

# MY VIEW

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# Reader View: Santa Fe must address overgrown forests

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Tom Ribe

Posted: Saturday, April 2, 2016 7:00 pm

Tom Ribe

Fortunately, New Mexico has few natural disasters. We don't have big earthquakes or tornadoes, but we do have large forest fires that can denude mountainsides, burn homes, and cause flooding in towns. While people can't control the intensity of tornadoes or earthquakes, we can prepare for intense forest fires and make them less destructive to people and wildlife when they happen.

We are way behind on this urgent work in the Santa Fe area.

Big, intense forest fires are time-bombs waiting to go off. You need only drive or hike on the dirt roads and trails through the Tesuque Watershed to see thickets of sickly trees, heaps of sticks, needles and logs waiting for lighting or a

careless person to set off a firestorm on a dry windy day. Look to the mountains above Tesuque and see the scar of the Pacheco Canyon Fire that killed most trees over 12,000 acres. Look across the valley to the Jemez Mountains where drought driven intense fires since 1977 removed much of the forest cover from Bland Canyon to Santa Clara Canyon.

A large fire starting on a dry and windy day above Santa Fe could transform our mountains, kill millions of trees, and send rainy season flooding into downtown Santa Fe and Tesuque. Flooding after the Las Conchas Fire devastated Bandelier National Monument, Santa Clara Pueblo and the Dixon Apple Orchard. Downtown Santa Fe and Tesuque could be next.

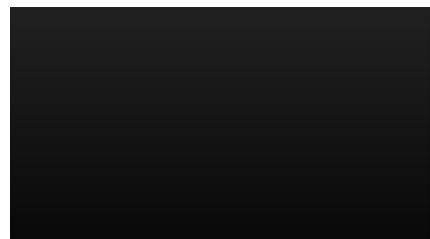
Preparing for an inevitable large fire near Santa Fe is urgent work for many professionals in federal agencies and nonprofits that understand that thinning

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thickets and controlled burning needs to be done over at least 107,000 acres near Santa Fe. That's so when the inevitable fire starts, it finds less fuel and burns with lower intensity. Foresters and ecologists know exactly what needs to be done and are ready, yet barriers stand in the way of improving forest health and protecting homes and towns from fire and flood.

Years of budget sequestration have left the U.S. Forest Service short on funds to do urgent fire preparation work. Controlled burning during wetter times is the least expensive way to calm future wildfires by reducing fuels in advance, yet some in our community complain loudly where there is temporary smoke in town.

A local campaign by "Once a Forest," a small, anti-technology group, has been spotted at public meetings and leafleting trailheads, campaigning against science-based forest management and for 1910-style wildfire suppression that was abandoned by conservationists and scientists more than 40 years ago. Their testimony and fliers utterly misrepresent the history of fires and forests in New Mexico and distort the intention and the reality of forest and fire management today.

Just as with medical science or computer technology, professional understanding of forests and wildfire have evolved and progressed over the last few decades of hard experience on the part of federal agencies. We know that low-intensity fires burned regularly in the Southwest for millions of years. We've missed many natural fire cycles in our forests due to past misguided fire management policies. Now the U.S. Forest Service and nonprofits are ready to correct decades of mistakes with a scientific program to treat 120,000 acres of the Santa Fe "Fireshed."

If Santa Fe is to avoid the devastation visited upon Los Alamos, Colorado Springs and Flagstaff, we all need to understand the centuries-old reality of fire in Southwest forests. If you want to help or get more information, please visit [http://www.forestguild.org/SantaFe\\_Fireshed](http://www.forestguild.org/SantaFe_Fireshed) and support local non-profit, city, county, and federal agency efforts to make our forests resilient again.

Tom Ribe is author of *Inferno by Committee*, a history of the Cerro Grande Fire. He has been working on prescribed fires since 1980.

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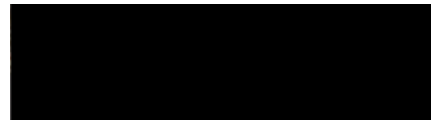
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**Lisa Morley** · Santa Fe, New Mexico

Thank you Tom! It's good to hear from the science-based side of this issue!

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