

NEW MEXICO TREE FARM BULLETIN



THE WILDFIRE IMPACTS OF TRAINS AND TOURISM

Written by: Todd Haines, NM Tree Farm Program, Inspector Coordinator

The Southwest is no stranger to wildfire. Wildfires start for many reasons, lightning, unattended campfires, human neglect, among others. In my 35+ years in forestry, including time in a district that commonly managed more than 200 wildfire starts annually, I have seen fires begin from a wide range of causes.

While I worked in a district that has freight trains and passenger trains, we did not have coal-burning recreational steam engines operating in our area, like other districts. Over time, I learned more about the specific risks associated with these historic trains, the mitigations and precautions taken to reduce those risks, and the consequences of not taking precautions. This article explores those issues and highlights how mitigation practices have evolved.

The Colorado Example

In 2018, two significant wildfires, the 416 Fire and the Burro Fire, burned more than 57,000 acres in southwestern Colorado, primarily within the San Juan National Forest. The 416 Fire began on June 1, followed by the Burro Fire on June 8.

Federal officials later alleged that embers from a coal-burning steam locomotive operating on the Durango & Silverton Narrow Gauge Railroad ignited the 416 Fire. Combined suppression costs exceeded \$43 million. In 2022, the railroad reached settlements related to the fire, including a \$20 million payment to the federal government and commitments to implement additional fire mitigation measures. A separate settlement addressed impacts to private home and business owners.



1ST QUARTER
2026

OUR MISSION

To promote the growing of renewable forest resources on private lands while protecting environmental benefits and increasing public understanding of all benefits of productive forestry.

The American Tree Farm System (ATFS), a program of the American Forest Foundation, is committed to sustaining forests, watershed and healthy habitats through the power of private stewardship.

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The 416 Fire became one of the largest wildfires in Colorado’s history and had significant impacts on tourism and commerce in the region.

Since that time, the railroad has converted most of its operating locomotives from coal to oil, reducing the likelihood of ember production. The last time I was on this train it was noticeable that coal was not being used. No cinders from the stack were getting in our eyes, and the smell was very different. Operational changes can make a real difference in fire risk.

A New Mexico Perspective

Here in New Mexico, we are home to another historic coal-burning steam railroad: the Cumbres & Toltec Scenic Railroad, operating between Chama, New Mexico and Antonito, Colorado.

Like many landowners and operators in fire-prone landscapes, the railroad has implemented mitigation practices to reduce wildfire risk, particularly during periods of elevated fire danger. These include:

- Delayed seasonal start dates during high fire conditions
- A water car positioned directly behind the locomotive to spray the tracks
- Water tankers traveling along nearby roads
- “Coal washing” prior to use

Coal washing was new to me when I first learned about it. This practice removes fine coal dust and small coal particles that could otherwise be drawn up the smokestack and expelled as embers that could ignite a fire. By reducing fine material, the risk of ignition from airborne particles is lowered.

In 2022, facing both high fire danger and a local water emergency, the railroad delayed the start of its season out of precaution and stewardship. In a public statement, the railroad emphasized its long-standing commitment to proactive fire safety and responsible operation in the landscapes it travels through.

Fun Fact: Steam Engines Throw Sparks by Design

Early steam locomotives used spark arrestors, mesh and internal baffle systems inside the smokestack, to reduce ember discharge.

Even with arrestors, fine fuel particles (like coal dust) could escape under dry, windy conditions. Thankfully, technology has improved.



LESSONS IN SHARED STEWARDSHIP

Historic steam trains are an important part of our regional heritage and tourism economy. They operate across the same forests, grasslands, and private lands that Tree Farmers steward.

The broader lesson is not about assigning blame. It is about recognizing risk and adapting practices accordingly. Fuel conversions, operational timing, suppression support equipment, and material handling improvements all demonstrate how mitigation evolves in response to experience.

As landowners, managers, and operators, we all share responsibility for reducing wildfire risk where we live and work.

Look for more discussion on wildfire risks, including other ignition sources and practical considerations for landowners, in the next New Mexico Tree Farm newsletter.

HONORING CHARLIE WICKLUND'S YEARS OF SERVICE TO THE TREE FARM PROGRAM



Written by: Doug Boykin, NM Tree Farm Chairman

It is with both gratitude and sadness that we accept the resignation of Charlie Wicklund as our Treasurer of the Tree Farm Committee.

Charlie has been involved with the Tree Farm Program since the late 1960s or early 1970s, when he managed the sawmill in Española. His involvement deepened in the early 1990s when he joined New Mexico State Forestry. Over the years, he served in numerous State Forestry roles, including Capitan District Fire Management Officer; Timber Staff Officer in Socorro and Bernalillo; State Timber Staff Officer; and Supervisor of the Inmate Work Camp Program in Los Lunas. Throughout these many assignments, Charlie remained a steady and committed supporter of the Tree Farm Program.

Charlie is stepping down to focus on caring for his wife, Joyce, who has attended many Tree Farm field days over the years, and himself as they navigate health challenges. We ask that you keep both of them in your thoughts and prayers.

In recognition of Charlie's decades of service and dedication, the annual NM Tree Farmer of the Year Award will now be named in his honor. This tribute reflects our deep appreciation for his lasting contributions to New Mexico's Tree Farm community. A photo of the updated award plaque will be featured in a future newsletter.

Thank you, Charlie, for your years of leadership and service.

