

Very Serious Fire Risk to Four Hills Village

Fire danger to Four Hills Village is very real. The smoke you see every day is not from a weather inversion. Those low-flying orange and white jets you see passing overhead almost every day are not part of an air show or a military drill. They are specially modified Ericson Aero Tankers (fire bombers) built to quickly deliver heavy loads of fire retardant to forest fires and to fly in incredibly tough conditions. They don't have to fly very far, only about 100 miles to any of three major forest fires currently burning all around us.



Photos by Steve Brugge

The US Forest Service has closed to public access almost all the forest around us due to extreme risk of fires. This includes the Cibola National Forest adjacent to our Open Space and almost all the Forest lands on the Sandia, Manzano, and Manzanito Mountains. At this time, the City of Albuquerque (City) and Albuquerque Fire and Rescue (AFR) have now closed all of the City-operated East Mountain Open Spaces plus those in Placitas and Golden. Bernalillo County has also closed the Carlito Springs Open Space in Tijeras Canyon and all of the East Mountain Open Spaces that it operates. Currently, there are no plans to close the City-operated Foothills Open Spaces, including Manzano/Four Hills and Tijeras Canyon Open Spaces, but that could change. The City, AFR, and the County have cited the isolation of the closed areas and very high fire-risk due to an over-abundance of dry and easily ignited brush as reasons for the closures. I suspect that a lack of both available trained manpower and firefighting equipment, due to their prior their commitments to the existing huge forest fires, also figured into the decisions.

The Bernalillo County Commission has also banned the use of any fireworks in all of its unincorporated areas. The US Forest Service has a standing ban of all fireworks in all of its managed areas, and the City of Albuquerque also has a standing ordinance which prohibits the sale and use of all Aerial Fireworks and Ground Audible Devices within the city limits. All of these bans carry penalties. FHV is located within the city limits of Albuquerque and the FHVA Board requests that all FHV residents pay attention to these firework bans and not use ANY fireworks until the extreme fire danger has passed and the bans are modified or rescinded.

Four Hills Village, Winterwood, Hidden Valley, and Executive Hills neighborhoods are all in a very vulnerable position for grass fire as well as forest fire. We are very, very dry up here and many trees are dead or dying. We are surrounded on three sides by the Tijeras Canyon and the Manzano-Four Hills Open Spaces with Kirtland Base open land closing the circle. The very things that make our neighborhood attractive, also make it more susceptible to fires. We have large lots with few brick fences to serve as fire breaks. Most of our yards boast big trees (especially evergreens) and abundant vegetation, including native grasses and bushes. Think about it, Folks. We are in nearly the same position as the towns destroyed in the Marshall Fire near Boulder, Colorado, when they were burned to

the ground at the end of last year. At least 1,100 homes were lost in matter of hours. Like the former community of Superior, our community is built against Open Space and US Forest, our streets are convoluted, and we have only one way in and out of the neighborhood.

Fire risk in our neighborhood is further compounded by our area's predilection for strong Canyon Winds which can push fires to spread quickly. A rule of thumb for the speed at which brush fire will spread is 10% of the wind speed. For example, if winds are 30 MPH, the fire will advance at 3 MPH. That would be a moving fire front that could take out the width of 7-8 house lots every hour! We dodged a bullet this week when on Tuesday, May 17, a 10+-acre grass fire started on the Base which already had fire restrictions in place. Fortunately, it was quickly contained.

So, what can we do? Fire proof your yards and homes and, especially, WATER YOUR TREES and dry areas next to your house. If possible, don't waste water by using sprayer-type or oscillating sprinklers as the water will evaporate too quickly to be of much use. Instead, use drip systems, soaker hoses, or hand water near the roots of your trees and plants. The amount of water needed by each tree and shrub varies by its species, age, and the soil conditions in which it is planted. If you have questions on the amounts of water needed or the best watering techniques, consult your favorite nursery or contact the NM Office of the State Engineer Water Use & Conservation Bureau*, the Albuquerque Bernalillo County Water Utility Authority (contact info on your water bill), or go on line with the New Mexico State University (NMSU): <https://aces.nmsu.edu/desertblooms/>.

Look at your trees. Not only are many dying from lack of water, but in their weakened state, insects are having a field day attacking trees, especially the pine trees. If you have dead or dying trees, or trees with dead limbs, call in a tree service company to treat or remove these fire hazards. Remember, a dead evergreen tree can ignite from a spark in less than 11 seconds.

If you think additional watering or tree service companies are expensive, ponder this: a single 5-foot-tall pinon tree now costs about \$500. That cost comes on top of the costs to remove a dead tree and deliver/install the new tree. The replacement cost of a single tree is really closer to \$1,000. Furthermore, what will it cost to replace your home if we do have the unfortunate luck to be caught up in a serious brush fire?

I reached out to Jim Sattler, City of Albuquerque Assistant Open Space Director, for fire prevention tips and he passed along the following information:

Some practical tips are to clear dead vegetation off your property (important not to dump it into Open Space! That happens a lot!), clear vegetation from around the house itself, limb up trees to help reduce the risk of a ground fire getting into the trees, trim up trees and shrubs that might be hanging over into Open Space. For additional information on how to create a Firewise home go to the following link (You may have to type it in on your device -RG):

https://www.iafc.org/docs/default-source/pdf/wild_haveafirewisehome.pdf?sfvrsn=d1b9a00d_0

In our Open Spaces, neighbors can help by keeping their eyes open and reporting fires immediately to 911 and calling 311 to report illegal camping on Open Space. Try to give as much information on the location as possible including GPS coordinates.

In summary, pay attention to fire warnings! Protect your home, your family, and your neighbors by taking steps to remove combustible vegetation and trash near your house. Water your trees and treat or

remove dead or dying trees in your yard. Lend a hand to help others prepare for fire conditions when you can.

Hoping for abundant gentle rains soon,
Rusty Goetz
Director Open Space and Parks
FHVA Board

*The New Mexico Office of the State Engineer Water Use & Conservation Bureau published a very useful handbook on watering in 2019: "A Homeowner's Guide to a Water Efficient Landscape, New Mexico's Enchanted Xeriscape Guide". Their contact is <http://www.ose.state.nm.us/WUC/>