



National Park Service Proposes Prescribed Fire at Bandelier National Monument to Address Fuel Overloads and Reduce Risks to Surrounding Communities



Frijoles Canyon within Bandelier National Monument is an area with significant fuel loads and has not been adequately treated with prescribed fire. The proposed burn for this fall would encompass nearly 400 acres in the flat terrain above Frijoles Canyon.

After the Cerro Grande Fire, everyone will be asking us why we need to burn in Bandelier. The answer is that we have a responsibility as a land management agency to reduce our fuels and provide buffers to our neighbors. We have too much fuel in many hard to reach canyons. We cannot let these become pathways for wildfires to travel into surrounding communities. We know that this is an issue that must be addressed collaboratively and with the full support of the community.

With the assistance of the Santa Fe National Forest, Los Alamos County, the Bureau of Land Management, the Department of Energy/Los Alamos National Laboratory, the Bureau of Indian Affairs, and the New Mexico State Division of Forestry, the National Park Service is making plans for a small prescribed fire to clear forest fuel overloads and reduce the risk from wildfires that might ignite within Frijoles Canyon.

**— Darlene Koontz
Superintendent
Bandelier National
Monument**

The proposed fire would occur near the cross-country ski trail on State Road 4 within Bandelier National Monument during a four-day window in mid-October to December, if conditions are appropriate. The prescribed fire will be the first by Bandelier since the Cerro Grande Fire in 2000.

Fuels have built up within Bandelier due to a 100-year history of fire suppression. Although much of the fuel in Bandelier has been reduced by prior prescribed fires, wildland fires, and mechanical thinning, the proposed prescribed fire would burn an area that has never been treated by prescribed fire. These untreated fuels pose a risk to our neighbors – especially since Bandelier is located in an area with the second highest incidence of lightning strikes in the nation.

The prescribed fire would help to establish a critical buffer zone between highly fire-vulnerable areas within the park and the Los Alamos National Laboratory, the Valles Caldera National Preserve, the City of Los Alamos and other adjacent lands.



