

## MY VIEW

# A holistic approach to healthier forests

By James E. Melonas 13 hrs ago



According to analytics firm CoreLogic's 2019 wildfire risk report, Santa Fe is one of the top 15 American cities at risk for property damage due to extreme wildfire — with 23,546 homes at high or extreme risk and a combined reconstruction cost of \$7.3 billion. Reducing wildfire risk in the wildland-urban interface, the transition zone between development and natural spaces, is critically important. The Greater Santa Fe Fireshed Coalition works with neighborhood associations, businesses and homeowners to better adapt our communities to wildfire.

But protecting homes is only one part of a comprehensive approach to restoring fire resiliency to our forests. Of course, we will protect critical infrastructure when we can do so safely, but we also need to proactively restore and maintain the forests and watersheds outside the wildland-urban interface.

In 2014, the National Cohesive Wildland Fire Management Strategy gave us a science-based framework to collaboratively manage fire and fuels for the benefit of landscapes and communities. The cohesive strategy was the culmination of years of work by scientists, firefighters, federal, state and local officials, tribes, nonprofit partners and communities across the country. The strategy guides local efforts to make our forests healthier, our communities more resilient to wildfire, and our firefighting response safer and more effective.

The scientific consensus is that Southwestern forests are fire-adapted ecosystems that historically experienced a natural fire regime until human land use resulted in more than a century of fire suppression. By artificially excluding fire as a keystone process that removed woody debris and sustained wildlife habitat, we have accumulated a significant ecological debt.

Over the last decade, a combination of overly dense forests, climate change, extended drought, and insect and disease mortality has dramatically raised the risk of catastrophic wildfire. The large Las Conchas-type fires that kill every tree across thousands of acres and sterilize the soil are not natural in our dry forests. And the aftermath of these megafires — post-fire flooding and extreme erosion — can be even more devastating than the flames.

The fact that nearly half the drinking water for the city of Santa Fe originates in the Santa Fe National Forest is only one example of the community's interest in a healthy forest resilient to wildfire. Although the Santa Fe Municipal Watershed is outside the narrow wildland-urban interface zone, it is unquestionably essential to the economic stability and future well-being of our community.

In 2006, a broad spectrum of partners in New Mexico — including environmental organizations and scientists — agreed on a set of forest restoration principles. Forest managers have three basic tools to restore fire resiliency: strategic thinning, prescribed fire under conditions where we can best control fire effects and mitigate smoke impacts, and managing lightning-caused fires to accomplish resource objectives. There is plenty of room for reasonable debate about the best way to use these three tools. But the underlying science and imperative to tackle this work is not in question. Recent research also shows that strategic forest restoration in the Southwest actually benefits carbon storage and mitigates climate impacts over the long term.

Communities across the West are coming together to address this collective challenge, and Santa Fe has led the way. After the 15,000-acre Schultz Fire near Flagstaff, Ariz., in 2010, the community followed the Santa Fe model and passed a bond issue specifically for wildfire prevention and forest restoration.

Fire is coming to the Sangre de Cristo Mountains. The question is not if but when. It is time to come together as Santa Feans, applying the full body of science and in the spirit of collaboration, to continue to lead the way to make our beloved forests and mountains healthier and more resilient to fire.

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