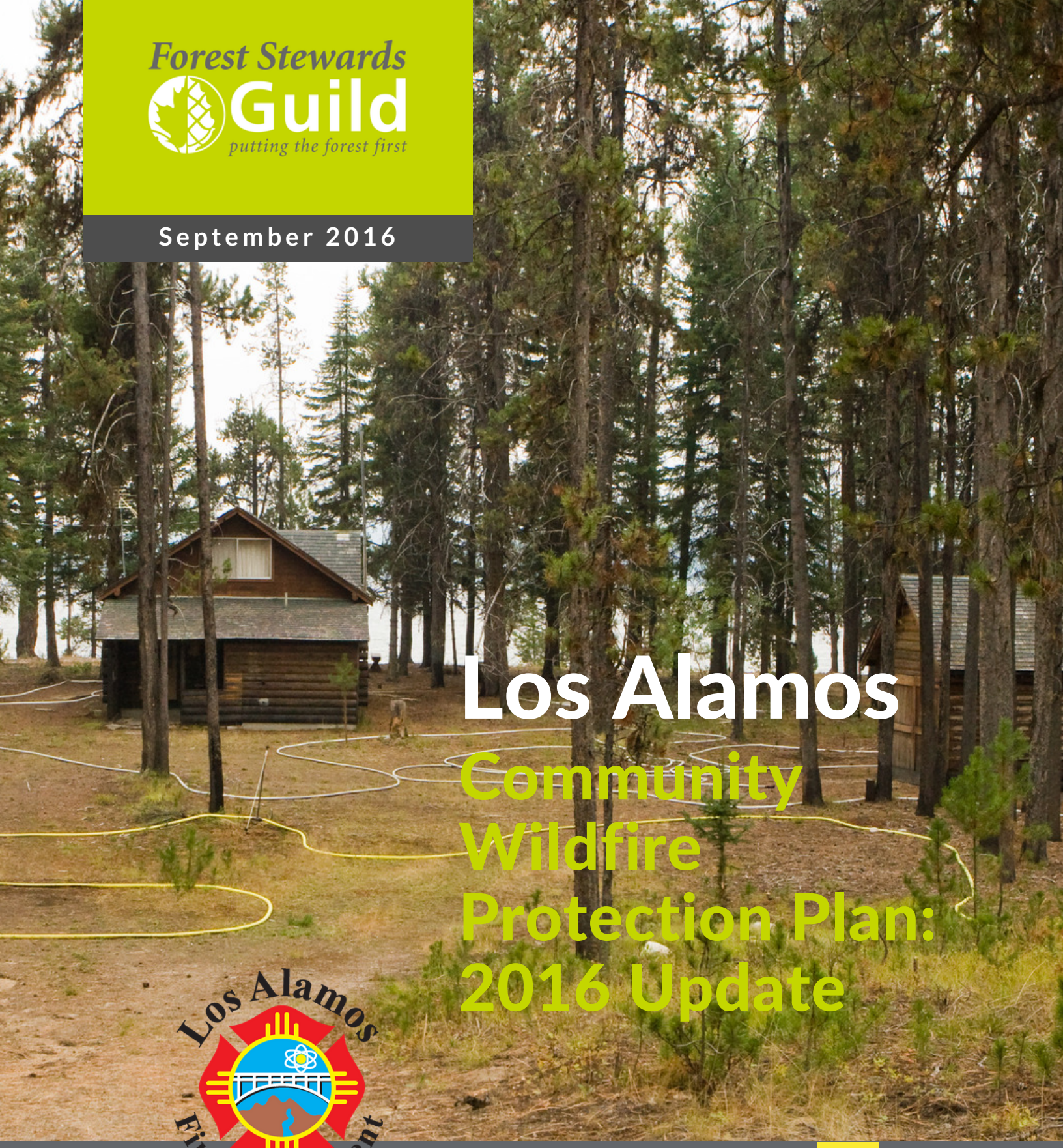


Forest Stewards Guild
putting the forest first

September 2016

Los Alamos Community Wildfire Protection Plan: 2016 Update

Los Alamos Fire Department

SUMMARY

Fire cannot be excluded from fire-adapted forests

WHAT IS A CWPP?

Wildfire threatens people and homes across the U.S. When homes are built in and around forests, they become part of the wildland-urban interface (WUI).

Much of the WUI occurs in fire-adapted forests, which need fire to be healthy. For much of the 20th century an aggressive and successful effort suppressed most forest fires. However, fire cannot be excluded from fire-adapted forests forever. Now dense, unhealthy forests have created a hazard for people in the WUI.

