershed consultant hired by Taos County to update its wildfire plan. "The public has been skeptical and resistant of Forest Service management," he says, explaining that even the best science is useless without community buy-in. "When they're part of it and understand what the outcomes and benefits are, it's more likely they'll support it."

There is momentum building among residents concerned about the effects of wildfire. Several “fire-wise” communities in Taos County have recently organized and done work to reduce the threat of fire in their neighborhoods. And a statewide effort known as the Rio Grande Water Fund seeks to do landscape-scale treatments of forests that are dangerously overstocked to protect the Rio Grande watershed, and there is a proposal for some of that work to be done on the western slope of the Sangre de Cristos from Pot Creek to San Cristobal.

The rewrite of the wildfire plan is emphasizing a holistic view of wildfire, watersheds and communities: Preventing catastrophic fire can protect watersheds, which in turn protect villages and towns reliant on water. Gardiner says the average resident can offer advice on places where work can be done (both on public and private land), and the sum of these efforts add up to real progress.

The next public meeting for the Community Wildfire Protection Plan is scheduled for July 30 at 2 p.m. in the County Commission Chambers on Albright Street. The “community comments” portion of that meeting is slated to take place from 5 to 7 p.m.

For more information, call Gardiner at (575) 586-0700.