



## Learning to Live with Fire – Last Minute Evacuations & Proactive Approaches

*by Dr. Doug Cram, Extension Forest and Fire Specialist*

Fire season has come early to New Mexico this year – as predicted given a La Niña climate pattern over the Pacific Ocean this winter (Figure 1). Typically, May and June are months when warmer temperatures and a lack of precipitation allow fuels to dry out creating conditions ripe for wildfire activity. Of course, strong winds can also create volatile wildfire conditions – as seen across the state this spring. Painfully, as we witnessed with the McBride, Nogal and Big Hole Fires, the time between ignition and a fully developed wildfire burning structures and hundreds of acres is minimal on a “Red Flag Warning” day (Figure 2). Given this reality, NMSU Extension has constructed an easy-to-follow wildfire evacuation checklist should you find yourself needing to flee from a fire with moments or minutes to respond (Figure 3).

Evacuating a home in the face of wildfire is a stressful event. As such, the ability to follow an emergency evacuation checklist should prove useful. Our checklist, an alliteration of 10 **Ps**, is as follows: **P**eople, **P**hones, and **P**rescriptions are the top three items to secure. In a worst-case scenario, homeowners may have only moments to leave or escape, in which case, evacuating people is obviously the highest priority. Just a few short years ago, a phone might not have been on the list, but today this tool can serve as a lifeline in emergencies. Beyond phone calls, it allows for sending text messages when phone lines are jammed, two-way tracking of movements, providing evacuation maps, and receiving emergency messages from authorities. Prescription medications that are taken daily are also essential to grab on the way out of the house (*e.g.*, insulin, inhaler, heart medication, EpiPen®, etc.).

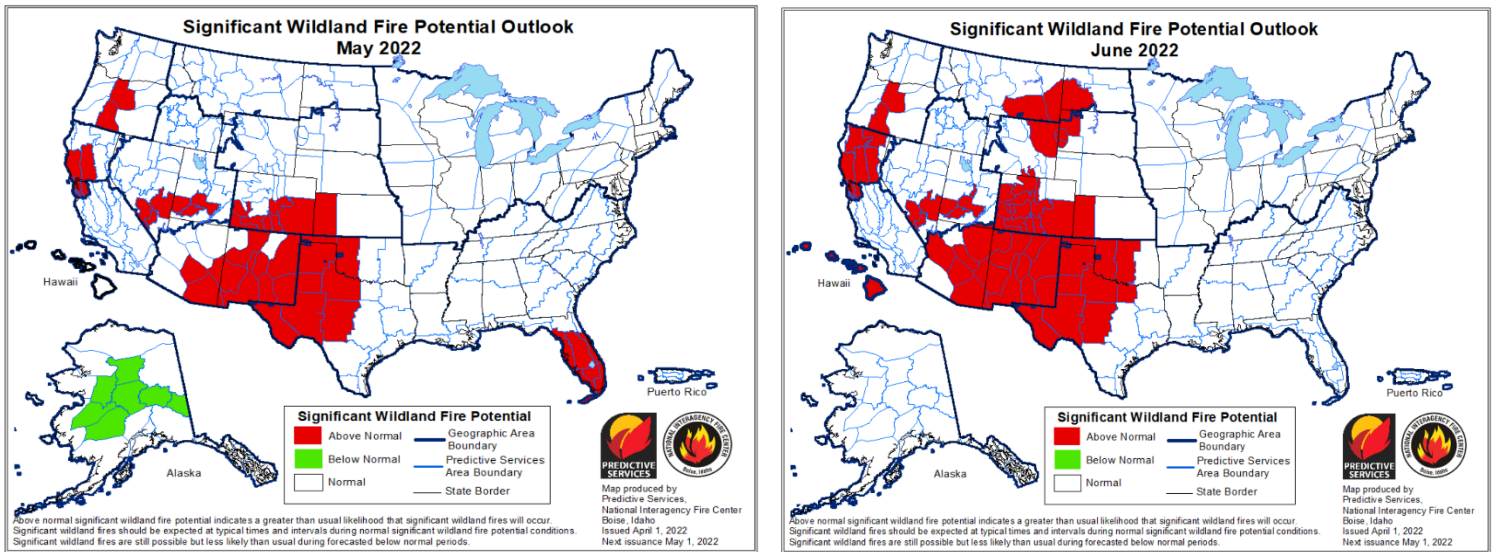
The relevancy of the remaining checklist items will vary from one individual to the next. **P**ets and **P**hotos are the two most cited categories people recall when listing items, they most miss following the loss of a home to wildfire. Grabbing a **P**ersonal computer, such as a laptop, is an easy way to secure

digital photos and, more and more each year, electronic documents/**P**apers. However, it should be noted, most documents, especially those that are government issued, can be replaced. As such, spending precious time sorting through documents and boxing them up is probably not the best use of time and mental focus when in the midst of an evacuation. Examples of **P**ersonal items include phone and computer charging cables, water bottles, change of clothes, toiletries, and sun and/or reading glasses. While **P**ocketbook (*i.e.*, purse, wallet, money clip) could be considered a personal item, it is important enough that it warrants its own category. Having a government issued ID, cash and/or a credit card during an evacuation will be useful. Finally, grab “**P**riceless” heirlooms, keepsakes, or similar items (*e.g.*, handwritten recipes, collections, artwork) as time and transportation constraints allow.

