

## **Prescribed Burns Planned for the Pagosa Ranger District September 11, 2025**

The US Forest Service has just posted the public announcements for the upcoming planned prescribed burns for the Pagosa Ranger District. This is usually good news for some residents and a cause for concern from others. After the recent Oak Fire in Aspen Springs, those concerns are elevated.

Why would the Forest Service intentionally start a fire? Consider some history that can clarify what is going on.

Most of the forest around the Pagosa area is composed of ponderosa pine with an understory of Gambel oak (also known as scrub oak or oak brush). Since the retreat of the glaciers about 40,000 years ago, this area has seen frequent wildfires. As far back as we can determine, those fires happened about once every 7 years (that is not a misprint). Those lightning caused fires occurred so regularly that they thinned out the ponderosa and kept the oak brush in check. Ponderosa have thick bark that doesn't like to burn. They self-prune by letting their lower branches die as the tops grow upward. Those dead branches are not as flammable as the ones with green needles on them. (Those needles are full of volatile oils and can easily flare up with a touch of flame.) Because of that, those fires would often burn the oak and highly flammable junipers, but the flames couldn't reach up to ignite the green needles on the ponderosa. That kept the fires much smaller than what we are seeing today. Some of the baby ponderosa would burn. This natural thinning left a healthy forest with about 25 to 50 ponderosa per acre.

In 1880, the railroad was run into Chama. From there, narrow gauge spurs were run up most of the valleys around here in order harvest ponderosa. From Chama to Bayfield most of that forest was clearcut and left to grow back on its own. Starting in 1910, we began putting wildfires out. We did a good job of it. Unfortunately, after 100 years of putting out wildfires we began to realize that fire was what kept the forest healthy. Most of the forests around Pagosa now have 200 trees or more per acre. Oak brush and highly flammable juniper have grown underneath the ponderosa. This once healthy forest is still green, but all of that unchecked growth has led to an overcrowded, moisture stressed, stunted forest that is a prime candidate for beetles, disease or wildfire to run rampant. In the middle of this, we have built towns and subdivisions.

For over 20 years, the Forest Service has been trying to make the forests more resilient against fire and insects. This is usually done by thinning the excess trees and masticating (grinding) the oak understory. This can mimic what mother nature used to do with fire, creating gaps between trees and clumps of brush.

Gambel oak is very persistent. In our area, it grows back to the size where it is a problem again after 5 years or so. The most effective way to control that growth is to treat the area again but using fire to burn back the understory. That is mother nature's way to return the nutrients to the soil and allow the trees to regain that vital moisture that was being used by the brush. We live on the edge of the desert and those trees need all the moisture that they can get. Healthy trees with proper spacing are less likely to support large wildfires.

The District is planning to use fire to treat two areas that have been mechanically treated in the past. Brockover Mesa/Turkey Springs and Eight Mile Mesa have been chosen because the undergrowth has grown back to the point where wildfire could threaten populated areas. Months of preparation has gone into preparing these areas for burning in a controlled area. Lines have been established to contain the brush burns. Moisture levels, weather, predicted wind speeds and a host of other information is constantly evaluated before any ignition occurs. On the ground crews constantly monitor fire to make sure it doesn't spill over out of the prescribed area. After the fire, they will remain vigilant until they are sure that it cannot reignite.

Brockover Mesa has received significant amounts of rain over the last week and is close to the point where a prescribed burn is feasible. Eight Mile Mesa has not received enough moisture to be ready. The crews will keep monitoring moisture and weather before they do anything.

There is always a risk when dealing with fire, but everything possible is done to decrease that risk. If conditions aren't right, the fire will not be started. The Mill Creek prescribed fire was prepared and then the crews waited two years for the right conditions before anything was attempted. This diligence has paid off many times with safe thinning of the forest.

Smoke can be an issue during a prescribed burn. It usually lasts for three days to a week. Measures can be taken to lessen your exposure, but some people choose to take a vacation for a few days during a prescribed burn.

When considering risks and inconveniences from a prescribed burn it's sometimes helpful to consider the alternatives.

- Smoke from a prescribed fire can last for a week. Smoke from a wildfire can last for months.
- Prescribed burns only occur under ideal weather conditions. Wildfires often occur when conditions are at their worst (low humidity, high winds and temperatures).

- Fire crews are on the scene during a prescribed burn. During a wildfire, you never know what their response time will be.

Prescribed fire creates areas that are not likely to burn again for years. Controlled fire is the most natural and effective way to lessen the risk of uncontrolled wildfire. Your risk of being threatened by wildfire is much greater than the risk of being threatened by a controlled fire.

Whenever I think about prescribed fire, I remember the old saying, “I’d rather see smoke out my window today than fire at my back door tomorrow.”

If you have questions about the upcoming prescribed burns, please contact Pagosa Ranger District Fuels Specialist Brian Austin at [brian.austin@usda.gov](mailto:brian.austin@usda.gov) or by phone at (970) 264-1541.

For information and help preparing your home against wildfire threats, please go to [wildfireadapted.org](http://wildfireadapted.org) and sign up for a free site assessment under the Programs tab. You can also contact Bill Trimarco at [btrimarco@wildfireadapted.org](mailto:btrimarco@wildfireadapted.org)

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