



United States Department of Agriculture

### Forest Service

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# News Release

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## Fighting Fire During Covid-19:

### Fire Danger Rating Rises to High on the Lincoln National Forest

**Alamogordo, NM** – May 6, 2020 – Rising temperatures and a lack of precipitation have led fire officials on the Lincoln National Forest to raise the fire danger rating to high. A high fire danger rating means fires can start easily from most causes. Grasses and pine needles will easily ignite and campfires and brush fires are likely to escape. Fires can become serious and difficult to control unless they are put out while they are still small.

Fire season in the southwest typically runs from April through early July or until monsoonal rains arrive. Fire restrictions prohibiting campfires have been in place since April 15 on all New Mexico National Forests including the Lincoln National Forest.

With low fuel moisture levels and other indices pushing many areas of the state into high fire danger and the recent surge of quarantine-weary visitors to the forest, the risk of human-caused wildfire is rising. Despite the campfire ban, fire patrols reported numerous illegal fire campfires last weekend and law enforcement officers ticketed multiple illegal campfires. Fortunately, none of the prohibited campfires got out of control.

“We’ve seen a huge uptick in forest visitation since the pandemic began. While most people are following the rules, we unfortunately have a small subset of visitors who knowingly disregard them,” said Acting Fire Staff Dave Bales.

### Fighting Fire During Covid-19

“The Lincoln National Forest and our local partners stand together, ready to respond to wildfire



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during the 2020 fire year. Health concerns related to the COVID-19 pandemic may affect how we fight fire, but it will not alter our commitment to protect local communities and our public land," stated Forest Supervisor Travis Moseley.

While the COVID-19 outbreak is unprecedented, wildland fire personnel are emergency responders and are trained to adapt to changing situations. The Forest Service's primary fire response strategy for 2020 will be aggressive initial attack using local resources from all available partners.

"Our goal is rapid containment to minimize the number of large wildfires and prevent the need to bring large numbers of firefighters together," said Acting Fire Staff Dave Bales.

Firefighters will respond to every wildfire, but to prevent the spread of COVID-19, how they are mobilized and supported will be different this year.

For larger fires that could not be stopped during initial attack, it is very apparent that gathering and supporting large numbers of firefighters in compact fire camps will not be practical for this fire year. In the past during a large wildfire it was typical for dozens or even hundreds of fire personnel to be based out of large fire camps. This will not be the norm this year. Most firefighting efforts will be in small groups and fire resources will base out of small isolated camps to provide better social distancing. Wildland fire agencies are also identifying support functions that can be done virtually to prevent the transmission of the virus.

"Social distancing among firefighters wherever possible, spreading out fire camps, issuing PPE such as masks and gloves, screening and testing firefighters, and developing more contracts for logistical support to these less dense organizations are all considerations built into the agency's firefighting plans this year," explained Bales.

### How You Can Help

The most important thing members of the public can do to help during the 2020 fire year is to do their part to prevent human-caused fires. Fewer human-caused fires will not only help protect communities from wildfire but will also preserve firefighting resources and help slow the spread of COVID-19 by reducing the need to move firefighters throughout the nation.

- Follow fire restrictions.
- Do not allow chains to drag on the road. It can cause sparks and inadvertently start a





- wildfire.
- Do not throw cigarettes out your car windows.
  - Do not burn debris on windy days.
  - Be mindful of grills, camp stoves and lanterns.

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