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### A burning question facing our forests

By [T. S. Last / Journal Staff Writer](#)

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Larry Martinez of Española hand-lights a prescribed burn in the Santa Fe Watershed last September. Some activists are arguing that such forest management techniques do more harm than good. (Eddie Moore/Journal North)

SANTA FE, N.M. — Are prescribed burns misguided?

That claim flared up last week when the Santa Fe City Council approved financing to manage and restore Santa Fe's municipal watershed.

The council unanimously approved the loan/grant agreement with New Mexico Water Trust Board and the state Finance Authority despite passionate pleas from some people who say fighting fire with fire, using prescribed burns and pile burns to thin the forest and reduce fuel loads, is not only misguided, but also contributes to climate change.

They also claim that calling it a watershed management project is really a smoke screen that will subject local residents and tourists to substandard air quality over the next 20 years.

"It's not a water project; it's a fire project," said Cate Moses, who added that the word "fire" appeared just once in 52 pages of material provided to the council.

Moses and others said peer-reviewed studies show that prescribed burns actually increase the risk of catastrophic fires by drying out forests and, worse, accelerate climate change by releasing carbon and mercury into the atmosphere.

Jan Boyer of Once a Forest, a Santa Fe-based group that advocates for "living forests and community-inclusive decision-making," according to its website, cited a 2001 study published by Physicians for Social Responsibility that indicated burning one acre of coniferous forest released 4.81 tons of carbon into the atmosphere.

"Don't burn our forests down; it is not useful. Read the science," she urged.

While concerns were also raised about the health risks associated with resulting smoke filling the air, it was the use of fire as a tool to manage the forest — or, in this case, the municipal watershed, which lies within the Santa Fe National Forest — that was at the center of the debate that played out before City Council.

"It's not a foregone conclusion that prescribed burns prevent larger catastrophic fires. In fact, the opposite is being proven true," Moses said. "It's really highly controversial and I don't think the council is being presented with that information."

Others disagreed.

Alexander Evans, research director with the Forest Stewards Guild, said the research in support of prescribed burns is stacked quite high.

“There is actually very good scientific consensus that thinning and prescribed fire is very effective at reducing the severity of fire,” he said, adding that the technique enabled firefighters to save homes during the 2007 Angora Fire in northern California and the 2011 Wallow Fire, the largest fire in Arizona history, that burned partially into New Mexico.

Evans’ colleague, Matt Piccarello, the Guild’s Southwest forestry coordinator, said there’s also ample visual evidence.

“If you look at the Las Conchas fire scar, that is what doing nothing looks like,” he said of the 2011 fire in the Santa Fe National Forest that burned 150,000 acres and continues to cause flooding problems on Santa Clara Pueblo. “If you want to see what post-fire impacts look like, you can go to Santa Clara Canyon and see the devastation that has occurred there.”

Fire officials are planning a prescribed burn totalling 1,376 acres in Gallinas Canyon and the Las Dispensas area in the Pecos/Las Vegas Ranger District, beginning Wednesday and lasting seven days, if conditions are favorable.

A pile burn planned for Hyde Memorial State Park in the mountains above Santa Fe was cancelled earlier this month because conditions weren’t right.

A one-day “slash-pit” prescribed burn is planned for next week about 10 miles north of Jemez Springs in the area of the 2013 Thompson Ridge Fire.



Nichols Reservoir holds part of the city of Santa Fe’s water supply. Managers worry about the effects a major wildfire might have on the water quality there. (Eddie Moore/Journal North)

### A century-old debate

The argument over whether prescribed burns are beneficial to forests has been likened to the creation versus evolution debate.

“I can see some parallels with that,” Bill Armstrong, a fire ecologist with the Santa Fe National Forest, said in a phone interview Wednesday.

It all goes back to the beginning, he said – the beginning of the U.S. Forest Service, that is – and the preservation versus conservation debate between naturalist John Muir and Gifford Pinchot, the first chief of the USFS.

Armstrong said that Muir, a preservationist who founded the Sierra Club, recognized that fire played an essential role in the forest and supported what was then called “Indian burning” or “gentle burning.” But Pinchot, whose background was in commercial forestry, favored fire suppression, partially to provide product for the timber industry.

“Pinchot was the one who won the battle,” Armstrong said.

So, for the better part of a the 20th century, the Forest Service followed a total fire suppression policy.

But, in the 1970s, as emerging scientific research demonstrated the positive role fire played in forest ecology, the USFS adopted a “let burn” policy and has used prescribed burns to reduce the risk of catastrophic fire.

“It’s not a question of whether or not these forests burn, it’s a question of how they burn,” he said, repeating a phrase used by several people in support of the watershed management plan last week.

Those opposed to prescribed burns argued that the only people speaking in support of the plan had a financial interest. They presented their own stack of research they say backed their position.

The work of University of Wyoming professor William Baker was at the heart of it and it has ignited considerable debate within the scientific community.

His research contradicted the accepted tree ring research that indicated that forests in the western part of the United States were historically more open, or “park like,” and that, centuries ago, severe fires were less frequent and no worse than those that occur today.

It was in a 2012 article in “High Country News” that fire ecologist Peter Brown, head of Rocky Mountain Tree-Ring Research in Fort Collins, Colo., likened Baker’s position to “creationists trying to tear down evolution.”

Baker’s book, “Fire Ecology in Rocky Mountain Landscapes,” was entered into the record at last week’s meeting by Arthur Firstenberg, best known in Santa Fe

as an electromagnetic hypersensitivity activist, but also active with Once a Forest.

“As far as the science behind it,” he said of fire ecology during a phone interview, “I know it as well as anybody.”

Firstenberg said the plan is to burn 1,000 acres per year in Santa Fe’s municipal watershed on a seven-year rotation. The idea is to reduce the number of trees from approximately 1,000 per acre to 50 per acre.

“If you remove canopy trees, which is what they are doing, you’re letting the sun in, and you’re heating up the forest and drying it out,” he said. “That creates the condition for future fires. Common sense would tell you what they are doing is not reasonable.”

Firstenberg also talked about the use of chemicals used to ignite prescribed burns and the impact burns have on wildlife, especially now during the nesting season.

“There are all these issues that are not being paid attention to,” he said.

While Armstrong disagrees that prescribed burns do more harm than good, he said those on the other side of the argument are not entirely wrong.

“All of what they said had a grain of truth in it, which makes it difficult to refute,” he said. “There’s a grain of truth but, in the end, fire is essential, it’s an essential keystone in the forests of the Southwest. Without the right kind of fire, we will lose our forests to these high-intensity fires. We’re losing them already.”

Armstrong said his beliefs are based mostly on what he’s seen with his own eyes over several decades as a fire manager. He said he wasn’t qualified to argue the science, but appreciated the debate.

“It’s like any other scientific debate; it’s enriched by having counterevidence,” he said. “Hopefully, whatever comes out of it is greater understanding.”

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