

New Mexico Fire Planning Task Force

Meeting Minutes

November 30, 2020

1. Opening

A meeting of the New Mexico Fire Planning Task Force (Task Force) was called to order at 2:00 p.m. on November 30, 2020 via WebEx by Laura McCarthy, State Forester for the Energy, Minerals and Natural Resources Department's (EMNRD) Forestry Division.

2. Welcome and Introductions

Laura McCarthy, State Forester, recognized the Task Force, public members, and guests. Task Force members introduced themselves via round robin.

- **Task Force Members and Delegates Present:**

- Laura McCarthy, State Forester, EMNRD Forestry Division, Task Force Chair
- Aurora Martinez, Indian Affairs Department
- AJ Forte, Executive Director, New Mexico Municipal League
- Joy Esparsen, Deputy Executive Director, New Mexico Counties
- Clay Bailey, Director, Regulations and Licensing Department, Construction Industries Division
- Aurora Martinez, Executive Assistant, Indian Affairs Department
- Donnie Quintana, Director Local Government Division, Department of Finance and Administration
- Mike Cherry, NM Fire Chief's Association, Municipal League
- Joe Kenmore, Director, Lincoln County Office of Emergency Services
- Teresa Rigby, Fire Mitigation and Education Specialist, United States Department of the Interior, Bureau of Land Management (BLM)
- Melanie Barns, Acting Associate State Director, United States Department of the Interior, Bureau of Land Management (BLM)
- Judy Palmer, Fire Director, Fire and Aviation Management Southwest Region, United States Department of Agriculture, Forest Service (USFS)
- Jake Nuttall, Deputy Fire Director, Fire and Aviation Management Southwest Region, United States Department of Agriculture, Forest Service (USFS)

- **Task Force Members Absent:**

State Land Office

3. Task Force Business

- **Approval of Agenda**

Judy Palmer moved to approve the agenda, which was seconded by Joy Esparsen. The Task Force unanimously approved the November 30, 2020 agenda.

- **Adopt Open Meetings Act Resolution**

AJ Forte moved to adopt the Open Meetings Act Resolution as written, which was seconded by Clay Bailey. The Task Force unanimously adopted the Open Meetings Act Resolution.

- **Approval of Minutes**

Joy Esparsen moved to approve the meeting minutes from December 3, 2019 as written, which was seconded by Donnie Quintana. The Task Force unanimously approved the meeting minutes.

4. Review and Approve Community Wildfire Protection Plan (CWPP) Submittals

Joy Esparsen, Chair of the CWPP Subcommittee provided background on CWPPs to the Task Force explaining that CWPPs are directed by the National Forest Plan. Submission approval requirements include public collaboration, prioritized fuel reduction projects, addressing structural ignitability, and obtaining appropriate signatures from the local governing body, local fire department, and the Forestry Division. The Task Force gives final approval to updated or new CWPPs each year. The CWPPs are then added to an annual inventory list that is submitted to the state and federal government.

In 2020, the subcommittee reviewed four updated CWPPs as follows:

- **Cibola County**

Recommended for approval as all requirements have been met.

AJ Forte moved to approve the updated Cibola County CWPP, which was seconded by Judy Palmer. The Task Force unanimously approved the Cibola County CWPP.

- **Grant County**

Recommended for approval provided the following needs are met:

- Include prior risk ratings in future CWPP updates to show if wildfire risk has been reduced.

Teresa Rigby moved to approve the updated Grant County CWPP, which was seconded by AJ Forte. The Task Force unanimously approved the Grant County CWPP.

- **Otero County**

Recommended for approval provided the following needs are met:

- Amend risk ratings to follow the CWPP format (e.g. use “low, medium, and high” risk level terminology rather than using the term “extreme” risk).
- Include a review and signatures from the United States Department of the Interior, Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) and BLM.
- Demonstrate broader public engagement (e.g. post CWPP to county website, solicitation from the public through advertising or public meetings, make broader announcements to the community that the CWPP is available for review and input).

Joe Kenmore moved to approve the Otero County CWPP with contingencies, which was seconded by Joy Esparsen. The Task Force unanimously approved the Otero County CWPP with contingencies.

- **Santa Fe County**

Recommended for approval provided the following needs are met:

- Submit final signature page.

Judy Palmer moved to approve the Santa Fe County CWPP with contingencies, which was seconded by AJ Forte. The Task Force unanimously approved the Santa Fe County CWPP with contingencies.