Area Land Managers Cooperate on Fuel Loads, Fire Operations

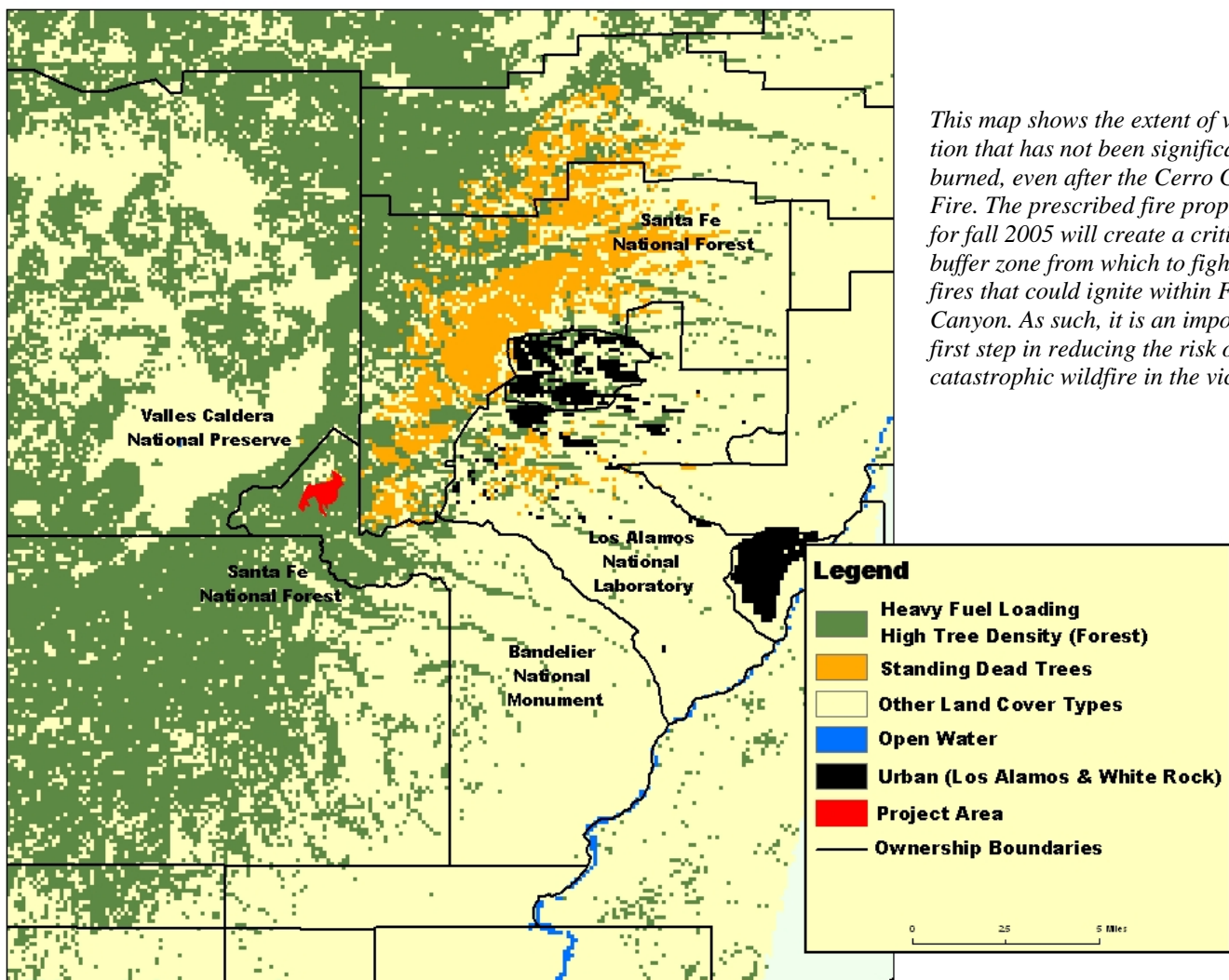
The problem of excessive fuel loads in the Los Alamos vicinity has been recognized by the Los Alamos National Laboratory, the Bureau of Indian Affairs, the National Park Service, the U.S. Forest Service, the Bureau of Land Management, and New Mexico State Division of Forestry — all of which are part of the Santa Fe Zone Board, which works cooperatively on fire operations.

Prescribed Burn Reviewed by Zone Subcommittee

The Zone Board has created a fuels subcommittee to ensure that the interagency use of prescribed fire and mechanical treatments in fuels management

projects is performed safely, cost effectively, and with the maximum benefit to the public, cooperators, and the environment. The subcommittee has reviewed and concurred with the plan for this prescribed fire.

A separate committee, the Interagency Wildland Fire Management Team, includes representatives from the Los Alamos National Laboratory, the National Park Service, the U.S. Forest Service and Los Alamos County, and is open to the general public. The committee meets bi-weekly to discuss wildland fire-related issues and coordinate operations in Los Alamos County. This board has been briefed about the upcoming plan and some members will be part of the effort to implement the proposed fire.





Lessons Learned from Cerro Grande

Several reviews of the Cerro Grande Fire, including those conducted by the U.S. General Accounting Office, the National Academy of Public Administration, and the former Interior and Agriculture Secretaries resulted in a number of recommendations to help prevent future catastrophes. The six main recommendations were:

- Improve interagency coordination and cooperation
- Identify and have available contingency resources
- Implement peer review by interagency partners for all burn plans
- Reduce fire danger by addressing the wildland urban interface
- Improve risk analysis
- Work directly with affected communities

Improving Interagency Cooperation and Coordination

Since the Cerro Grande Fire, a number of steps have been taken to improve coordination and cooperation among federal, state and local agencies. That level of cooperation is reflected in the fact that the proposed fire for this fall will not be an exclusively National Park Service operation. Approximately 100 individuals will staff the fire, including highly trained personnel from federal, state and local agencies. In addition, communications among interagency partners has improved significantly since 2000. The National Park Service, the U.S. Forest Service and the Department of Energy/ Los Alamos National Lab have developed an interagency fire center at Technical Area 49, situated on DOE/LANL property directly adjacent to Bandelier National Monument.

