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## **Modeling catastrophic wildfire prevention**

'Firewise' Taos Pines Ranch welcomes Rx burns

By Geoffrey Plant  
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One Moreno Valley community is proving to be a model for other neighborhoods situated in or next to national forest land, where the risk of catastrophic wildfire is top of mind. The unity among residents of Taos Pines Ranch with regard to mitigating wildfire risk was on display this week as the Carson National Forest implemented two prescribed burns adjacent to the community.

Crews began ignitions for the La Jara and Apache prescribed fires Tuesday (Oct. 8), initially treating 100 acres of forest abutting the community. Fire trucks and personnel were positioned near homes and along the forest border to ensure the burn didn't spread to private property.

“With this part of the unit directly next to homes, we’re going low and slow,” District Ranger Michael Lujan said in an update Tuesday night. “We plan to continue ignitions along the neighborhood boundary on Wednesday.”

Located northwest of Angel Fire and U.S. 64, bordering Carson National Forest and remote Taos Pueblo lands for miles, Taos Pines Ranch has been a Firewise Community since 2005, Bonner said. For nearly two decades, residents there have participated in educational programs about maintaining defensible space around their homes, and benefitted from grant programs that assist property owners in thinning and other fuel reduction projects to reduce the risk of wildfire spreading or igniting on their land.

"We're the first Firewise Community, and I think we're going to be the best," said Regina Bonner, chair of Taos Pines Ranch Firewise and president of the Cimarron Watershed Alliance. "We work with other communities to help them get their Firewise programs off the ground."

"Taos Pines is an exceptionally prepared neighborhood and excellent partner when it comes to reducing the threat of wildfire across boundaries," said Zach Behrens, public affairs officer for the Carson, emphasizing the importance of cooperation when it comes to reducing the risk of wildfire, which does not respect jurisdictional borders.

Bob Elsinger, president of the Taos Pines Ranch Homeowners Association, said being a certified Firewise Community can make a difference when it comes to homeowner's insurance. After the massive Hermit's Peak–Calf Canyon Fire — started by two out-of-control prescribed burns on the Santa Fe National Forest — nearly reached the Moreno Valley in 2022, and with the increased frequency and destructiveness of wildfires across the West over the past 10–20 years, home insurance has become more expensive and difficult to get in rural areas.

"My insurance went up \$2,000 this year," Elsinger said. "They're trying to mitigate their risk. But there's been a lot of talk on Facebook in Angel Fire where people are saying, 'I just bought a million dollar home, and I can't get homeowner's insurance,' you know? Homes sales are being held up, I think, because people can't find somebody to insure their home."

Elsinger noted his insurance company documents the work done to thin trees, reduce ladder fuels, understory and brush, as well as add features like a metal roof and other fire-resistant building materials; firewood isn't stored next to his house, and he keeps

his yard uncluttered to allow firefighters clear access if the need arises.

"I think, down the road, they're going to be really strict," he said of insurance companies.

Thanks to two community wildfire defense grants secured by the Cimarron Watershed Alliance and worth a combined \$18 million, Moreno Valley communities are close to checking every box in terms of wildfire preparedness. A total of 85 percent of Taos Pines' 1,200 acres will have been thinned soon thanks to the first \$8 million grant. The second grant will largely be dedicated to creating fire breaks to benefit the whole valley.

"We wrote that one with the Angel Fire Resort and the [Village of Angel Fire], and that was \$10 million," Bonner said. "That grant is going to be mainly focused on fire breaks in the south and southwest of the valley because that's where the predominant fires come from. So, that'll indirectly affect Taos Pines, obviously, by slowing the fire before it gets into the valley."

To address the wildfire crisis across the West, the federal government is investing heavily in such projects. Large parts of the Enchanted Circle were identified in 2022 as one of the top 10 most at-risk fireheds in the entire nation, in part because of the number of people living in close proximity to forests. Consequently, there is virtually as much funding available now as local governments, community organizations and contractors can figure out how to spend.

In tandem, and despite agency funding shortfalls and attrition among wildland firefighters, the U.S. Forest Service has increased the pace of forest treatment programs to restore overgrown forests across the West, including the Carson. The forest has done several prescribed burns, tree thinning projects and pile burns near Taos Pines over the past five years, which Elsinger said the subdivision's residents fully support.

"Everybody's pretty much on board for doing the best they can to mitigate fire risk around their homes," Elsinger said.

Several prescribed burns were implemented on the Carson National Forest over the past week. Crews ignited the Sotano Prescribed Fire near El Rito and Vallecitos in Rio Arriba County on Monday (Oct. 7). The burn will last up to four days and treat 2,366 acres of forest. Smoke was expected to travel as far as Taos, where air quality could be impacted, particularly at night.

"Over the last century, forested areas have departed from conditions suitable for a healthy and vibrant ecosystem," Behrens said. "This is especially true in frequent-fire forest types, such as ponderosa and dry mixed conifer, where stands are unnaturally

dense and lacking recent fire history. If a future wildfire reaches the area after prescribed fire treatments are completed, the fire behavior will likely be modified to a less intense, more manageable surface fire.”

