Date submitted (Mountain Standard Time): 7/11/2019 5:11:45 PM
First name: Peter
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Organization:
Title:
Comments:
Santa Fe Mountains Landscape Resiliency Project #55088

Dear Hannah Bergemann,
I am writing to express my support for the Santa Fe Mountains Landscape Resiliency Project #55088. Although I now reside in Santa Fe, I lived for many decades within the community of Los Alamos. From my youth through adulthood, I traveled the forest landscape that surrounds the city of Los Alamos and the Pajarito plateau. My travels enabled me to become intimately familiar with the mesas, canyons, and forests. I also had the opportunity to experience the big fires that swept over the landscape, beginning in the mid-1970s.

At the time of the Cerro Grande and Las Conchas fires, I resided in the urban/woodland interface on Woodland Avenue on the northern perimeter of the town which placed me adjacent to the treated area north of Arizona Ave. Also, my office at S-site, near the west gate and Hwy 502 allowed me to periodically view both the treatment and the recovery of the forest located west of SR502. Post-fire as I once again traveled the forest, I was struck by how the areas that received mechanical treatment and low-intensity burning of the debris, and were subsequently burned by one or both of the fires, retained the mature trees and topsoil. These treated areas quickly regained the characteristics of a healthy forest.

In comparison, untreated areas such as Guaje or Chochiti canyons burned with a frightening ferocity. Not only did these canyons burn very hot, destroying all flora and fauna, but the subsequent rains created flooding and debris flows that wholly altered the canyon floors. What was once lush meadowland with mature trees was now a large gravel bed studded with boulders and broken trees. What was once some of my favorite locations in the forest were no longer recognizable! The trails and roads that traversed the area were no longer visible! Travel through the areas became very difficult. Restoration will take centuries!

Due to my residence in Los Alamos, I have the most familiarity with the Pajarito plateau, but I have witnessed similar comparisons across the forest of the Rocky Mountains. I note that I did have the opportunity to walk the area north of FR 102 after the prescribed burning that occurred there this year, and it appears that the treatment and subsequent burning was very successful. Good job on that one!

Based on my observations I suggest that if the western slope of the Sangre de Cristo mountains does not receive treated as described in project #55088, the fire will burn with the ferocity that occurred in so many locations of the untreated Jemez mountains and the Pajarito plateau. The results will be devastating for the communities and residences located downstream from the burn areas. Imagine a flood similar to that which occurred in Guaje Canyon occurring in Upper Canyon Road. The damage to property would be substantial, and many of the structures may no longer be inhabitable. Can the same result be predicted for the villages of Tesueque, Rio en Medio, Nambe, Cundiyo, Cordova? The public cries of pain and outrage will be substantial!.

I place minimal weight to the argument that mechanical treatment and subsequent low-intensity burning will substantially harm flora and fauna. I have been in the forest when controlled burns have been ongoing, and I did not find them threatening. The velocity of the fires is slow enough that fauna, including myself, can move on. The intensity of the fire is low enough that those faunae that cannot move on can hunker down and wait out the event. In contrast, I have come across the skeletons of elk that were overtaken by the Las Conchas fire.

What I don't understand is why the controlled fires occur so infrequently and why do they not start until after the snowpack has melted? It would seem to me that in a forest heavily loaded with burnable material that the best approach would be to repeatedly burn the area with each burn designed to reduce a smaller portion of the fuel loading. Begin treatment of the forest in the fall and drop the dog hair and collect it into appropriately located piles. Wait for the snowpack to develop and burn the piles, not the forest. Repeat the process, taking additional dog hair and larger trees, followed by more burning of the piles. Each burn reduces the available fuel until sufficient confidence predicts that the safe burn of the forest floor is possible. Why attempt to remove all the excessive fuel in a single burn forcing a wait for perfect conditions?

In a moisture blessed year such as 2019, I would be happy to see crews working and possibly burning the landscape every day.  The future of the local  communities depends on the thinning of the forests.

Sincerely
Peter Prince
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