New Mexico FIRE AND WATER

Impacts and Lessons Learned from the Las Conchas Fire

FINAL REPORT

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

After reviewing the lessons learned from the 2011 Las Conchas fire, New Mexicans are calling for a range of reforms. They want additional planning with broad participation that employs an expanded scale for forest and water management, more emphasis on economic impacts and development of forest resources, heightened science-based education for the public and policymakers regarding fire prevention and mitigation, and several specific changes in fire policy and practice.

These recommendations and others resulted from the *Town Hall on New Mexico Fire and Water*, held June 5-6, 2012 in Albuquerque. The town hall produced a platform of 19 recommendations, of which 17 garnered support from at least 80% of the participants.

Town Hall Participation

With almost 90 participants, the event included people from primarily the northern and central regions of the state. Participants came from urban, rural, and tribal communities – and they included scientists, researchers, environmentalists, educators, students, public officials, advocates, business people, and government officials. About half of the participants attended the event for free; the other half paid a voluntary $50 registration fee that covered meals and snack breaks during the two-day deliberation.

Town Hall Process

The event opened with guest speakers including David McGinnis, National Science Foundation and Dr. Robert Parmenter, Valles Caldera National Preserve. A panel of experts in economics, biology, water, and forestry provided a context for the policy issues that would be important for the deliberations that followed, and Tim Aydelott presented a preview of a documentary video on the Las Conchas Fire. Participants then divided into small groups, during which they outlined lessons learned from the Las Conchas Fire and explored policies and practices that could improve the state's approach to severe wildfire and its aftermath. They prioritized those issues into 19 discreet recommendations. Finally, all participants reviewed and refined the work of the other groups.

Town Hall Background Report

Prior to the town hall, all registrants received the *New Mexico Fire and Water* background report which provided key information on the impacts of severe wildfire and the policy issues involved. It is available at www.nmfirst.org.

Recommendation Summary

The list below offers a high-level summary. Additional details on each recommendation are provided in the complete report that follows.

PLANNING

- Create and implement a water source protection plan.
- Develop and implement a landscape-scale plan for forests and watersheds.
- Update and re-implement the NM Forest and Watershed Health Plan.
- Strengthen the process and broaden participation in land and resource management planning.

ECONOMIC IMPACT

- Highlight economic benefits of fire mitigation and watershed protection and restoration.
- Develop sustainable economic development opportunities using renewable forest resources.
- Restore and support small-scale wood product industries.

PUBLIC EDUCATION AND OUTREACH

- Educate the public about wildfire effects and mitigation.
- Educate the next generation about wildfire.
- Educate the public about controlled burns.

- Educate the public about fire ecology.
- Disseminate science information to planners, policymakers, and the public.
- Support informed decision-making by policymakers.

SPECIFIC POLICES AND PRACTICES

- Develop a better emergency communication system.
- Proactively implement fire and flood science.
- Use adaptive management principles in forest and watershed management policies.
- Promote strategies to reduce fire risk at wildland-urban interface.

JURISDICTION CONTROL

- Develop community-based forest and watershed projects on federal and non-federal lands.
- Increase local government and community input regarding fire and water actions on federal lands.

INTRODUCTION

Purpose of the Town Hall

The 2011 Las Conchas Fire in Northern New Mexico affected not only individual communities, but also had an impact on economic development, ecological systems, recreational interests, community health, and municipal water supplies throughout the region. The opportunity to learn from this devastating fire can help all New Mexicans protect our valuable natural resources.

During this two-day town hall, participants explored the state's policies and practices in reducing, responding to, and recovering from severe wildfires. They identified several key themes that needed to be addressed. Some of these needs might be addressed through more coordinated government response, others by the scientific research community, and others by local education and advocacy.

About New Mexico EPSCoR

The **New Mexico Experimental Program to Stimulate Competitive Research** fosters partnerships between New Mexico's academic institutions, our national labs, private industry, and state and federal sources to benefit education, research, and the New Mexico economy. NM EPSCoR builds the state's capacity to carry out state-of-the-art research, provide superior educational opportunities, and provide the quality of life and employment that comes with an active and competitive science and technology base. The overarching vision for the most current NM EPSCoR is to enable an environment in which New Mexico scientists and educators are fully competitive in climate change research and education.

About New Mexico First

New Mexico First engages people in important issues facing their state or community. Co-founded in 1986 by Senators Jeff Bingaman and Pete Domenici (retired), the public policy organization offers unique town halls and forums that bring together people from all walks of life to develop their best ideas for policymakers and the public. New Mexico First also produces nonpartisan public policy reports on critical issues facing the state. These reports – on topics like education, healthcare, the economy, and energy – are available at www.nmfirst.org.

