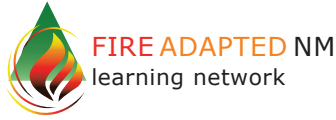


Coronavirus and Wildfire in Santa Fe

an interview with a US Forest Service Fire Manager

Jon Boe - Espanola District Fire Management Officer



By Sam Berry and Gabe Kohler
of the Forest Stewards Guild

Jon Boe is the Fire Management Officer for the Espanola Ranger District, one of five districts that make up the Santa Fe National Forest. Jon is responsible for all fire management activities on the district including wildfire suppression and prevention, prescribed fire, and fuels management. He supervises two fire engine crews, a prevention technician, and a Helicopter crew that is shared with the National Park Service out of Bandelier. During our interview on April 14, we discussed the impacts of the Coronavirus on fire operations on the Santa Fe National Forest this year and how the public can help local firefighters and Forest Service personnel stay safe this season.

As it has every year in the Southwest, we can be certain that wildfire season is coming, the difference will be in how we respond. This year the Espanola District is maintaining the same suppression resources as in past years, including firefighters, engines, and helicopters, that are ready to respond to fires but is applying a different strategy. The strategic changes described here are part of a larger effort at the regional and national scale. Since the Southwest has an earlier fire season than the rest of the US, Jon and his counterparts are leading the charge on this effort.

The unpredictability of wildfires means that to stay safe and be effective, wildland firefighters must become skilled at working with large and diverse teams across their own agencies and with partners. The challenge for Jon and his counterparts this year is how to adapt to the new reality of the coronavirus and social distancing. These social distancing measures are essential to keeping firefighters and their families safe and healthy, so when a fire starts, they are able to respond.



Jon Boe (in the yellow nomex) leads a prescribed burn in the Santa Fe Fireshed area. Photo by Matt Dahlseid

Here are the ways that Jon and his crew are managing the risk of the Covid-19 disease (caused by the novel coronavirus) to wildfire response:

Training and working from home

Typically, this time of year fire crews come together to train and work together. This year on the Espanola District firefighters are staying home and completing their training virtually so they can reduce their risk of contracting the virus. Then, when the call comes in, they mobilize to the base in either Espanola or Santa Fe and move out to the fire.

Isolation

Isolation within the agency: crews are staying more insular, almost like a family unit. This insulates the district as a whole from exposing everyone at the same time. Where typically the two crews on the Espanola District would intermix to fill gaps, this year there is more

of a focus on keeping them separate.

Isolation between agencies and organizations: when an engine from Espanola responds to assist other agencies, firefighters are taking extra care to limit exposure by limiting face-to-face contact with other crews and being aware of cross-contamination between crews and agencies.

Self-Sufficiency

At all times the crews on the Espanola District are prepared to be self-sufficient for 24 hours, and this year that's been tripled to 72 hours. Where typically a crew might be supported by a large fire camp and chow halls, this year they will be camping out in smaller groups.

Full Suppression and Suspension of Prescribed Burns

Forest-level and regional strategy for this season orders that all fires be suppressed as quickly as possible. "We're going to hit fires fast, and keep them small, so we don't have to work in large groups," says Jon. While there has been some latitude to manage naturally ignited fires for resource benefit in previous years, this will not occur in 2020 to reduce the need for longer-term fire camps which can easily spread the virus.

Prescribed burns this spring have been postponed to limit gatherings of firefighters and protect people that have respiratory issues and a heightened risk of Covid-19 from the additional impacts of prescribed fire smoke.

What can you do?

Jon's message to all of us this year is to be prepared for wildfire this year and exercise caution to protect the fire community from exposure to Covid-19 while responding to an incident.

Be engaged and alert to receive messages about wildfires. The sooner you know about a fire the more prepared you can be. Have a plan for evacuating your family and all your animals.

Be cautious with ditch burning and pile burning. When these fires get out of hand, you're putting firefighters at unnecessary risk.

Prevention

Effective fire prevention programs can reduce the number of wildfires, which is especially important this year as it will also keep firefighters out of situations where Covid-19 can spread. The Forest Service is taking prevention measures at the forest and district level to support this effort.

The Santa Fe National Forest (SFNF) has two prevention goals in 2020: prevent human-caused wildfire ignitions, and prevent the general spread of Covid-19 by complying with state and federal orders for social distancing. A campfire ban is in place as of April 15 to reduce the risk of human-caused wildfire ignitions. There is also a closure of public use facilities, including developed campgrounds and all restrooms, to help slow the spread of Covid-19 in New Mexico. The public affairs officer of the SFNF is supporting ranger districts by broadcasting messages about burn bans and the importance of wildfire prevention. In addition to the current closures and the campfire ban, it's possible that parts of the SFNF with high visitor traffic may go into full closure.

Within the Espanola Ranger District specifically, fire prevention officers will serve crucial logistical and communication roles to prevent both wildfire and the spread of Covid-19 to firefighters. Prevention technicians will support social distancing between engine modules by serving as a logistical link between the crews—passing supplies and information between crews to prevent the risk of cross-contamination of resources. Messages about burn bans, restrictions, closures and the importance of reducing human-caused ignitions will be shared through digital communication channels whenever possible to maintain social distancing and reduce the risk of a prevention officer spreading Covid-19 to firefighters. Some essential duties of fire prevention officers, such as enforcement of campfire bans, will still require patrols of the ranger district, making full isolation of prevention officers a challenge.

What you can do to support prevention:

- Be aware of and respect current burn bans, restrictions, and closures to protect firefighters. Visit <https://firerestrictions.us/nm/> for more information.
- Leave-no-trace on the SFNF while public-use facilities are closed and trash collection is suspended. <https://l-nt.org/why/7-principles/>
- Follow state-ordered social distancing measures while on the SFNF. <https://cv.nmhealth.org/>