A Community Wildfire Protection Plan (CWPP) is a strategic plan developed by the local fire department, federal and state land managers, tribes, and communities.

A CWPP is developed to guide wildfire mitigation.

Each CWPP is designed for and by a specific community's needs which drive decisions and designations about scale, approach, area of emphasis, and depth.

CWPP's are designed to mitigate and prepare for wildfire risks and recommend actions including fuels treatments, road improvement, evacuation planning, and prescribed fire to reduce risks.

CWPP's are important in facilitating community engagement in wildfire risk reduction and preparedness and are used to set a broad array of priorities.

A CWPP is a collaborative plan used to guide wildfire mitigation and facilitate fire adapted communities.

A brief history of

FIRE IN LOS ALAMOS

A WAKEUP CALL

A period of large, fast-moving crown fires in ponderosa pine forest around Los Alamos County began in 1954 with the Water Canyon fire. Within hours after it started, the fire raced through the trees from the south and threatened the town site.

The Water Canyon fire was significant for being the first to require the evacuation of Los Alamos. The 15,000 acre La Mesa fire in 1977 spread rapidly from Santa Fe National Forest, across Bandelier National Monument toward Los Alamos. Many considered this fire a wakeup call for changing fire behavior in the area, but little effort went into prevention of another such event.

Nineteen years later, the 1996 Dome fire created another threatening smoke column on the southern horizon of Los Alamos. The extreme fire behavior exhibited by the blaze served as motivation to begin fuel treatments in the area. Two years later, the Oso fire burned north of town.

CATASTROPHIC FIRE

The fires in the late 1990s were dwarfed by the 43,000-acre Cerro Grande fire. On May 10, 2000, the fire entered the town site and destroyed more than 400 homes. The unthinkable happened again in June 2011 when Los Alamos was evacuated for a third time as the Las Conchas fire burned 148,000 acres to the west and north of town.

HUMAN CAUSED

The well-documented high frequency of lightning strikes in the Jemez Mountains has played a role in the fire frequency of the Los Alamos area. However, all of the large fires occurring over the past 50 years were human caused.

Aerial View of Los Alamos

FIRE IN LOS ALAMOS: A TIMELINE FROM THE 1950S - PRESENT DAY

1954 ***WATER CANYON FIRE***

1977 ***LA MESA FIRE***

1966 ***DOME FIRE***

1968 ***OSO FIRE***

1990s ***NUMEROUS FIRES***

2000 ***CERRO GRANDE FIRE***

2011 ***LAS CONCHAS FIRE***

Above: The Fuel Mitigation/Forest Restoration Project greatly reduced fuel loads at the wildland urban interface

Top left: North community in Los Alamos following the Cerro Grande Fire
Above: It takes a community to maintain fire risk reduction strategies

LOS ALAMOS COMMUNITY WILDFIRE PROTECTION PLAN

The Los Alamos CWPP, approved in 2009, aimed to reduce catastrophic wildfire, protect lives and infrastructure, and promote ecosystem health.

2009 CWPP

In response to Cerro Grande and other large wildland fires in 2000, the Departments of Agriculture and Interior developed the National Fire Plan. Under the guidelines set forth in the National Fire Plan and the Healthy Forests Restoration Act of 2003, the Los Alamos CWPP, approved in 2009, emphasizes several key factors:

- collaboration among multiple land management agencies
- restoration of fire adapted ecosystems
- fire as a management tool, and
- maintaining the essential resources for implementation

Of the 1,200 acres that were mechanically thinned from 2003 to 2015, about 675 acres have been treated with prescribed fire

These factors are in alignment with current CWPP guidance for New Mexico and nationally, as well as the current (2014) National Cohesive Wildland Strategy.

The 2009 Los Alamos CWPP initiated long term planning to reduce the threat of catastrophic wildfire; to protect the lives and safety of citizens and firefighters; to protect residential and commercial infrastructure; and to promote ecosystem health and community resilience.

2016 CWPP

2016 update: The updated CWPP addresses changes in the community, including new development along the South Rim, changes in the local fire regime, and changes in the current climate over the past five years. Risks were re-evaluated based on those changes, creating new, prioritized implementation strategies for the wildland-urban interface in Los Alamos.

The plan redefined the forested area that, with an uncontrolled ignition, has the potential to threaten life and property in Los Alamos and White Rock, as well as Los Alamos National Laboratory (LANL).

