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Break the Hot Ash Habit and Make Fire Safety a Top Priority

Wildfires caused by hot ashes threaten multiple homes

Santa Fe, NM – The Energy, Minerals and Natural Resources Department's (EMNRD) Forestry Division wants to remind residents to make fire safety a top priority this winter, especially when disposing of hot ashes or coals to prevent wildfires. Ongoing drought combined with the second year of a dry La Nina weather pattern is a major concern for the Forestry Division and its partners.

"The climate impacts are significant. The latest U.S. Drought Monitor Shows 100 percent of New Mexico is in drought, and what little rain and snow we are getting this winter will not be enough to pull us out," said State Forester Laura McCarthy. "The recent wildfire in Colorado that destroyed hundreds of homes and forced thousands to flee should be a warning that winter and wildfire are now a fact of life due to climate change."

According to the National Fire Safety Administration, more than 11,000 fires are caused each year by embers or ashes that were not left to cool or placed in unsafe containers. Ashes and coals can remain hot enough to reignite for several days, and one small gust of wind can easily carry hot embers to nearby vegetation and homes.

"Usually the ground has more moisture content at this time of year, but warm temperatures and a lack of snow and measurable rainfall is setting us up for a busy fire season in New Mexico," said Shannon Atencio, Las Vegas District Forester. "A wildfire started by hot ashes in Mora County on Christmas Eve had the potential to grow because of high winds. We were able to stop the fire, but with conditions as dry as they are, it could have been much worse."

Anyone using wood stoves, fireplaces, or fire pits are urged to take precautions and avoid dumping hot coals or ashes on the ground. Here are some tips for proper disposal of hot coals or ashes:

- Allow ashes to cool completely in your fireplace or wood stove for 2-3 days before removing them.
- Use a shovel to place ashes or coals in a metal can, soak the ashes with water, then cover tightly with a metal lid.
- Keep the metal can outside at least 10 feet away from your home, and keep it clear from combustible materials.
- Never place other flammable materials in the container.
- Do not place hot coals or ashes in paper or plastic bags, cardboard boxes, plastic garbage cans, or other combustible containers.
- Always use water and a shovel to churn and stir outdoor fire pits or campfires until they are cold to the touch.

Following these simple steps could help prevent unintended wildfires that threaten lives and property. For more wildfire prevention tips, go to https://www.emnrd.nm.gov/sfd/ and click on the Fire Prevention Program tab.



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