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These pictures depict fuel conditions in the higher elevations of Bandelier. The picture at right reveals heavy fuels, creating an unhealthy, unsustainable forest prone to large forest fires. The picture below demonstrates healthier forest conditions created by combining prescribed burning with mechanical thinning to reduce heavy fuels.



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Lessons Learned

continued

This interagency fire center houses engines, equipment, a helicopter during the fire season, and serves as a manpower center that all agencies can call on in the event of a fire.

Improvements to Contingency Planning

The prescribed fire will be staffed by 49 firefighters from the interagency team and 47 additional firefighters available on-site as contingency resources.

Doubling the number of firefighters on hand will enable immediate response to any issues that might arise with the prescribed fire. If more staff or equipment becomes necessary, it will be immediately requested from surrounding agencies. These measures will help prevent a prescribed fire from becoming a wildland fire.

Burn Plan Identifies Contingency Resources

As recommended by the U.S. General Accounting Office in its review of the Cerro Grande Fire, the National Park Service has identified the contingency resources in the burn plan for the prescribed fire. Burn plans outline conditions under which a prescribed fire may be ignited and the resources necessary to staff the fire and respond to fire behavior.

The plan identifies “a prescription” for when a fire may be ignited that is based on a model that predicts fire behavior based on wind speed, relative humidity and fuel moisture. If conditions do not match that prescription, then the fire is not ignited. If conditions change after the fire is ignited, then no further ignition occurs and the fire will be closely monitored or suppressed. If at any time the prescribed fire poses significant threats to life, property, or high-value resources, suppression actions will be taken, and the fire will be declared a wildland fire.

In 2000, prescribed fire plans did not adequately identify contingency resources. The plan for this prescribed fire identifies the types and quantities of firefighting equipment and labor necessary should circumstances require it. Resources for this prescribed fire will be onsite or located within two hours of Bandelier. All personnel will meet National Wildfire Coordinating Group (NWCG) standards for the job they perform in the prescribed fire.

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Improvements to Contingency Planning continued

In 2000, problems also arose when Department of Interior agencies ordered additional resources from other federal agencies. At that time, there were inadequate procedures in place to facilitate access to the resources of other agencies. For example, there was no method for payment of employees across federal agencies. Since the Cerro Grande Fire, a national account was set up for each agency to charge the cost of resources requested during ongoing prescribed fire operations. Additionally, firefighting resources can now be summoned at any time, regardless of whether the fire is formally declared to be a wildfire.



Peer Review of Burn Plan

The U.S. General Accounting Office also recommended that prescribed fire plans be reviewed by independent experts. Technical peer review for this prescribed fire plan has been provided by the Santa Fe Zone Fuels Committee consisting of partner agencies such as the Santa Fe National Forest, New Mexico State Division of Forestry, and the Bureau of Land Management.

Bandelier's Fire Management Plan, a long-term strategy that outlines how the park will conduct fire operations within Bandelier, has also been reviewed by many agencies and the general public.

Protecting the Wildland Urban Interface

Since 2002, in an effort to address the fuels problem at Bandelier National Monument, the National Park Service has used mechanical thinning and pile burning on 1,945 acres at a cost of \$733,353.

Mechanical thinning involves removing live and dead vegetation (fuels) with hand tools and mechanical equipment according to a prescribed plan. Mechanical thinning is often used as a pre-treatment for prescribed burning to remove smaller diameter trees, ladder fuels, shrubs, and ground litter to help keep the fire within the designated areas. Topography often limits the extent to which mechanical thinning can be used. Once fuel has been mechanically thinned, the piles of cut fuel are then burned.