TREE FARMERS AT LAST

Written by: Doug Boykin, NM Tree Farm Chairman

After 40 years as a Tree Farm inspector, NM Tree Farm Program advisor, and now the NM Tree Farm Committee Chairman, I am proud to say that I can add another title — Tree Farmer.

Along with my wife and our oldest son, we recently purchased Mangitas Springs Ranch, located southwest of Quemado. The 115-acre property includes ponderosa pine, piñon-juniper woodlands, and open meadows, all surrounded by the Gila National Forest.

Mangitas Springs has been in private ownership for more than 200 years. In recent decades, ownership changed hands several times, often with a focus on wildlife management, particularly elk, and securing landowner tags for out-of-state owners. The ranch has experienced heavy grazing pressure, as neighboring cattle were able to access portions of the property.

Despite those challenges, the land holds tremendous potential. A natural spring, recently restored, feeds a unique wetland area and several dirt tanks that provide permanent water. The previous owner secured the exterior fencing, added wildlife-friendly crossings, installed a solar-powered well and storage tank with trick drinkers, restored the spring, and completed some piñon-juniper thinning (though slash remains on site).

Our goals are broader and long-term. We intend to:

- Repair remaining exterior fencing and remove old interior pasture fencing and corral wire
- Burn existing brush piles
- Plant coyote willow where appropriate
- Use managed livestock grazing to help restore native grasslands
- Mow rabbitbrush and restore both cool-season and warm-season grasses
- Thin piñon-juniper stands to release residual ponderosa pine, Gambel oak, and alligator juniper (including several trees over 36 inches in diameter)
- Remove deteriorating sheds left by previous owners
- Install rock and log gabions in two active drainages to stabilize gradients
- Develop additional water catchment structures to hold water on the land longer
- Repair the large steel rim tank so it can capture spring water
- Identify and protect remnants of the original homestead
- Add additional wildlife-safe fence crossings

We also plan to research and better understand the history of this place — from Native American resettlement and use to more recent ownership. The ranch lies along a historic trade route connecting Chaco Canyon and northern Mexico, adding a rich cultural layer to its story.

Much of this work will require research and planning. But most of it is simply the implementation of practices I've shared with Tree Farmers for over four decades.



SPRING STEWARDSHIP TIPS FOR NEW MEXICO TREE FARMERS

SPRING FENCE & BOUNDARY CHECK

Early spring is ideal for walking property lines before grasses green up and wildlife pressure increases.

Why it matters:

- Winter winds, snow, and wildlife movement often loosen wires
- Fixing now prevents summer grazing issues and wildfire access problems
- Tip: Check for wildlife-safe crossings while you're at it, spring is when animals begin moving more frequently.

SLASH PILE READINESS (BEFORE FIRE RESTRICTIONS)

If thinning or cleanup happens over winter, spring is your last best window to prepare slash piles safely.

What to do now:

- Consolidate piles
- Clear around bases
- Identify safe burn windows before Stage I restrictions

Even if you don't burn this year, preparation now prevents rushed decisions later.

PROTECT SPRINGS, SEEPS, AND WET AREAS

Spring runoff reveals water features that may be invisible later in the year.

Action items:

- Flag springs, seeps, and ephemeral drainages
- Check fencing to prevent livestock damage
- Stabilize banks early before summer storms

Water protection now pays off all year, for wildlife, forage, and fire resilience.

GRASS BEFORE TREES: WATCH WHAT GREENS FIRST

In NM, grasses respond faster than trees in spring.

Why to look for:

- Bare soil patches
- Invasive or undesirable species
- Areas slow to green up

Spring observations help guide:

- Grazing timing
- Reseeding decisions
- Mowing or thinning priorities

EARLY WEED DETECTION

Spring is when many problem species first show themselves.

Tip: If you don't recognize a plant early, flag it. It's much easier to identify (and manage) weeds *before* they mature and seed.

WILDFIRE READINESS STARTS QUIETLY

Fire preparedness doesn't begin with red flag warnings; it begins in spring.

Simple steps:

- Clear around gates and roads
- Trim vegetation near structures
- Identify water access points for firefighting



TAX TIPS FOR FOREST LANDOWNERS

IF YOU OWN FORESTED LAND, YOU SHOULD UNDERSTAND HOW U.S. TAX LAWS PERTAIN TO YOU.

How you treat income and expenses associated with your forest property for tax purposes depends on your purpose for owning the property, your actual use of it, your taxpayer classification with respect to the property, and the nature of the income or expense itself.

[Tax Tips for Forest Landowners: 2025 Tax Year](#) can help forest owners understand the basics of forest-related federal tax provisions and how that relates to income tax planning. This is an annual information and educational publication developed by the Forest Service in partnership with the Warnell School of Forestry & Natural Resources, University of Georgia, and the Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences Extension at the University of Florida.

HELPFUL RESOURCES

- [American Forest Foundation website](#)
- [American Tree Farm System | National website](#)
- [Family Forest Research Center](#)
- [Forest Management map viewer](#)
- [Guide to Resources for Private Forest Landowners in NM](#)
- [MyLandPlan.org](#)
- [National Association of State Foresters | NM website](#)
- [National Woodland Owners Association \(NWOA\)](#)
- [New Mexico Department of Game and Fish](#)
- [New Mexico Tree Farm Committee Members](#)
- [New Mexico Tree Farm Program website](#)
- [NM Energy, Minerals and Natural Resources Department \(EMNRD\)](#)
- [U.S. Forest Service](#)

