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Organization:

Title:

Comments: I am writing with concern about the proposal to commence prescribed burning in the Sandia mountains. I possess a masters in public health, several years of experience as a practitioner of equitable healthcare access, and I am a medical student at the University of New Mexico. I also specialize in health equity and systemic barriers to positive health outcomes, including disproportionate impacts of environmental hazards on communities of color. Here in New Mexico, where communities of color experience higher rates of respiratory illness due to factors such as air pollution in their neighborhoods, we cannot afford more catastrophic fires. Moreover, for rural communities the health risks to their water supplies from fires are also severe. Beyond being a healthcare practitioner, I am also a runner and frequently enjoy outdoor spaces for recreation. For both of these reasons, I have an interest in the responsible management of natural spaces in the Sandia mountains.

Based on my understanding, it appears that the forest service is not engaging in an equitable or accessible public engagement process that would allow residents of surrounding communities to voice their concerns and take part in forest management in a collaborative way. Personally, I do not find that this form is an adequate way to conduct outreach, and I would hope that the forest service would be holding a series of public meetings to inform their plan. I do not support prescribed burns in the Sandia mountains without consistent collaboration with affected communities, whose health and well-being would be impacted by a fire. When it comes to these serious decisions, public engagement needs to be inclusive. Communities in these regions are familiar with the terrain and natural surroundings in a way that makes them well positioned to comment on fire risk management in their areas. Additionally, there are Indigenous communities in this region who consider those mountains to be sacred and engage in traditional forms of medicine, using plants that are gathered from the area. Are they being properly consulted to see how prescribed burning would affect some of their traditional plants and medicines, as well as sacred sites? What about nearby residents with respiratory illnesses who could be affected by the smoke from controlled burning? Are they being consulted and is there a mechanism for advanced notice? Why hasn't the forest service established these channels?

We are all familiar with what happened in Calf Canyon/Hermits Peak, and I only wish that the forest service had listened to local residents about the wind and waited for their prescribed burns. Examples like this make it clear that a collaborative approach makes us all safer. It is not fair for the forest service to dictate the terms of forest management unilaterally when our communities' health is on the line. This online public comment form does not show true effort to engage. This project should not proceed without multiple public meetings and a chance for the affected communities to contribute to the plan and have an open dialogue that is ongoing. Citizens in nearby communities, especially those with existing health complications, deserve to know what is happening here and be notified of any relevant actions by the forest service in advance so that they have time to consider and weigh in.