The updated plan categorizes the wildfire risk of individual neighborhoods and describes an array of priority actions. The plan additionally addresses ecological changes since 2009, such as the significant grasslands that are developing on the western edge of the developed area. Read the entire updated plan at *forestguild.org/losalamoscwpp*.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE A FIRE ADAPTED COMMUNITY?

Community members, businesses and local government in the WUI and other wildfire prone areas collaborate to prepare and mitigate the effects of wildfire.

A fire-adapted community takes preventative and proactive action to reduce the risk of wildfire by using collaborative partnerships to develop and implement a CWPP that will guide home preparedness, healthy forests land management, business resilience, fire department planning and government participation in fuel mitigation and community resilience. A local CWPP guides actions to implement safety measures and fuel management to protect residents, homes, businesses, natural areas, and cultural resources against wildfire. A fire-adapted community takes a role in the planning, implementation and periodic updating of the CWPP that will guide their appropriate risk management strategies. Community members engage their neighbors to participate in fire mitigation strategies in order to adequately prepare the community against the threat of wildfire.

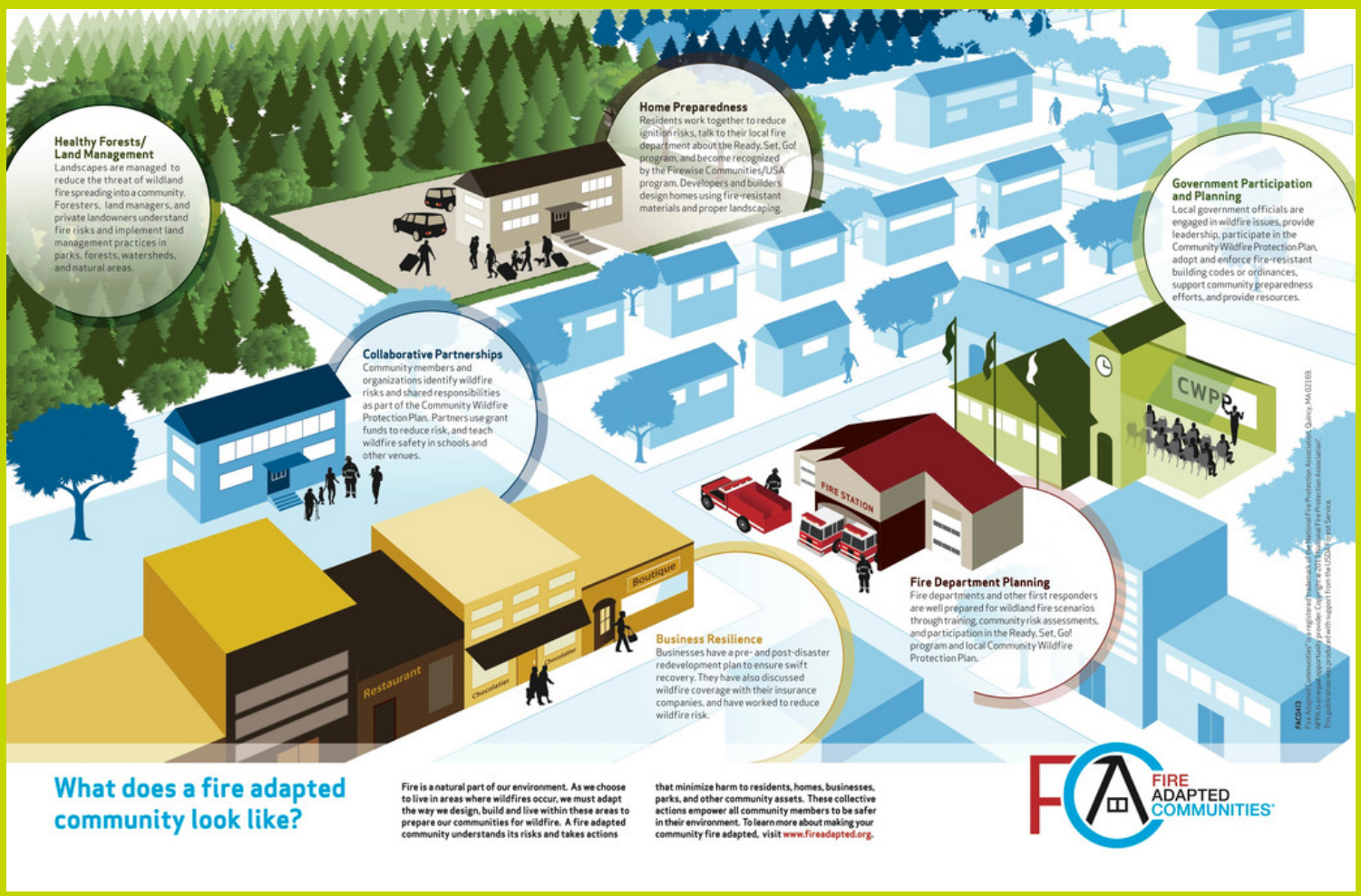


Image: http://www.fireadapted.org/

Before and after hazardous fuels reduction

SUMMARY OF 2016 CWPP UPDATE

FUEL MANAGEMENT GOALS

