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Where forests, humans meet: Wildfire protection plan ready

By Andy Dennison

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In 1996, the Hondo-Lama wildfire consumed 10,000 acres of forest and 22 homes in just 36 hours. Questa residents used their own earth-moving equipment to clear fire lines to protect the village.

In 2003, the Taos Pueblo Encebado wildfire scorched 5,400 acres and came within a mile of the pueblo. For 11 days, residents of the pueblo and neighboring foothills watched as threat of catastrophic loss crawled closer and closer.

Both fires served to high-light the dangers of living in and near forests of the West — and how past federal and local land management policies helped heightened that risk. Not only did these “crown” fires clear off forest vegetation, they also produced large-scale “sheet erosion” of soils that dumped sediment into streams and rivers — and killed off fish — once the rains came.

Many pointed to the U.S. Forest Service’s “last resort” policy on fighting wildfires, and a reluctance to reduce fire-friendly fuel loads; others said that Taos County should never allow buildings within forest-ed areas. Still more blamed the lack of a coordinated wildfire team to fight the blazes effectively.

Whatever the reasons, these two wildfires did set in motion a serious government-tal effort to lessen the risk of loss of homes and property that adjoins forests. One off-shoot was the Healthy Forest Restoration Act of 2003, which required federal landholders U.S. Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management to include local communities when managing the surrounding forests.

A result of the federal legislation is the Taos County Community Wildfire Protection Plan, which is now out in its final form and the guidebook for education and solutions in communities around the Taos area.

The plan, developed by a 37-member team and directed by watershed planner Ron Gardiner, of the Questa-based Land and Water Clinic, focuses on ways to reduce the amount of dead wood and small live trees in a forest and around homes that accelerates the spread of wildfires. Methods include clearing, thinning, stacking and burning, controlled burning, and building fire breaks.

“The effort to develop a truly community-based wild-fire plan has begun to pay dividends in Taos County’s greater eligibility for community project funding,” said Gardiner, who wrote the grant for the project.

Where forest meets homes

In the parlance of wildfire protection, these plans deal primarily with “wildland-urban interface” areas, known as WUIs. These zones delineate where human-built structures meet undeveloped wildlands — and heightened risk to home dwellers.

The rise in population in Taos County — from less than 20,000 in 1970 to nearly 35,000 today — has increased the number of WUIs.

“It is the addition of homes in this area that interrupts the natural cycle of wildfires,” the team wrote in the plan. “Ultimately, this contributes to a dangerous build-up of old vegetation which can contribute to an uncontrollable wildfire.”

A number of locales in Taos County fit this description: Taos Canyon, Taos Ski Valley, Red River, Upper Red River Valley, Pot Creek and the Penasco Valley. Some are more at risk than others, because of higher concentrations of homes and structures in forests — and the increased possibility of human-caused ignition. Others, such as Gallina Canyon and Llano San Juan, are isolated communities surrounded by thick forest lands.

The plan not only alerts communities and homeowners as to what they can do to protect themselves from wild-fires — known as developing “defensible space” — it also puts public agencies on alert about “watershed health” — the concept of maintaining natural drainage and ecosystems within a basin or sub-basin.

One map in the plan depicts areas of risk to “post-fire erosion,” pinpointing locations where the loss of soil-holding vegetation would result in a heavy flow of soils, sands and gravel into arroyos and stream-beds.

Another aspect of the plan has been identifying the 14 area firefighting agencies and their jurisdictions, including volunteer and federal fire departments, and pinpointing hydrants, storage tanks and access points within the county.

And a third, which is about to get under way, is a series of meetings at fire stations and community centers that will outline what individuals can do to make their homes “lean, clean and green.”

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Plumes of smoke rise out of the Lama-Hondo fire in 1996. The destruction caused by this and other wildfires around Northern New Mexico spurred officials to rethink policies about protecting life and property