

## Gallinas Prescribed Fire FLA

Pecos/Las Vegas Ranger Districts, Santa Fe National Forest

March 2, 2018

### Background

In early October the Pecos/Las Vegas district, Santa Fe National Forest initiated the Gallinas prescribed fire in the municipal watershed for the city of Las Vegas, NM. Due to persistent dry weather conditions, prescribed fire operations continued throughout the fall in multiple units. Moisture/snow was forecasted on several occasions across the burn area, but snowfall accumulation was well below historically normal conditions. The snow across the project area melted rapidly which resulted in prescribed fire spreading away from the piles, but well within the project area. The district had a presence throughout the fall and responded appropriately to areas of concern. This strategy resulted in a long duration event. In late fall, a portion of the prescribed fire crossed into an area where fire was not desired within the unit. December 29<sup>th</sup> the decision was made to suppress this portion of the prescribed fire, and on January 18<sup>th</sup> the same portion of the prescribed fire was converted to a wildfire due to unwanted fire effects. This decision was made due to the potential for ash to enter the municipal watershed degrading water quality and community relations.

The Forest Supervisor requested a FLA of this event to explore opportunities to improve communications, safety, coordination, and the prescribed fire program. The FLA team identified two common themes after conversations with individuals involved in the planning and implementation of the prescribed fire.

The two themes are:

1. Communication
2. Burn Preparation and Risk

A summary of these conversations are organized by theme and includes recommendations for the forest to consider.



Ignition operations Gallinas Prescribed Fire, Andrew Valdez

## 1. Communications

- Multiple Burn Bosses transitioned throughout this event, due to its long term nature. The transition between Burn Bosses was not always clearly communicated.
- Field personnel expressed they did not always understand strategy and tactics and how they related to the big picture.
  - Cutting line to secure cold black
  - Not a common understanding why there were areas not lined prior to ignitions
  - Communications between field and leadership may have been unclear with regards to tactics
  - Lack of communication with regard to control lines
  - There may have been a reluctance to accept the rationale behind the decision to declare the prescribed fire a wildfire.
- Opportunities exist to improve the feedback loop across different levels of the organization.
  - Burn Boss to Line Officer, Duty Officer and Dispatch
  - Field personnel to Burn Boss
  - District Staff to Line Officer
- When additional personnel were requested to support the prescribed fire, resources believed it was optional to respond. The lack of resources availability and the concern with ash entering in the municipal watershed resulted in the decision of the prescribed fire being converted to a wildfire.
- Perspectives differ by functional areas.
  - The flexibility of the Gallinas NEPA decision relative to the layout of cutting units, size of the prescribed fire units, and the disposal of residual slash is unclear.
  - The intent of flagline review is unclear
    - Can changes to the cutting units be made during this review?
    - Fire leadership believes they have limited opportunity to adjust cutting units during the flagline review
    - Fire leadership expressed the need to have input into all projects including the layout of the Gallinas units
  - Timber Specialist believes opportunities exist for Fire leadership to provide input.
    - Ex: input for upcoming projects is solicited during the February staff meeting before flagline review
    - The Timber Specialist believes that during the flagline review there is an opportunity to adjust cutting units
  - Fire leadership believes the layout of units across the Gallinas landscape are somewhat random resulting in implementation challenges.
    - Ex: piles are showing up above units that were previously treated with fire
  - There are different opinions about how to treat residual slash (pile/lop and scatter).
  - Timber management believes deviation from the plan would impact partnerships and funding due to unplanned delays if cutting units are changed.
  - Fire leadership does not believe they are informed about where the treatments are occurring across the landscape.

- It is recognized by forest program managers and district personnel that there has been little to no involvement in planning and implementation of the Gallinas watershed project from Supervisor's Office.

## 2. Burn Preparation and Risk

- Fire leadership proactively implemented prescribed fire to mitigate future risk of wildfire under extreme fire weather conditions in the Gallinas drainage. This leadership is commendable.
- There is professional disagreement whether lines are needed during implementation of individual units within the Gallinas watershed project.
- There could be opportunities to sequence units (cutting and burning) strategically to help ensure successful implementation.
- The location of piles on steep slopes exposes fire personnel to additional risk due to poor footing in snowy conditions.
- Long term events can:
  - stress communications, organization, and resources;
  - increase fatigue; and
  - impact other projects.
- Fire organization is questioning if life/work balance principles apply
  - "Fire-year" vice fire season
    - Ex: dispatch has expanded to a 52 weeks/year service and need personnel to plan leave so there is year around coverage
    - Ex: people are rearranging leave around burn windows and wildfires instead of personal needs
  - With the three forest collaboration, fire personnel will be traveling more frequently for a more extended period of time
  - Fire organization is under greater stress to support other functional areas in addition to fire preparedness expectations

## Recommendations

- Continue working towards the three forest collaboration to help meet targets and increase capacity.
  - Ex: Explore agreements with partners for increased capacity
- Forest program managers and district personnel are committed to successfully complete the Gallinas watershed project. There are opportunities to explore the following:
  - Forest program managers and district staff review the NEPA decision to determine flexibility in implementation;
  - Forest program managers are available to support the completion of this project; and
  - Explore the opportunity to incorporate the GATE system to increase integration of resource program managers' concerns to complete the Gallinas watershed project.
    - Timber management leadership at the SO has the expertise to facilitate this process

- Review the planning cycle to insure input from all staff.
  - Ex: Flagline review – clarify the intent of the review and where staff can provide input or changes to the plan.
  - Revisit the five year plan and update.
- Forest fire staff provide clear leader’s intent and implement standard operational procedures.
  - Ex: Prescribed fire burn boss checklist
- Plan and discuss how the “fire-year” impacts life/work balance with all employees.
- Strengthen and empower employee feedback avenues.
  - Burn Bosses should continue to use After Action Reviews (AAR) to insure that employees have input.
  - Burn Bosses, Duty Officers and Line Officers have a face-to-face conversation to understand perspective and risk, and validate strategy.
  - Burn Boss is responsible to inform the employees of changes.