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Plans for prescribed burns to improve forest health, reduce wildfire risk spark concerns

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1 of 2



Peter J. Garcia Sr., a lifelong Cañones resident and seventh-generation rancher, speaks during a community meeting Thursday in the village about U.S. Forest Service plans for prescribed burning in the Santa Fe National Forest. “What would your sentiment be in regards to beginning those controlled burns in your backyard?” he asked Forest Service officials.

Daniel J. Chacón/The New Mexican

CAÑONES — Peter J. Garcia Sr. knows the mountains south and west of this tiny village are overgrown and a catastrophe waiting to happen if a massive wildfire were to strike.

Garcia, a seventh-generation rancher with a grazing permit in the Santa Fe National Forest, has seen it firsthand.

“You have trees on top of trees growing next to each other, which is not healthy,” said Garcia, a married father of three. “It’s not healthy to the ecosystem or the environment.”

But a plan by the U.S. Forest Service to restore the health of the forest and watersheds while reducing the risk of wildfire isn’t the solution, Garcia and other area residents contend.

The multiyear Encino Vista Landscape Restoration Project, a 130,305-acre vegetation management project largely in the Coyote Ranger District, includes plans to conduct prescribed burns on about 74,600 acres — igniting fears of a repeat of the Hermits Peak/Calf Canyon Fire that blew out of control and ravaged several communities two years ago.

The wildfire, the largest and most destructive in state history, was formed by two prescribed burns started by the Forest Service.

“What would your sentiments be in regards to beginning those controlled burns in your backyards? I’m sure you would be against it as well,” Garcia told Santa Fe National Forest Supervisor Shaun Sanchez and other agency officials during a community meeting Thursday night in Cañones, a tiny community west of Abiquiú.

Sanchez, a New Mexico native who took over as forest supervisor about 14 months ago, told the roughly two dozen attendees his priority for the agency is to “know and relate to our communities, and we need to be a community asset.”

“I know just in talking to folks, there’s still a lot of work that we need to do to do both of those things,” he said.

In Northern New Mexico, where logging and ranching have long been a way of life, the Forest Service’s policies sometimes run counter to cultural traditions, creating tension between residents and the federal agency. There is also long-running resentment over land from land grants that became Forest Service property.

More recently, the distrust has been born out of plans to conduct prescribed burns following the Hermits Peak/Calf Canyon Fire, especially because wildfire survivors, many of them Hispanic, are still struggling to be compensated for their losses.

“The Forest Service does not have a lot of trust right now,” Sanchez said in an interview after Thursday’s community meeting.

“That is very evident, and there is a lot of concern in our communities,” he said. “We heard that here tonight.”

Sanchez said he doesn’t know how much “support and trust” the Forest Service had April 5, 2022, before the start of the wildfire. “But I know we don’t, in many cases, we don’t have any now, and so that’s a big focus of ours,” he said. “How do we engage? ... How do we help build that trust? How do we repair this loss, this distrust, because of such a traumatic, catastrophic event [as a result of a] prescribed fire that escaped?”

In an interview Friday, Coyote District Ranger Mark Sando, who also attended the community meeting in Cañones, said residents raised valid concerns in light of the Hermits Peak/Calf Canyon Fire. But he said the vegetation-management project the Forest Service is proposing would make a wildfire more manageable.

“To me, either we do something or we don’t,” he said. “The catastrophe will still be there. ... If we get a fire, it won’t be that terrible fire. It would be if we didn’t do anything.”

At the meeting, residents raised myriad concerns about the Forest Service’s plans, including a failure to communicate with communities that would be affected by the large-scale vegetation-management project, which Sanchez and Sando acknowledged.

Although the Forest Service hosted two open houses earlier this year, only a handful of people attended each meeting, which residents said stemmed from poor advertising.

“I think there’s way more we could have done and that we should do when we’re developing projects,” Sanchez said in the interview. “We should develop projects collaboratively. We should be very, very proactive in our conversations, in our dialogue.”

Melissa Velasquez, executive director of the Juan Bautista Valdez Land Grant, said some residents initially submitted comments on the proposed project in 2019.

“The community felt largely overlooked ... in that initial scoping phase,” she said during Thursday’s meeting. “Just to give you an example, we never saw a flyer posted in the community. No community member ever came forward and said, ‘Hey, we received a letter. This project is going on.’ We just felt

like the Forest Service didn't do a very good job of adequately informing one of the most small and rural, isolated communities that would be primarily impacted by the project."

Velasquez, who grew up in Cañones and is considered a technical expert in environmental legal research, contends the Forest Service is violating the general tenets of the National Environmental Policy Act.

"Congress enacted NEPA in 1969 because the status quo of developing projects behind closed doors and without careful study has through history produced catastrophic results," she said Friday.

With a Monday deadline looming for public comment, the Forest Service's plans to conduct prescribed burning dominated the discussion and led to questions about smoke, air quality, runoff and possible evacuations in a village accessible by only one road.

Residents are advocating for the Forest Service to reconsider prescribed burns for what they called "less invasive" forest management practices.

"Let's look at logging, thinning, wood gathering — let's look at those items first," Garcia said.

While the plan calls for nearly 27,000 acres of "small diameter thinning" and commercial logging on about 7,200 acres, residents said they would like to see more thinning, as well as allowing community members to harvest the timber for firewood, vigas and latillas.

"The wood and the timber are a huge resource, have been a huge resource for the communities for ages, so just burning them seems ridiculous," Lupita Salazar said. "I'm very interested in how we can maybe make the timber sales and the logging areas larger."

Salazar suggested the Forest Service offer trainings and pay locals to harvest the timber as part of a socioeconomic effort.

Salazar noted many people in Cañones and surrounding communities like Youngsville, Coyote, Arroyo de Agua, Capulin and Gallina live off the land.

"In a land-based community, if you look at things through the money perspective, you're burning the money," she said.

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