

LEARNING FROM NEW MEXICO'S LARGEST WILDFIRE

SUMMARY

This fact sheet summarizes some takeaways of a special panel session titled: “Learning from the Hermit’s Peak Calf Canyon Wildfire, the largest fire in New Mexico: From erosion to reforestation and living in the continuum of wildfire cycles” held during the 4th Annual Southwest Fire Ecology Conference. The panel of expert practitioners and thinkers was convened to facilitate practical ways to restore the culture of fire among communities impacted and traumatized by catastrophic wildfires. This fact sheet discusses takeaways from small group discussions for each of the main topic areas: culture, accessing fire resources, communications, and education.

Culture

Restoring a culture of fire requires collaboration across diverse groups (e.g., Indigenous communities, local landowners, government agencies, and fire practitioners) and a commitment to shared knowledge and values.

Key Action Areas:

- Advocate for land management policies that support culturally significant fire practices on public lands.
- Integrate cultural fire practices into broader land management strategies, working alongside contemporary fire management techniques.

Assessing Fire Resources

Supporting local leadership and fostering partnerships can improve access to resources and build resilience. Innovative changes to fire management policies can simplify fire management practices, reduce barriers, address concerns, and align policies with both community and ecological needs.

Key Action Areas:

- Address resource gaps to empower landowners to contribute to large-scale fire resilience efforts and reduce catastrophic wildfire risks.
 - Expand funding opportunities and grants for landowners, particularly smaller-scale operations, to implement fire risk mitigation and prescribed fire.
 - Increase access to shared fire equipment (e.g., burn kits, fire engines, etc.) through cooperative arrangements or fire councils.
 - Develop programs that can connect landowners with financial, technical, and logistical assistance.
- Advocate for land management practices that streamline the process of accessing fire management funding and resources, especially for smaller and/or rural landowners.
- Provide resources to agencies and private landowners to address risk and liability concerns.
- Continue to engage the public on defensible space and pile burns to build understanding and comfort of fire management practices.
- Pursue and support cooperative burn initiatives, such as Prescribed Burn Associations (PBAs) among interested landowners.



The “Learning from Hermit’s Peak” workshop held at the 2024 Southwest Fire Ecology Conference in Santa Fe, NM.

Photo by Molly McCormick

Communications

Effective communication around fire management and wildfire risk is critical in building public support, understanding, and safety. Disconnects often exist between land management agencies, local communities, and the broader public on fire-related issues, especially regarding the differences between prescribed burns and wildfires. Trauma-informed communication is vital for fostering empathy and resilience, with mental health support provided as needed.

Key Action Areas:

- Develop consistent, trauma informed, and clear messaging about prescribed fire, emphasizing safety, ecological benefits, and long-term wildfire mitigation.
- Use local media, social platforms, and community events to spread accurate information about fire practices.
- Create localized fire communication networks to ensure timely and accurate information in the event of a wildfire or prescribed burn.
- Draw on communication strategies used for other natural disasters (e.g., hurricanes, tornadoes) to enhance fire-related messaging.
- Build proactive mental health networks, train agencies in empathy, and promote accountability in communication.

Education

Comprehensive fire education is essential both in schools and for adults, to help communities prepare for fire events and understand fire's role in land management practices. Educational efforts for K-12 students, adult learners, landowners, and fire managers should include fire ecology, safety practices, and land management techniques, integrating both Western science and Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) about fire.

Key Action Areas:

- Develop and implement fire literacy curricula for schools, focusing on fire ecology, safety, and prevention. (See SWFSC's Fire Ecology Learning Lab.)
- Encourage community-based fire education programs where local fire experts and land managers can directly engage with residents.
- Partner with state agencies and universities to create continuing education programs for adults, focusing on fire preparedness, prescribed fire techniques, and fire science.
- Provide hands-on learning opportunities and accessible career pathways in fire management.
- Support educators in helping students and families impacted by catastrophic wildfire by sharing knowledge, experiences, and fostering resilience.

PANELISTS

- Amina Sena, Pecos/Las Vegas District, Santa Fe National Forest, USDA-Forest Service
- Dr. David Pan, Associate Professor, Psychology Department, New Mexico Highlands Univ (NMHU)
- Dylín Montoya, Engagement Coordinator, Forestry Department, NMHU
- Edmund Gorman, Teacher at El Camino Real Academy, Santa Fe Public Schools.
- Dr. Eric Romero, Assist. Professor of Languages & Culture and Interim Director Native American Hispano Cultural Studies, NMHU
- Dr. Erika Derkas, Professor, Department of Sociology, Anthropology, and Criminal Justice, Gender and Women's Studies, NMHU
- George Ducker, Wildfire Prevention & Communications Coordinator, Forestry Division, NM EMNRD
- J.R. Logan, Forest Health and Watershed Coordinator, Taos County
- Dr. Michael Remke, Assistant Professor, Forestry Department, NMHU
- Ryan Swazo-Hinds, Environmental Biologist, Pueblo of Tesuque Department of Environment & Natural Resources
- Sam Berry, Southwest Associate Director, The Forest Stewards Guild
- Shannon Atencio, District Forester, Las Vegas District, Forestry Division, NM, EMNRD

FACILITATORS

- Hank Blackwell, Ambassador for the NFPA Fire Adapted Communities Program
- Alejandro Collins, Collaboration Specialist, NMFWR, NMHU
- Staci Matlock, Public Information Specialist, NMFWR, NMHU
- Dylín Montoya, Engagement Coordinator, Forestry Department, NMHU
- Shantini Ramakrishnan, Conservation & Restoration Education Program Manager/ Conservation Science Center, NMFWR, NMHU

ORGANIZER & MODERATOR

- Dr. Blanca Cespedes, Associate Prof. Forestry Department, NMHU

This fact sheet was written by Crystal Medina, New Mexico Forest and Watershed Restoration Institute.

The Southwest Fire Science Consortium (SWFSC) is a regional organization that facilitates knowledge exchange and disseminates wildland fire research and information across agency, administrative, and state boundaries in the Southwest. The SWFSC is one of 15 Fire Science Exchange Networks funded by the Joint Fire Science Program.



The Arizona Wildfire Initiative (AZWI) at the Northern Arizona University's School of Forestry supports Arizona's wildland fire needs by enhancing workforce development and education, communicating science, and increasing resilience to Arizona's communities. AZWI is funded by the state of Arizona.

