



# THE TAOS NEWS

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## **If there's fire on the mountain ... 20 years after Hondo, are we prepared?**

**By Cody Hooks**

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This month marks 20 years since a normal springtime Sunday erupted into the hell known as the Hondo Fire.

It was a nightmarish situation on May 5, 1996.

The fire burned more than 10,000 acres and took out more than two dozen homes in Lama. Within 24 hours of the ignition, 400 firefighters — including U.S. Forest Service hotshot crews pulled off of other fires — came to the front line. Then-governor Gary Johnson declared a state of emergency.

In those first hours, folks knew little. Who was at risk of losing their home and who was at risk of losing their life?

The pendulum swung between utter isolation in the face of fear and disaster, and the larger community that came out in full force when the ground was left burnt, cinders smoking.

"We never expected the big one to happen here ... This is the worst loss of homes we've ever experienced in this area," said Marc Trujillo, forest management officer at the time.

For many in Taos County, the threat of a disastrous wildfire took an unexpected turn for reality that day. As they say, it hit close to home.

Twenty years on, devastating fire is no less of a threat.

Climate change, drought, beetle kill and encroaching development near forests have collectively helped create the mega-fires of the 21st century.

In 2011, the Las Conchas fire burned dangerously close to Los Alamos National Laboratory and forced the metro areas downstream to turn off the water supplies because of the ash-black river.

And just this month Alberta, Canada, has seen the ravishing effects of a wildfire — forcing mass evacuations as flames consumed whole neighborhoods.



**The Tio Gordito prescribed burn in the Carson National Forest last weekend.**

**Katharine Egli**

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The U.S. watched on as 2015 became a record-setting year for fire and especially agency budgets, which have skyrocketed and stripped forest districts of funds for restoration. Of the forest service's annual budget, 52 percent is going to fire suppression in 2016 compared to just 16 percent in 1995, according to the USDA.

And already, five times more acres have burned in 2016 than this time last year, according to the USDA.

On the 20th anniversary of the Hondo Fire, and with another fire season knocking at New Mexico's door, one has to ask: If there is fire on the mountain, then what?

### **The response network**

In the event of a budding fire or other pending natural disaster, the first step is simply assessing the situation and sussing out the actual threat it may pose.

Dorotea Martinez, fire information director for the Carson National Forest, told *The Taos News* that once she gets the word from dispatch that smoke has been spotted, an internal apparatus kicks in so someone is immediately deployed to assess the situation.

Wildfire policy has shifted quite a bit from where it was at the beginning of the 20th century. "There used to be a time when [the forest service's] response to any fire, regardless of where it was, was to suppress it," Martinez said.

Now, if a fire is far enough away from roads, homes, communities or other resources, the agency is more likely to try to let that fire "play its natural role."

But if homes and lives are in danger — as was the case with the Hondo Fire — the response is quickly geared up as a network of organizations, from the hometown federal agencies of the forest service and the Bureau of Land Management to local, state and federal governments, get involved.

Whether it's a fire or another disaster, the idea is to use resources at hand to get the situation dealt with as soon as possible. "We first start off with our local resources," said Dominic Martinez, director of the Taos County office of emergency management.

For the county, that means working with the public works department in the event of nonfire disasters, such as flooding.

"If it becomes too much for us," he said, then the state apparatus comes into play and they start looking for resources in neighboring counties. The county-level Office of Emergency Management (OEM) is directly connected with the New Mexico Department of Homeland Security and Emergency Management its federal counterpart.

For the forest service, escalating a response means "just bringing in more people and more resources," Martinez said.

The forest service uses three types of fire crews, ranging more in size than in skill. "The skill level has to be the same in all of them," she said.

Through a "complicated process" and its own iteration of a national apparatus, the agency can order hotshot crews and personnel from other forests, depending on what fires are burning in the West and what human and mechanical resources are even available, Martinez said. The more people on a fire, the more expensive the operation. While budgets are a factor on the national level, Martinez said that if homes and lives are at risk — "We're going to fight the fire. We're not going to hold back because we don't have the money on hand. We'll find the money."

### **Citizen alerts**

During the Hondo Fire, locals were glued to their radios and up on their roofs trying to get a better TV signal, watching as the column of smoke rose and filled the sky.

La Plaza, the Taos version of the early internet, even set up a "World Wide Web Page" to get information out, and also linked victims of the fire to help from the community and agencies on the ground.

In 2016, those tactics are more advanced, but the sense of urgency is the same.

"In the event of a disaster, the most important thing is getting the information out to as many people as possible," said Martinez.

"We have so many more tools now than we did 20 years ago. We used to do our jobs by finding the nearest pay phone. Those days are gone," she said.

There's no single clearinghouse for information in the event of a major disaster, so officials are sure to take a buckshot approach by utilizing a network of agencies — from law enforcement to town, county and municipal governments, local utility providers and national organizations — to blast the message across social media, Martinez said.

Facebook, Twitter, individual websites and press releases to print, radio and TV media would all be in play, she said.

"People want information as quickly as possible," she said, but cautioned against relying on and spreading misinformation — something that could flood the emergency system or cause unnecessary panic.

Evacuation orders would likely go out the old-fashioned way, she said — that is, doorto- door visits from law enforcement.

### **Technology still lacking**

While social media and the tried-and-true technologies of radio and TV are at the ready for local agencies to use in the event of emergencies, the most advanced technologies are still in the distance.

According to Taos County's OEM director Martinez, the county does not have a mass notification system that would send out alerts over email, cell phones and land lines — such as Reverse 911 or Next Generation 911.

Money, he said, is the limiting factor to getting those technologies. But Taos is not alone, as those technologies have not been widely implemented throughout the county.

Should a disaster become large enough, it is possible the public might be notified through the Integrated Public Alert and Warning System (IPAWS) — a modern iteration of the Emergency Alert System that blasts radio and TV with warnings during severe weather.

IPAWS — legislated by Congress in 2006 and made widely available in 2013 through a new generation of Early Warning System-enabled cell phones — has the ability to push notifications to cell users on most major carriers, such as the AMBER Alert recently issued for Ashlynn Mike of Navajo Nation.

IPAWS has a dedicated communications system and dedicated software in phones, meaning it is designed to work even if the rest of the cellular networks are crippled with a flood of calls and texts.

While the New Mexico State Police send out AMBER Alerts over IPAWS, only the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) has the ability to send out other alerts using that system.

Luckily, Martinez said, people seem to listen to the forest service announcements, such as that listed last week for a prescribed burn west of Tres Piedras. The plume of smoke may have looked ominous, but few to no calls came in from worried residents, she said.

The forest service puts a lot of attention on education, she said, especially of young kids in the schools.

“Kids grow up. They become adults. They become homeowners. That stays with them,” Martinez said.

Additionally, more communities around the county are getting “Firewise certified,” meaning neighbors are banding together to not only improve the wildland-urban interface (by cleaning brush and other common-sense tactics), but also prepare for a response if and when another big fire starts to burn on the mountain.

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