Town Hall Background Report

The *New Mexico Fire and Water* background report was designed to broaden the understanding of citizens and lawmakers about the severe wildfire issues facing New Mexico. It also helped participants prepare for the town hall. Using the 2011 Las Conchas fire as an example, the report reviewed the impacts on water, land, wildlife, and the economy of severe wildfire. It also outlined various policy issues that have the potential to improve the way the state handles such fires in the future.

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TOWN HALL PROCESS

Using **New Mexico First's** proven consensus-building process, the two-day event asked participants to share their best ideas for making policy and practice change in reducing, responding to, and recovering from severe wildfires. On day one of the town hall, participants were divided into small groups to explore various ideas and identify urgent needs that will have the greatest influence in the future. On day two, participants developed a platform of recommendations for addressing these needs.

Step 1: Learn the Issues

Background Report

Review report before attending the town hall.

Context Setting and Shared Learning

Listen to guest speakers and ask questions.

Step 2: Explore Possibilities

Small Group Discussions

Consider promising opportunities or crucial issues that need to be addressed.

Step 3: Develop Common Ground

Draft Recommendations

Create recommendations that will impact future progress.

Agree on Final Recommendations

Refine and reach consensus on final recommendations in the full group.

Step 4: Advance Change

A final report will be sent to all stakeholders, including community and business leaders, policymakers, media, and all town hall registrants. The Implementation Team will work to advance the recommendations agreed to by town hall participants.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations were developed by participants in small groups at the town hall. The entire town hall considered all the recommendations and weighed in on their level of approval regarding the final language. The recommendations are listed in order of approval level within similar themes.

TOPIC	THEME: PLANNING	PERCENT APPROVAL
REC 1: Water Source Protection	**ACTION**: Recognizing New Mexico's montane[1] forests are the source for surface water supply and ground water recharge and are at significant risk from wildfire damage, create and implement a water source[2] protection plan. **STRATEGIES**: 1. Use statewide resources such as government agencies, universities, etc. to create accurate water source region maps, develop the hydrologic data necessary to describe them, include prioritized treatment areas to minimize potential damage from wildfire, and make the data accessible to all resources in a universal format. 2. Conduct an economic valuation of montane water sources and the economic risk from damaging wildfire. 3. Implement best management practices (e.g., science-based adaptive management[3]) including monitoring, measurement, and feedback to protect water source regions. 4. Create a mechanism (e.g., water source protection fund) for all types of water users to help pay for restoration treatments in the montane forests that are their water source.	98%
REC 2: Landscape-scale Management	**ACTION**: Develop and implement an action plan for managing forests and watersheds at a landscape-scale extensive enough to include a contiguously forested mountain range across jurisdictional boundaries to restore proper watershed and ecosystem functions and reduce the risk of uncharacteristic wildfires, while utilizing forest resources in a sustainable fashion. **STRATEGIES**: 1. Create an interagency task force to coordinate the review of existing and development of new landscape-scale forest and watershed restoration and management plans and pool funds for treatments (e.g., forest thinning, prescribed fire, etc.) across jurisdictions. 2. Pass legislation to address landowner liability when using controlled burns. 3. Seek federal legislation to utilize land and water conservation funds to implement landscape-scale restoration.	92%

[1] Montane refers to upper elevation, forested habitats.
[2] Water sources include springs, streams, or groundwater.
[3] Adaptive management is an intervention that identifies uncertainties and then establishes methodologies to test hypotheses concerning those uncertainties. It uses management as a tool to both learn about a system and change the system.

REC 3: NM Forest and Watershed Health	**ACTION**: Review, update, and re-implement the entire New Mexico Forest and Watershed Health Plan. **STRATEGIES**: 1. Convene a committee representing the same entities that developed the plan, plus others, to update the plan as well as make a budget and timeline for re-implementation. 2. Publicize and elicit public input and support for re-implementation of the plan. 3. Re-implement the plan.	86%
REC 4: Broad Participation Planning	**ACTION**: Strengthen the process and broaden the participation in land and resource management planning. **STRATEGIES**: 1. Facilitate the development of diverse stakeholder networks to act at state and local levels for more transparent forest, fire, and water management decision-making by providing information and expertise to the appropriate federal, state, tribal, and local land managers. 2. Broaden access to the environmental review process regarding forest planning and restoration. 3. Synthesize information from diverse locations by establishing a central database to make rapid-response assessments. 4. Develop a contact database of stakeholder expertise.	84%

TOPIC	**THEME: ECONOMIC IMPACT**	**PERCENT APPROVAL**
REC 5: Proactive Mitigation	**ACTION**: Highlight the economic benefits of being proactive in mitigating severe wildfires and protecting and restoring watersheds. **STRATEGIES**: 1. Quantify, document, and publicize the money saved through mitigation in comparison to the money spent on fire suppression and rehabilitation, after the fact. 2. Develop a workforce plan, using existing successful models, for implementing mitigation activities, including forest thinning and management fires.[4] 3. Quantify potential economic and job creation benefits for purposes of obtaining federal and state funding. 4. Quantify, document, and publicize the benefits of proper fire management for downstream users in terms of water quantity and quality to generate public support for funding these activities.	94%

[4] Management fires include prescribed fires, controlled burns, and wildfire use.