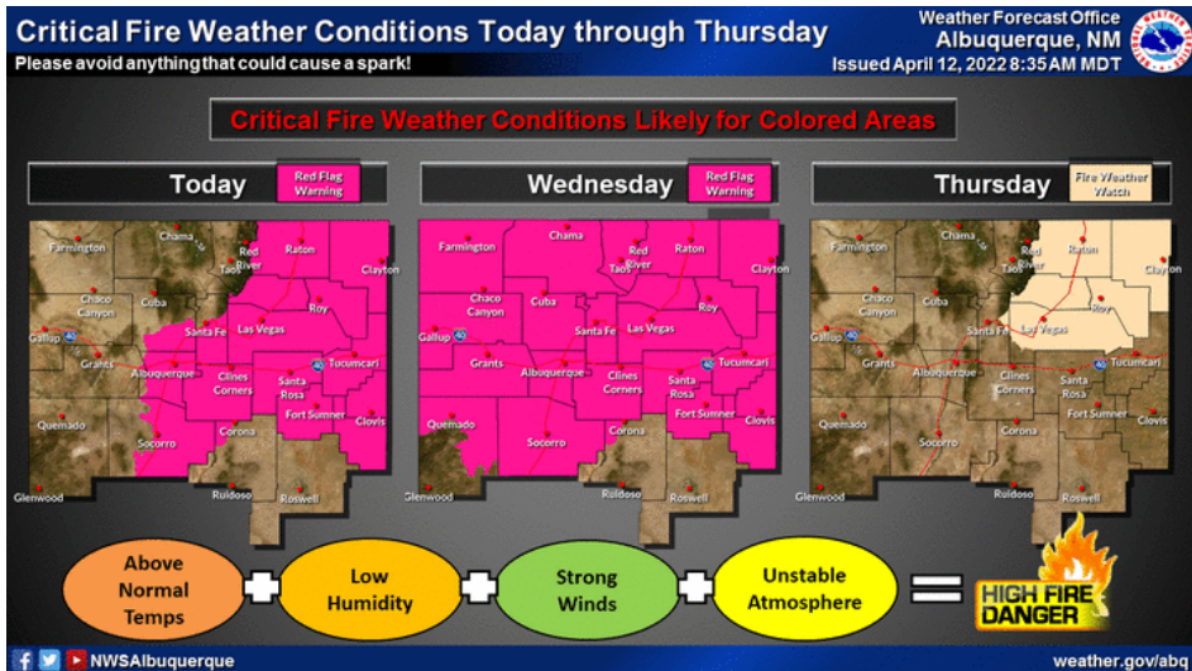
Once the checklist has been completed, it is time to load up a vehicle and go – remembering to turn on headlights and drive cautiously, especially if visibility is hampered by smoke. Depending on the nature of the fire, the entire neighborhood may be out on the road attempting to accomplish the same goal. This can result in traffic bottlenecks. To avoid this scenario, leave as early as possible and be familiar with alternative evacuation routes. If authorities suggest a two-hour evacuation window, consider using half the time to evacuate. Moreover, consider the timeframe an estimate at best – wildfires do not follow scripted timetables.

Unfortunately, as noted above, New Mexicans have already had to utilize the checklist this year, and in some cases, with only moments to evacuate. Visit our NMSU Learning to Live with Fire [webpage](#) and view our webinar series to learn how to proactively prepare for a wildfire evacuation (Session 2). Also, learn how to proactively prepare a home and yard to withstand flames, radiant heat and embers (Session 3). Our final webinar highlights unique wildland fire challenges found on farms and ranches (Session 4). It is never too late to be prepared.

**Figure 1. National Weather Service Fire Predictive Services for May and June 2022.**



**Figure 2. Red Flag Warnings are issued by the National Weather Service when warm temperatures, low relative humidity, and strong winds are expected to occur simultaneously creating an increased fire danger for the forecast area. If an ignition were to occur given these conditions, fire behavior and growth would be significant and containment difficult.**



Strong to damaging winds and low relative humidity are expected over the next several days across portions of northern and central New Mexico. Widespread critical fire weather conditions are expected as a result. Please do your part to create #OneLessSpark!

Figure 3. Wildfire Evacuation Checklist

## Learning to Live with Fire – Wildfire Evacuation Checklist (10 Ps)

**Leave Early**

**Forget the Garden Hose**

### Moments to Respond:

1) **P**eople

2) **P**hone

3) **P**rescriptions

Non-over-the-counter meds needed daily:  
heart medication, insulin, inhaler, EpiPen®,  
etc.

### Minutes to Respond:

- **P**ets

- **P**hotos

- **P**ocketbook (purse, wallet, money clip)

- **P**ersonal Computer (easy to grab laptop and/or external hard drive)

- **P**ersonal Items (phone and computer charging cords, water bottle, clothes, toiletries, sun and/or reading glasses)

- **“P**riceless” \_\_\_\_\_ (fill in the blank: heirlooms, collections, sentimental value, etc.)

- **P**apers (keep in mind, most documents can be replaced...)

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**Leave early!** Be familiar with multiple evacuation routes.  
Turn on vehicle headlights. Drive cautiously.

Do NOT plan to slow down a wildfire or save your house with a garden hose!  
Intense heat, flames and blowing smoke will render this approach useless & dangerous.



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