5. Review Revisions to CWPP Guidelines

Joy Esparsen explained that the Forestry Division has requested more information for guidance in CWPPs that are updated. The Task Force has revisited the CWPP Guidelines multiple times since it was developed and made various changes (tweaks). It had been suggested in the past to bring back a stakeholder's group, which includes Task Force members and partner agencies that all have insights into what CWPPs should address. Due to COVID-19, the spring meeting of the Task Force was cancelled, and the issue was not revisited. After speaking with Vernon Muller, State Fire Manager for the Forestry Division, Joy suggested that a stakeholder's group be reconvened in the spring of 2021 to make recommendations and bring them to the Task Force for final approval. This includes addressing more endangered species information, if values at risk have been fully identified, and possibly make risk ratings more evident.

Laura McCarthy asked if the 2020 guidelines will be used for 2021. Joy explained that any updates approved at the spring meeting would apply to 2022 CWPP submittals, because there may be many updates already in progress for 2021 using the current guidelines.

Laura McCarthy said she would like to see an explicit linkage between the CWPP and the 2020 New Mexico Forest Action Plan (FAP), which includes statewide data that is watershed based and includes an analysis of the risk of fire transmission to communities. Laura would also like something in the guidelines that requires those preparing CWPPs to consult with the statewide data, statewide assessment, and strategies in the FAP and that they might, as a county, choose to implement this.

Joy suggested to open up the CWPP Subcommittee to others on the Task Force who may want to take part in updates to the CWPP guidelines. Currently there are representatives from the Forestry Division, Forest Stewards Guild, State Land Office, Department of Game and Fish, and NM Counties. Laura suggested a local government representative, which Joy suggested the Municipal League could possibly fulfill that role as they have in the past. AJ Forte volunteered the Municipal League to represent local governments.

A motion from the Task Force on this issue will take place at the 2021 spring meeting.

7. State Forester's Update

Laura McCarthy shared the following with the Task Force:

- The final USDA signoff on the FAP is expected by the end of the 2020 calendar year. A detailed fire management strategy and shared stewardship agreement with the USFS is included. The top 500 watersheds (out of 3,200) in the state are also identified in the FAP because of their risk of fire transmission to communities, water source value, and value to wildlife and plant habitat. The Forestry Division will use the top 500 watersheds as a guide for where money and effort will be spent.
- Completed a report on expanding the use of prescribed fire that came out of the House Memorial 42 (HM42) from the 2019 Legislative Session. The report was provided to the legislature on June 30, 2020. A presentation and discussion of report findings during a Water and Natural Resources Committee meeting in July 2020. EMNRD has been given approval from the Governor's Office to introduce two bills regarding prescribed fire during the 2021 Legislative Session.

- The Prescribed Fire Act, an agency bill, would do three things: 1) clarify liability to reduce insurance costs for private landowners; 2) create a training and certification program for private landowners and consultants who assist with private land burning, which would be conducted jointly with NM State University (NMSU) Extension; and 3) create guidelines for counties that choose to issue permits for prescribed burning, which is defined as broadcast burning and pile burning. It would not affect open, agricultural, or acequia burning.

Laura shared details about out an op-ed in the Albuquerque Journal written by State Senator Pat Woods (District: 7 - Curry, Quay, and Union Counties). The op-ed is about reforestation, which is one of the key strategies in the FAP. We've been pushing for years that the primary forest management technique to reduce the risk of fire is cutting and removing overgrown brush and trees before the forest burn. Now we have an accumulation of burned lands, which in the future will need some reforestation, this can contribute toward New Mexico's climate change goals for emissions reduction. This will be one of the Forestry Division's focus areas for the coming year. Regardless of whether or not a bill passes as Senator Woods proposes, there are a lot of things we can do on the reforestation front without state funding or legislative action.

8. Other Business

- No other business discussed.

9. Next Steps

- Two CWPPs are approved with contingencies, Otero and Santa Fe Counties.
- Hear back from the CWPP guideline team/stakeholder's group on the guidelines for 2022.
- Meeting minutes for November 30, 2020
- Add a representative from the Municipal League to the CWPP guideline team/stakeholder's group
- **Schedule next meeting – Laura proposed Monday, April 26, 2021 at 2:00 p.m. as a placeholder until more is known about the pandemic.**

Adjournment

Joe Kenmore moved to adjourn the meeting of the Task Force, which was seconded by Donnie Quintana. The Task Force unanimously voted to adjourn.

Minutes submitted by: Wendy Mason

Approved by: Laura McCarthy