The 2016 CWPP update proposes to reduce the risk to human health, human safety, to homes, and other values-at-risk in Los Alamos and LANL from future forest fires by reducing hazardous fuels on county and federal lands within and adjacent to the wildland urban interface, along highways, forest roads, and trails. Additionally, the update includes minimizing the risk of crown fires, reducing the risk of firebrands and embers, improving conditions for suppression efforts, utilizing opportunities to continue active management of fuel loads on wildlands, and fostering public engagement and dialogue on living with wildfire.

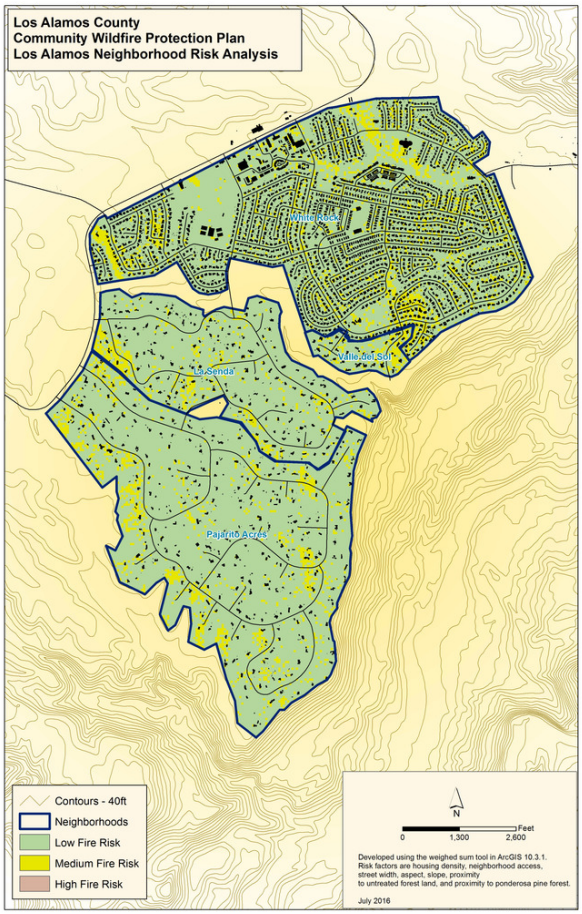
MITIGATION ACTION PLAN SUMMARY

The Los Alamos CWPP plans to continue fuel reduction projects on all jurisdictions of public lands through mechanical and hand thinning, as well as continued prescribed burning through broadcast and pile burn operations on public lands on all jurisdictions. Additionally, the 2016 CWPP update aims to engage homeowners on the home ignition zone through site visits and public information campaigns and support them to reduce structural ignitability and increase their preparedness. Plans are also in place to continue community outreach with public schools, local nature centers, and service learning projects, print media, and internet resources.

PRIORITY ACTIONS

- Assess and reduce fuels within individual home ignition zones
- Mechanical or hand thinning operations on untreated lands within the CWPP boundary
- Maintaining reduced risk through routine broadcast burning on all priority treatment areas
- Provide public information for all prescribed burning operations
- Mitigate the impacts of smoke on neighborhoods and individuals
- Continue hand thinning and pile burning
- Continue Interagency Wildfire Management Team and interagency cooperation efforts
- Institutionalize continued fuel management on Los Alamos County lands

