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Energy, Minerals and Natural Resources Department

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EMNRD'S State Forestry Division and Interagency Partners Commemorate Wildfire Awareness Week

Albuquerque – At a news conference today, Energy, Minerals and Natural Resources Cabinet Secretary Ken McQueen reinforced the importance of Wildfire Awareness Week, which in New Mexico started on April 16th and continues through April 22nd. Speaking at the Rio Grande Nature Center State Park, Secretary McQueen called upon New Mexicans to continue to be vigilant and do their part to help prevent wildfires in the Land of Enchantment.

“New Mexicans are faced with the constant threat of wildfire and the devastation it carries to our lives, our properties, and our natural resources,” states Governor Martinez’s official proclamation of Wildfire Awareness Week 2017. “I urge all New Mexicans to stand together and remember, “Wildfire doesn’t have to be a disaster. Little things you do now will make a big difference”, said Secretary McQueen.

Since January 1, 2017, New Mexico has had 126 wildfires burn more than 12,000 acres on state and privately owned land. Last year at this same time, 140 fires burned approximately 46,000 acres. But while the weather has helped to keep the flames at bay so far, we must be mindful of the high risk of wildfire that still lies ahead as we move into the warmer months.

In June of 2016, hot and windy conditions fueled the Dog Head Fire in the Manzano Mountains near Chilili. A dozen homes and nearly 18,000 acres were destroyed by the flames. Without the cooperation between local, state, federal, and tribal interagency partners fighting the Dog Head Fire, it could have been far worse. It just underlines the need for cooperation among all agencies and the community to come together to fight wildfire.

Part of that teamwork includes programs such as the Returning Heroes Program (RHP), which trains veterans of the U.S. Armed Forces in wildland firefighting techniques. RHP has become a vital resource in fighting wildfires, not just in New Mexico but across the country. So far, this fiscal year the Returning Heroes Program has responded to 17 incidents, assisting the state of Colorado, California, Idaho, Nevada, and Virginia.

The State Forestry Division, with the help of funding appropriated during Fiscal Year 2017, and in collaboration with federal partners and the Department of Game and Fish, have also developed 20 projects statewide which will continue to improve forest health, protect communities at risk, improve wildlife habitat and enhance the quality of our precious watersheds.

Touching on the week's theme of, "Wildfire doesn't have to be a disaster. Little things you do now will make a big difference," participants at today's news conference emphasized the importance of communities' engagement against escalating risk of wildfire in our state. Local, state, federal, and tribal agency representatives discussed how residents can best prevent human-caused wildfires through communication, planning, and individual action.

Fire response agencies expect this to be an active year for wildfire and there are steps state residents and visitors can take to reduce the potential for loss of life and property:

- Create a 30-foot defensible space zone around the home;
- Pile firewood and other flammables well away from home and other structures;
- Keep access roads free of debris and vegetation to improve access and escape in case of fire;
- Clean off needles and other debris from roofs and gutters;
- Consider constructing or renovating with fire resistant building materials;
- Prune trees near structures and remove excess ground fuels such as fallen needles, cones and branches.

While enjoying New Mexico's many forested private and public lands, it is suggested that residents and visitors:

- Know Before You go: Call the statewide toll-free Fire Restriction Hotline at 1-877-864-6985;
- Build a campfire in areas approved only such as established campgrounds with fire grills pits;
- Never leave a campfire unattended; be sure it is dead out and cold to the touch before leaving;
- Never park vehicles in tall grass or shrubs where fires can start because hot catalytic converters may come in contact with dry vegetation;
- Never toss lit cigarettes out of cars;
- Abide by smoking restrictions in forested areas;
- Keep in mind that the use of fireworks is always prohibited on all public lands including state parks or national forests.

For more information on wildfire prevention, how to create defensible space to protect lives and property, log onto: www.nmfireinfo.com or www.firewise.org. For more information on preparing your homes and families, visit the New Mexico Department of Homeland Security & Emergency Management's Family Preparedness Guide: <http://goo.gl/Zuams>.

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The Energy, Minerals and Natural Resources Department provides resource protection and renewable energy resource development services to the public and other state agencies.