Each prescribed fire's start date is subject to change and will depend on weather, wind and “fuel moisture conditions,” according to the Forest Service. The Mesa Juan Domingo Prescribed Fire, which will treat over 2,000 acres near Canjilon and Placita Garcia, has been rescheduled to today, Thursday (Oct. 10).

“The optimal conditions to burn these fuels are a balance, when the ground and fuels are not too wet and not too dry,” Behrens said. “Fire managers must find those conditions while matching it with weather and other prescription parameters, such as forecasted smoke dispersal.”

Crews will also continue to patrol and monitor the American Creek Prescribed Fire, in which 950 acres were treated last week near Tres Piedras. The 1,000-acre American Creek Prescribed Unit is part of the Rio Tusas–Lower San Antonio Landscape project, which seeks to restore the health of the forest throughout nearly half of the Tres Piedras Ranger District.

For more details regarding prescribed burns on the Carson, visit [fs.usda.gov/detail/carson/fire/?cid=fseprd1205809](https://fs.usda.gov/detail/carson/fire/?cid=fseprd1205809). Operational updates for prescribed fires will be posted on Inciweb at [inciweb.wildfire.gov](https://inciweb.wildfire.gov).

*Olivia Lewis contributed to this report.*

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DANIEL PEARSON/Taos News

Carson Interagency Hotshot Crew Member Rachel Kauffman, right, monitors the perimeter of the initial ignition of the La Jara Prescribed Fire alongside the Taos Pines Ranch neighborhood in Taos Canyon on Tuesday (Oct. 8).



DANIEL PEARSON/Taos News

Firing Boss Jonathan Romero, supervisory fire management specialist for fuel planning with the U.S. Forest Service, begins blacklining and igniting fire near the control line for the La Jara Prescribed Fire alongside the Taos Pines neighborhood in Taos Canyon on Tuesday (Oct. 8).



DANIEL PEARSON/Taos News

Brennan Charlton, U.S. Forest Service fire crew member, begins the initial ignition of the La Jara Prescribed Fire alongside the Taos Pines Ranch neighborhood in Taos Canyon on Tuesday (Oct. 8).



DANIEL PEARSON/Taos News

Brennan Charlton, U.S. Forest Service fire crew member, begins the initial ignition of the La Jara Prescribed Fire alongside the Taos Pines Ranch neighborhood in Taos Canyon on Tuesday (Oct. 8).



DANIEL PEARSON/Taos News

U.S. Forest Service fire crews monitor the perimeter of the initial ignition of the La Jara Prescribed Fire alongside the Taos Pines Ranch neighborhood in Taos Canyon on Tuesday (Oct. 8).



DANIEL PEARSON/Taos News

Bob Elsinger, president of the Taos Pines Ranch Homeowners Association, watches as the La Jara Prescribed Fire is ignited just across the fence from his home in the Taos Pines Ranch neighborhood in Taos Canyon on Tuesday (Oct. 8).



DANIEL PEARSON/Taos News

Carson Interagency Hotshot crew members fill up their drip torches to ignite the La Jara Prescribed Fire alongside the Taos Pines Ranch neighborhood in Taos Canyon on Tuesday (Oct. 8).



DANIEL PEARSON/Taos News

U.S. Forest Service fire crew members ignite the La Jara Prescribed Fire alongside the Taos Pines Ranch neighborhood in Taos Canyon on Tuesday (Oct. 8).





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Firing Boss Jonathan Romero, supervisory fire management specialist for fuel planning with the U.S. Forest Service, right, monitors the ignition of the La Jara Prescribed Fire alongside Brennan Charlton as they backline next to the Taos Pines Ranch neighborhood in Taos Canyon on Tuesday (Oct. 8).



DANIEL PEARSON/Taos News

Forest Service officials monitor the progress and planned path of the La Jara Prescribed Fire alongside the Taos Pines Ranch neighborhood in Taos Canyon on Tuesday (Oct. 8).



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A Carson Interagency Hotshot crew member backlines around the fire control line as he helps ignite the La Jara Prescribed Fire alongside the Taos Pines Ranch neighborhood in Taos Canyon on Tuesday (Oct. 8).



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Earl Hidayetoglu, left, and Zach Behrens with the U.S. Forest Service monitor the ignition of the La Jara Prescribed Fire alongside the Taos Pines Ranch neighborhood in Taos Canyon on Tuesday (Oct. 8).



DANIEL PEARSON/Taos News

Firing Boss Jonathan Romero, supervisory fire management specialist for fuel planning with the U.S. Forest Service, goes over the process for safely igniting the La Jara Prescribed Fire alongside the Taos Pines Ranch neighborhood in Taos Canyon during a fire briefing on Tuesday (Oct. 8).



DANIEL PEARSON/Taos News

U.S. Forest Service fire crew members backline around the fire control line as they ignite the La Jara Prescribed Fire alongside the Taos Pines Ranch neighborhood in Taos Canyon on Tuesday (Oct. 8).