REC 6: Sustainable Economic Opportunities	**ACTION**: Develop robust, sustainable, economic development opportunities that take advantage of all renewable forest resources, while promoting economic efficiencies for forest restoration and management. **STRATEGIES**: 1. Provide financial incentives (e.g. grants, low interest loans, state tax incentives, reauthorize stewardship contracting, etc.) to establish and promote businesses for harvesting and utilizing forest products. 2. Increase the number of mechanical thinning acres with year-round sales strategically located across the landscape that will sustain appropriately scaled forest product industries across New Mexico and employ citizens on an annual basis for forest management efforts. 3. Develop new state and federal funding sources to support restoration activities (e.g., implement a sales tax on recreation goods and services to pay into a restoration fund, seek federal legislation to utilize land and water conservation funds to implement forest management practices, etc.).	85%
REC 7: Wood Products Industries	**ACTION**: Restore and support innovative, small-scale, wood product industries to encourage the removal of excess forest growth. **STRATEGIES**: 1. Work with small business development centers to identify markets and develop opportunities. 2. Develop innovative approaches to ensure a consistent supply of materials for appropriately scaled forest product industry.	84%

TOPIC	**THEME: PUBLIC EDUCATION AND OUTREACH**	**PERCENT APPROVAL**
REC 8: Wildfire Effects and Mitigation	**ACTION**: Utilize the lessons learned from the two largest fires in New Mexico's history to effectively and continually educate the public about wildfire effects and mitigation. **STRATEGIES**: 1. Correct public misconceptions about wildfire benefits and the inevitability of fires by using our understanding of the negative effects of more than a century of some forest management practices (i.e., fire suppression). 2. Publicize evidence-based options for reducing the intensity of future wildfires and smoke impact (i.e., the use of forest restoration practices such as thinning and controlled burns as a way to protect and restore watersheds). 3. Develop and deliver content that is based on the needs of various audiences such as new residents, visitors, and urbanites about wildfires including the direct and indirect causes and impacts as well as human sources of wildfire (e.g., off-road vehicles, power-lines, unsafe fire building and camping practices).	91%

REC 9: Youth Activities	**ACTION**: Educate the next generation about wildland fire in New Mexico. **STRATEGIES**: 1. Develop wildland fire curricula, materials, and professional development for teachers that aligns with education standards and reaches every New Mexico child. 2. Coalesce the work of other groups and develop a coordinated plan for the delivery of fire science education. 3. Establish an annual, statewide, young adult fire and water science research symposium.	91%
REC 10: Benefit of Controlled Burns	**ACTION**: Educate the public regarding how forest health is supported through site-specific,[5] low-intensity, controlled fires. **STRATEGIES:** 1. Educate the media to present a balanced view of controlled burning and wildfires. 2. Create a controlled burn education campaign similar to the Smokey the Bear campaign. 3. Conduct an independent risk review of all controlled burns.	86%
REC 11: Fire Ecology	**ACTION**: Educate the public about fire ecology and the importance of maintaining and restoring healthy forest ecosystems. **STRATEGY**: 1. Develop a consistent, ongoing, information campaign using public and commercial media. 2. Develop a network among existing and new environmental education sites to create a consistent message. 3. Leverage funds to help inform and conduct outreach to both urban and rural communities. 4. Inform elected officials about healthy watershed management policies using digestible information using the best available science. 5. Create site-specific informational kiosks and signs at public access points.	84%
REC 12: Scientific Information	**ACTION**: Widely disseminate current understanding of climate change, water, and fire science, as well as the knowledge gained from uncharacteristically severe wildfires to planners, policymakers, politicians, and the public. **STRATEGIES**: 1. Develop and implement an annual event where climate change, water, and fire science professionals educate planners, policymakers, politicians and the public. 2. Identify and make available the most effective spokespeople to communicate with planners, policymakers, and politicians. 3. Integrate, synthesize, and consolidate existing information to effectively communicate and share up-to-date fire and drought information with planners, policymakers, politicians, and the public, and possibly include operational criteria, policies, and sample legislation.	82%

[5] Site-specific includes density, elevation, slope, and fuel load.