Although mechanical thinning and pile burning are important tools in ensuring forest health, alone they do not provide the same fuels reduction or forest health benefits of prescribed burns. Prescribed burning mimics the natural processes that keep fuels low which in turn helps ensure that forests burn at low, natural intensities. All three of these approaches in combination are necessary to create buffer zones to protect life and property and restore forest health.

Standardizing Risk Analysis

The National Academy of Public Administration also recommended that improvements be made to the process of analyzing the complexity of a particular fire. Prescribed fire plans contain an assessment of the level of risk associated with a fire, based on variables like weather, types of fuels, and methods of ignition. At the time of the Cerro Grande Fire, the National Park Service had different criteria for assessing the risk of a prescribed fire. Today, the National Park Service uses a uniform methodology that is peer-reviewed in prescribed fire plans and includes two "Go, No-Go" checklists, one for the agency administrator and another for the prescribed fire burn boss. These documents are completed and signed prior to starting a prescribed fire.



Lessons Learned

continued

Working with Communities

The National Park Service recognizes that a fully-informed and involved public is essential to a successful interagency effort to respond to the fuels buildup around Los Alamos and to the success of Bandelier's long-term Fire Management Plan. The importance of community involvement was also underscored in reviews of the Cerro Grande Fire.

In light of the tragic Cerro Grande Fire, the National Park Service believes that the proposed prescribed fire should occur only after the public has been fully informed about the fire and has had an opportunity to comment. To that end, the following meetings and activities have been scheduled:



- **September 2: Open house from 5:30-7 pm at the University of New Mexico-Los Alamos. Key staff will be available to answer questions and to discuss the prescribed fire plan.**
- **September 14: Open house in the White Rock Town Hall from 5:30-7 pm.. Key staff will be available to answer questions and to discuss the prescribed plan.**
- **September 20: Open house from 5:30-7 pm at Fuller Lodge in Los Alamos. Key staff will be available to answer questions and discuss the prescribed fire plan.**
- **September 23 and 24: Two, three-hour hikes from 9am to 12 noon in the burn unit for community members interested in looking at the land and asking questions in a more informal setting.**
- **September 28: One hour call-in show from 6-7 pm with Fire Education Prevention Information Specialist and Bandelier's Fire Management Officer on PAC-8 -- the local public access channel for the Los Alamos cable system.**
- **Ongoing in September & October: NPS personnel will be stationed at community locations, meetings, and events in Los Alamos and White Rock to answer questions.**

Ongoing: Weekly articles in the Los Alamos Monitor about the upcoming prescribed fire.

Visit the Bandelier website at www.nps.gov/band for more information.

Questions or concerns? Call our fire hotline at (505) 662-7065 or send us an email at band_fire_comments@nps.gov.