WILDFIRE PLANNING

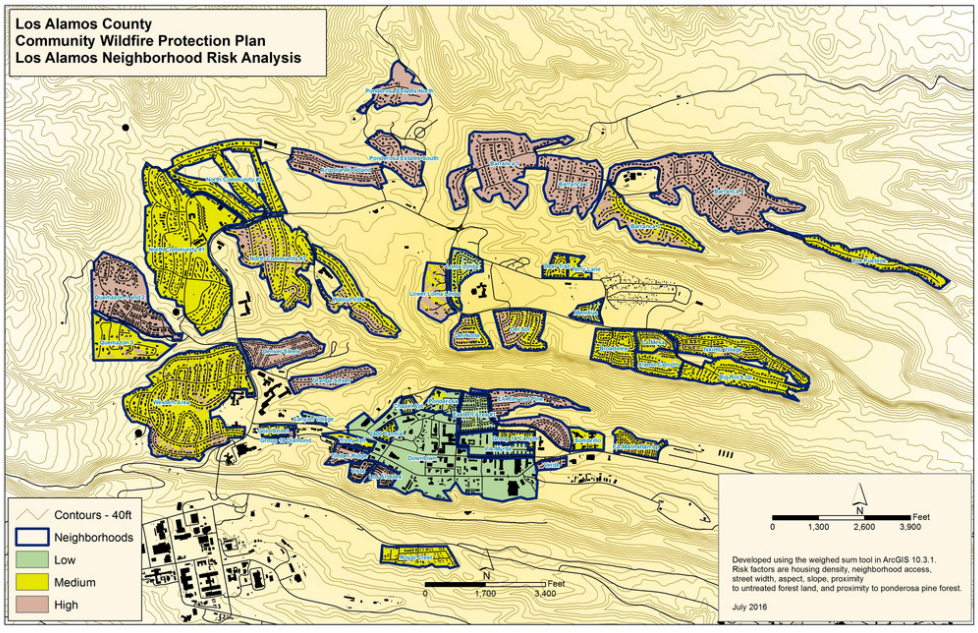


COMMUNITY HAZARD RATING AND PRIORITY NEIGHBORHOODS

PRORITY NEIGHBORHOODS:

- Southwest downtown Los Arboles Ridge
- Ponderosa Estates
- Walnut/Villa
- Del Norte and Del Sol sub-division
- Quemazon
- Denver Steels
- Pajarito Acres
- Barranca Mesa#2
- Barranca Mesa#1
- Big Rick Loop/San Ildefonso

Neighborhood maps:
Left: White Rock
Below:Los Alamos



WILDFIRE PREPAREDNESS

Communication is one of the best tools for reducing the impact of wildfires. Good communication allows firefighters to efficiently suppress wildfires, residents to evacuate if the need arises, and responders to help those in need. Pre-wildfire season meetings of key individuals help ensure seamless communication and understanding of protocols during a wildfire. Maintenance of ingress and egress roads is critical to ensure that wildfire suppression equipment and personnel can access an incident, as well as residents and visitors to have ways to escape an incident. Exposure to wildfire smoke is not healthy, even from wildfire miles away. It is important to check local air quality reports and seek shelter in a designated evacuation center or away from an incident if necessary.

PLANNING FOR POST-RECOVERY

The first post-fire recovery concern is safety. After a wildfire it is important that residents stay away from their homes or businesses until officials determine it is safe to return. To learn more about post-fire recovery, see *After Wildfire* (www.afterwildfirenm.org) from New Mexico State Forestry. A Post Fire Coordinator can work directly with local, state or federal agencies, emergency response officials and volunteers to address concerns such as post-fire flooding and implementation of post-wildfire treatments in the forest.

LEARN MORE AND STAY INFORMED

RESOURCES

Entire 2016 CWPP summary	www.losalamosnm.us/fire
Fire Adapted NM	www.fireadaptednm.org
Los Alamos County Fire Department	www.losalamosnm.us/fire
NM State Forestry	www.emnrd.state.nm.us/SFD
Fire Adapted Communities Network	www.fireadaptednetwork.org
Fire Adapted Communities	www.fireadapted.org
Greater Santa Fe Fireshed Coalition	www.santafefireshed.org

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The Forest Stewards Guild practices and promotes ecologically, economically, and socially responsible forestry as a means of sustaining the integrity of forest ecosystems and the human communities dependent on them. Our members are foresters, conservationists, resource managers, scientists, students, forestland owners, policy makers, and land stewards working in forests throughout the United States and Canada. The Southwest Region of the Forest Stewards Guild promotes excellence in forest stewardship by working with partners, forest workers and landowners to promote a sustainable forest-based economy and ecological forest restoration.

This summary is based on a larger report entitled, *Community Wildfire Protection Plan 2016 Los Alamos, New Mexico* available at www.losalamosnm.us/fire