REC 13: Informed Decision-making by Policymakers	**ACTION**: Promote and support informed decision-making by policymakers so they take into consideration the social, economic, cultural, watershed, and environmental implications of land and water management actions. **STRATEGIES**: 1. Work with the New Mexico Forest and Watershed Restoration Institute, plus other institutions and experts, to continue developing a template to analyze and communicate the opportunity cost[6] of alternative management plans. 2. Educate and train local government and small businesses on how to use the template, using a case study on the economic costs to a watershed or region (e.g., Las Conchas, Jemez Mountains, or East Mountains fires). 3. Create a pilot project that uses the template to demonstrate its value in policymaking (i.e., Picuris Pueblo project that removed small diameter wood to create charcoal).	80%

TOPIC	THEME: SPECIFIC POLICY AND PRACTICE	PERCENT APPROVAL
REC 14: Emergency Communication System	**ACTION**: Develop a better emergency communication system for public safety workers (i.e., firefighters, police, utility crews, emergency responders) to enhance coordination and safety during firefighting and flooding. **STRATEGIES**: 1. Standardize frequencies and equipment. 2. Develop redundancy (i.e., towers and paths). 3. Install more instrumentation (e.g., rain gauges, remote sensors, stream gauges, etc.).	86%
REC 15: Science Implementation	**ACTION**: Proactively implement the science we have about fire and floods. **STRATEGIES**: 1. Implement an adaptive management approach (i.e., ongoing evaluation feedback) for both restoration and maintenance. 2. Allocate resources based on risk analysis along with other considerations (e.g., scientific, economic, community, environment, etc.). 3. Disseminate scientific analyses (e.g., environmental assessments) across jurisdictions, agencies, and stakeholders and encourage their use.	86%
REC 16: Forward Looking Flexible Policies	**ACTION**: Promote the implementation of forward-looking, flexible, forest and watershed management policies that incorporate the principles of adaptive management.	82%

[6] The money or other benefits lost when pursuing a particular course of action instead of a mutually-exclusive, alternative action.

	STRATEGIES: 1. Identify relevant land and water policies that should be targeted for revision and improvement. 2. Base policy changes on multi-year, interdisciplinary assessments. 3. Form an integrated network of practitioners, managers, and researchers that supports efficient adaptive management strategies. 4. Ensure that agencies commit to multi-year projects to ensure completion of monitoring, assessment, and program modification.	
REC 17: Wildland-Urban Interface	**ACTION**: Promote strategies to reduce the risk from fire to property and human life at the wildland-urban interface. **STRATEGIES**: 1. Offer audits and education on the benefits of implementing effective strategies to reduce risks from wildfires to home and property owners and at-risk communities. 2. Develop and enforce emergency policies for non-compliant, at-risk homes with regards to fire suppression protocols. 3. Cost share with willing homeowners and property owners and at-risk communities in making improvements and reducing fire damage risk. 4. Develop and/or strengthen zoning regulations for new development in at-risk regions for wildfire in order to guarantee the cost-effective and proven measures for risk reduction are carried out.	82%

TOPIC	**THEME: JURISDICTION CONTROL**[7]	**PERCENT APPROVAL**
REC 18: Community-based Projects	**ACTION**: Develop community-based, forest and watershed management projects (e.g., thinning, restoration, etc.) using local institutions and resources (e.g., livestock ranchers, acequia associations, pueblos, etc.) on both federal and non-federal lands. **STRATEGIES**: 1. Advocate for legislative change to allow for more local input or involvement over local lands including federal and non-federal lands. 2. Mandate collaboration and transparency among federal, state, and local land management agencies across jurisdictional boundaries (e.g., environmental assessments, forest management plans, etc.).	69%
REC 19: Local Government and Community Control	**ACTION**: Increase local government and community input and involvement on fire and water actions and policy on federal lands abutting private, state, and public lands.	67%

[7] Town hall participants did not reach consensus regarding the level of local government and community control in relation to federal lands.

STRATEGIES:

1. Use cost benefit analyses of the potential economic impact of fires and floods to influence planning and funding for fire and flood prevention.
2. Require forest management planning involve community-based stakeholders (i.e., property owners, water systems, people with water rights, county and state government, federal agencies) and are systematic and cross-jurisdictional for watershed and fire policy decisions.
3. Clarify state and local rights over local area lands and encourage local communities to step up and take responsibility for letting their needs and rights be known.

IMPLEMENTATION PROCESS

The recommendations will not sit on a shelf. **New Mexico EPSCoR** will organize an implementation team to advance the town hall's priorities. Implementation efforts often run for several months. The process will be co-chaired by Mary Jo Daniel. She will lead the effort to advance the recommendations with state and local leaders.

Dr. Mary Jo Daniel is Associate Director of the New Mexico EPSCoR program. She is responsible for overall program management and fiscal oversight. She fosters and facilitates the development of new research and education funding opportunities as well as assists the EPSCoR state program to achieve its goals of multi-institutional, multi-disciplinary collaboration on complex issues related to climate change science. Dr. Daniel has been involved in science education in New Mexico for over 20 years and served as the State Science Specialist for the NM Public Education Department and Interim Bureau Chief for the PED's Math and Science Bureau.

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