

'BIG BREAKTHROUGH' AT BLACK LAKE RX

Broadcast burn reflects growing community trust and agency capacity

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When public attendance at Angel Fire prescribed fire meetings started dropping off, Chris Romo took it as a good sign.

Romo, Angel Fire's wildland coordinator, joined the fire department in 2013. At that time, pushback against prescribed burning was strong. Residents were concerned about inhaling smoke, harming the surrounding forest or putting property at risk.

Romo worked diligently to respond to concerns and host field days to tour successful burns. So when meeting attendance dropped off, it meant residents better understood the benefits – not just the risks – of prescribed burning.

"Now they go and tell their neighbors," he said. "They spread it around like wildfire."

That kind of community support for prescribed burns is integral as land managers reintroduce beneficial fire statewide.

This October, Romo joined a suite of fire practitioners for the Black Lake Prescribed Fire, which treated 370 acres of ponderosa pine and mixed conifer forest on state trust land managed by the New Mexico State Land Office.

By all accounts, the burn was a success – one built on a decade-plus of previous successes, said State Land Office Forester Mark Meyers. NMSLO has diligently thinned and implemented broadcast burns in the area for years, catching up on a century of overdue fuels reduction.

In 2013, the project site's first broadcast burn marked a major threshold passed. With most of the project planning and thinning completed by then, the heaviest and most complex lift had been achieved, Meyers said. That fire was like a sigh of relief.

This year's fire was a different kind: a maintenance burn. It cleared out the fine fuels and young seedlings that had

built up over the 13 years since that first broadcast burn. Creeping along grassland between ponderosa pines, the burn marked a return to the cycles of repeated, low-intensity fires that have visited New Mexico's forests for millennia – [averaging every 10 years](#) in the ponderosa pine forests near Black Lake prior to 1900, according to tree ring samples the U.S. Geological Survey and Highlands University collected.

Like those consecutive years of healthy fire, this year's prescribed burn was scaffolded on relationships tended season after season.



Photo: Forest Stewards Guild

This year's burn included practitioners from The Nature Conservancy, Forest Stewards Guild, the Guild's youth crews, Angel Fire Fire Department, Picuris Pueblo, Highlands University, the New Mexico Forest and Watershed Restoration Institute, Philmont Scout Ranch, and Moreno Valley Fire Department.

"It's been a good blessing having everyone here," Romo said.

For the first time, the New Mexico Forestry Division joined, as well, owing to a new collaboration method: the Statewide Prescribed Fire and Fuels Treatment Agreement.

"It's a big breakthrough for us," Meyers said.

The formal name belies a nimble motive: the agreement



370 ACRES, 4 DAYS, 9 PARTNERS

Photo: Forest Stewards Guild

allows the Forestry Division to support NMSLO's prescribed burn program with resources such as staff and fire engines.

"We have a lot of state trust land and are in need of prescribed fire, and state Forestry has resources that can come to the table," Meyers said.

Prescribed burns open up valuable training opportunities, too. Trainees with local fire department and the Forestry Division learn hands-on skills at every step, from checking weather to weed whacking fire breaks.

One shift in particular marks what is perhaps the burn's biggest success: the trust of the community.

Forester and business owner Brian Lindsey owns property that borders the NMSLO project land.

"I totally support it [prescribed fire]," Lindsey said. "I've seen the changes on the landscape; the forest benefits are amazing."

He's biased, he admits: Lindsey manages the Forest and Watershed Restoration Act project on Elk Ridge, which NMSLO is following up with prescribed burns. But he's seen the community's perceptions shift over time, too. Their trust was hard-earned through years of engagement, education and on-the-ground success by fire practitioners. Transparency with the community and building an archive of knowledge around fire behavior and favorable burn times in the fall helped make the process seem less daunting.

Now, residents are still cautious, but they're adjusting to living alongside fire.

"You have to respect fire, but I think people aren't as scared of it as they used to be," Lindsey said. "They know it's making our neighborhood better."

Beyond Black Lake, the landscape for prescribed fire is more nuanced.

With some of the largest wildfires in New Mexico's history tracing their starts back to prescribed burns – including the 2022 Hermit's Peak-Calf Canyon, 2022 Cerro Pelado and 2000 Cerro Grande fires – many community members are understandably on edge when they see smoke rising over the hill.

"You don't hear about the ones that go good, you hear about the 1% that goes bad, and it's unfortunate that that one was so catastrophically bad," Lindsey said.

"You have to respect fire, but I think people aren't as scared of it as they used to be. They know it's making our neighborhood better."

Brian Lindsey, Black Lake forester and business owner

In Black Lake, when communities see smoke, they're learning to see something that's necessary rather than something that's evil.

Every smoky day lends an opportunity to talk about fire-adapted forests, Meyers said. "We've had a lot of good dialogue, and I think the trust has grown with those communities."

This fall offered plenty of opportunities, with 28 prescribed burns implemented across all five national forests in the state. **Collectively, they treated 19,650 acres** – a substantial jump from previous years.

Living on a fire-adapted landscape means New Mexican communities like Black Lake will be managing their wildfire risk in perpetuity, Romo said. As forests return to cycles of low-intensity fire, communities will continue to adapt to living alongside fire.

"We all have to do more," he said. "But I think we have a good start."

2025 RX: BY THE #S

Carson: 7 burns, 13,000 acres

Cibola: 7 burns, 4,400 acres

Gila: 4 burns, 250 acres

Lincoln: 5 burns, 1,000 acres

Santa Fe: 5 burns, 1,000 acres

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