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## Panelists in Taos County discuss lessons learned from Hermits Peak/Calf Canyon Fire

By Emery Veilleux The Taos News  
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Firefighter Ryan Le Baron with the Elk Creek Fire Department in Colorado watches the Hermits Peak/Calf Canyon Fire blaze across a ridgeline near the Taos County line on May 13, 2022. Firefighters from all over the country converged on Northern New Mexico to battle the state's largest blaze.

Jim Weber/New Mexican file photo

TAOS — Gerald Romero, district manager for Tierra y Montes Soil and Water Conservation District, gets emotional when he recalls the state's largest-ever wildfire.

“If catastrophic fire is not in your minds, it had better be,” Romero said. “It’s not a matter of if but when, where and how bad it’s gonna be.”

Romero would know: Since 2022, he's been laboring tirelessly as a leader on the frontlines of the Hermits Peak/Calf Canyon Fire and the ensuing recovery.

"It was baptism by fire," he said in a recent panel discussion on lessons learned from the largest wildfire in New Mexico history. The discussion was the penultimate installment of the Enchanted Circle Wildfire Preparedness Series.

Perhaps the biggest lesson of all: The road to recovery is long.

“Post-fire recovery is not a sprint; it’s not a dash; it’s a mega-marathon,” Romero said. “We’ve been working on this for three years, and we’re still in emergency response mode. I don’t care what the government says; we are still responding to emergencies day to day.”

The fire scorched over 340,000 acres, but subsequent flooding has decimated landscapes and communities over and over again, making rebuilding efforts a painstaking process. It's seedling by seedling, home by home, acequia by acequia, experts said.

“Fire lasts for days, weeks, months; post-fire lasts for generations,” said Martha Graham, source water protection specialist for New Mexico Rural Water Association.

Panelists reflected on plans made at the community and individual level that proved crucial in the face of disaster — and what to prioritize ahead of time.

At the county level, community wildfire protection, hazard mitigation and emergency response plans prepare Taos County residents ahead of a wildfire. These plans detail different risk levels across the county, evacuation routes and emergency shelters.

The county has been updating its hazard mitigation plan and establishing more emergency shelter locations through mutual aid agreements with local school districts, churches and community centers, Emergency Management Director Bobby Lucero told *The Taos News* earlier this year.

In 2020, Taos County was awarded a Federal Emergency Management Agency grant that allowed for the purchase of an emergency shelter trailer. As part of an agreement with the American Red Cross, the trailer will enable Taos County to handle the first 48 to 72 hours of an emergency until Red Cross personnel arrive to take over shelter operations.

“Don’t skimp on training your emergency management people,” said Veronica Serna, a Mora County commissioner for District 1. She urged community members and emergency planners to account for the unincorporated communities that populate Northern New Mexico.

Communities must plan for their historical infrastructure, too, like acequias and graveyards.

Before the fire, Serna said she reached out to the New Mexico Acequia Association to map the community’s waterways.

“Thank God they did because the fire-flood event destroyed our acequias,” she said.

She urged communities to document their family plots and local cemeteries, which were rendered unrecognizable by fire and subsequent flooding.

“The county has no registry of who was buried there.”

At the personal level, preparedness amounts to having a clear plan in place in the event of evacuation.

Individuals should consolidate important documents like birth certificates, Social Security cards and property deeds in protective packaging in a place they can be accessed in an emergency.

Evacuation kits with first-aid supplies and nonperishable foods for family members and pets should be packed and easily accessible.

“We had people who thought they’d be evacuated for two to three days,” Serna said. “A week later, they’re out of diapers and clean clothes for children. They needed supplies so they could keep living there for weeks.”

Evacuation and relocation plans need to be made for livestock, too. Evacuees discovered mid-crisis they had limitations on transportation or boarding to house all the area’s livestock. Some residents snuck behind cordons to feed their livestock. Many lost their herds altogether.



Firefighters with Structure Group 4 clear brush and debris away from cabins along N.M. 518 near the Taos County line while the Hermits Peak/Calf Canyon Fire rages over the nearby ridge on May 13, 2022.

Jim Weber/New Mexican file photo

Many producers have had to rebuild their herds a few animals at a time; many have had to sell at a loss. Crop farmers endure repeated flooding, debris and cesspools.

“That’s generations of livelihood lost,” Romero said.

Panelists urged communities to harden their infrastructure, including water and electrical systems.

“Clean water is one of the cornerstones of a community that can build back and be resilient,” Graham said, urging water professionals to locate their community’s source water areas and plan forest treatments for them.

Les Montoya, general manager for Mora-San Miguel Electric Cooperative, has been busy rebuilding the area's electrical systems, which sustained \$26 million in damage, including 7,800 miles of line above and below ground — underground lines melted — and 2,400 poles.

Since the fire, the co-op has prioritized upgrading their maps to better manage their electrical systems. A GRIP grant will allow the co-op to deenergize remotely.

The co-op is also working to maintain their rights of way, where 160,000 hazard trees could take out power lines at any time.

Coordinating federal funds has made recovery all the more complex. Romero said allocating funds can be difficult because of preexisting state statutes and policies that restrict how municipalities can use funds.

“FEMA has been so complicated to deal with. [Recovery is] not happening as fast as the community hopes it would happen,” Romero said.

Moreover, there's an adjustment period for governing bodies used to a budget of a few million dollars that suddenly become responsible for allocating \$100 million in recovery funds.

Veronica Martinez, field representative for U.S. Rep. Teresa Leger Fernández, D-N.M., said recovery funds will remain steadfast through federal spending cuts. However, she urged communities to build alternative support systems as federal instability persists.

“The pots of money themselves that have been allocated for the Hermits Peak/Calf Canyon Fire are there through law, through an act of Congress, which the current administration cannot take away. That money is already allocated, it's already gone through and been cleared by DOGE,” Martinez said, adding, “For future events and emergencies, things are constantly changing, but we need to rely more on ourselves and state and local governments for help.”

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Serna emphasized establishing recovery plans that funnel recovery funds directly to the people who need to rebuild — not contractors.

Above all, panelists stressed collaboration.

“It will take a community to prepare for disaster and take the entire community to respond to disaster,” Romero said, adding, “If you don’t have those relationships beforehand, it’s difficult to establish them in the heat of the moment.”

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