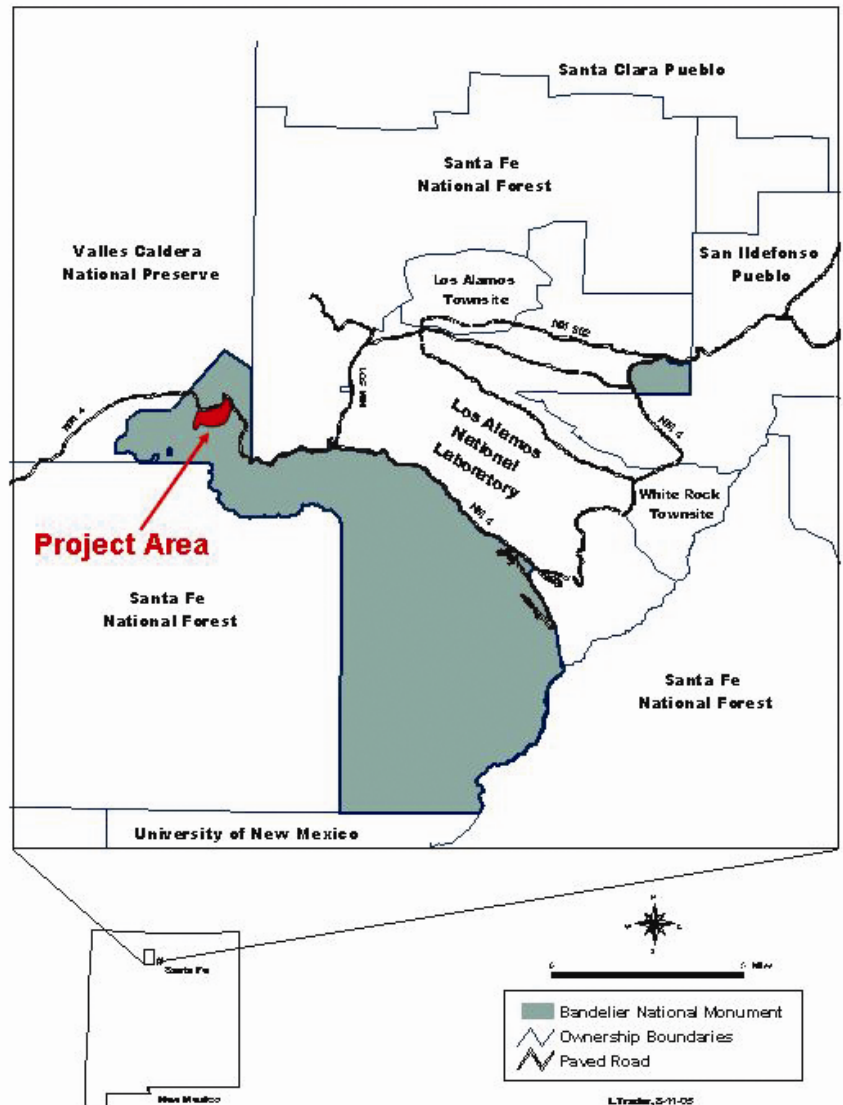
About the Proposed Burn

The planned burn will be on 377 acres by the cross-country ski trail on Highway 4, in Bandelier National Monument. The burn will most likely be performed in mid-October 2005 (but may occur as late as December), when the weather is cooler, with shorter days, and higher humidity levels.

During this time, high winds are less likely than in the spring. With the precipitation received during the last 12 months, the long-term drought has eased considerably and the fuel moisture levels are up dramatically from previous years.

North and east boundaries of the project are NM Highway 4. The south boundary is constructed fireline within Frijoles Canyon and the west boundary is Forest Road 289.

Bandelier and other interagency partners will only burn when fire conditions are determined to be safe and effective, and only for as long as it takes to do it correctly — possibly from a few days to a few weeks. Smoke is likely to be present for up to 2 weeks and commuters should expect heavy smoke and traffic delays along the upper section of Highway 4 near the ski trail during the actual burning.

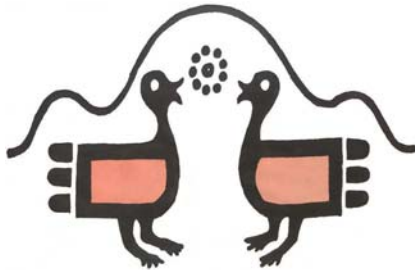


Prior to the ignition of the prescribed fire, all resources will be on site. Site preparations that will have been completed include mechanical thinning around the site, installation of over two miles of water hoses inside the perimeter, on-going monitoring of on-site weather conditions, and careful placement of trained personnel. The actual burning is expected to take two to four days, although site mop-up will be on-going for several weeks.

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Please join us at the following events to share your thoughts about the prescribed fire for Bandelier National Monument:

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Thank you for your interest in Bandelier National Monument!