



SUSANA MARTINEZ
Governor
JOHN A. SANCHEZ
Lieutenant Governor

State of New Mexico
ENVIRONMENT DEPARTMENT

Office of the Secretary

Harold Runnels Building
1190 Saint Francis Drive, PO Box 5469
Santa Fe, NM 87502-5469
Telephone (505) 827-2855 Fax (505) 827-2836
www.nmenv.state.nm.us



DAVE MARTIN
Secretary
RAJ SOLOMON, P.E.
Deputy Secretary

NEW MEXICO DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH
Secretary Catherine Torres, M.D.
NEW MEXICO ENVIRONMENT DEPARTMENT
Secretary David Martin

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Media contacts: Chris J. Minnick (DOH)
Cell: 575-649-0754
Jim Winchester (NMED)
Office: 505-827-0314

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Media contacts: Chris J. Minnick
Cell: 575-649-0754

Air Quality in Several Areas of the State Poor due to Wildfires
People Advised to Take Precautions to Prevent Illness

(Santa Fe) –Wind conditions in New Mexico Monday and Tuesday are expected to circulate smoke from wildfires burning in New Mexico that could cause unhealthy air quality conditions especially in the north central area of the state through the week. The New Mexico Department of Health and the New Mexico Environment Department are reminding residents to take precautions to avoid adverse reactions to the smoke.

Smoke from the Las Conchas and Pacheco fires burning in north-central New Mexico is expected to affect communities to the east and northwest of the fire, in communities including Cochiti Pueblo, Santa Fe, Tesuque, Pojoaque, and Espanola.

“The wildfires burning in New Mexico can have a severe impact on air quality in several areas of the state, so I am urging everyone to take precautions,” said Department of Health Cabinet Secretary, Dr. Catherine Torres. “Poor air quality conditions associated with smoke are especially important for people with underlying health conditions such as asthma, emphysema, and cardiovascular disease. If symptoms associated with these conditions do not respond to the usual recommended medications, see a health care provider immediately.”

If you have questions about health-related issues due to smoke, please call the New Mexico Nurse Advice Line: 1-877-725-2552. If you have other concerns and want to talk to a mental health professional, please call 1-866-HELP-1-NM.

The New Mexico Environment Department and the U.S. Forest Service operate air quality monitors at multiple locations around the state. The monitors gather information about air quality conditions and help to

keep the public informed. Data from the Environment Department and Forest Service air monitors can be found at <http://www.nmenv.state.nm.us/aqb/WildfireSmokeResources.htm> and <http://www.wrcc.dri.edu/cgi-bin/smoke.pl>.

In areas without air quality monitoring equipment, visibility can serve as a good substitute in determining air quality. People should use the following guide to determine air quality from visibility: if visibility is 10 miles and up, the air quality is good; six to nine miles, air quality is moderate; three to five miles, air quality is unhealthy for sensitive people; one and a half to two and a half miles, air quality is unhealthy; one to one and a quarter miles, air quality is very unhealthy; and three quarters of a mile or less, air quality is hazardous.

The procedure for making personal observation to determine smoke concentrations is as follows:

- Face away from the sun
- Determine the limit of your visibility range by looking for targets at known distances. Visible range is that point at which even the high contrast objects totally disappear
- After determining visibility in miles, use the chart to determine the appropriate visibility category.

In areas of the state with poor visibility of three to five miles, people with heart or lung disease, the elderly, children, and pregnant women should avoid prolonged or heavy exertion and stay indoors as much as possible. If you have symptoms of lung or heart disease that may be related to excess smoke exposure, including repeated coughing, shortness of breath or difficulty breathing, wheezing, chest tightness or pain, heart palpitations, nausea, unusual fatigue or lightheadedness, contact your health care provider. Also be sure you have the medicines needed for your chronic heart or lung problems.

Many air-conditioning units do not adequately filter out smoke particulates. The New Mexico Environment Department advises that the public should avoid using swamp coolers when the smoke levels are higher than normal. Most swamp cooler filters have filter pore sizes that are much too large to filter out smoke particulates.

The Department of Health also recommends using a high-efficiency particulate air (HEPA) filter on air conditioners to reduce breathing problems. A HEPA filter may reduce the number of irritating fine particles in indoor air. When smoke levels are high, do not use anything that burns, such as candles, fireplaces, or gas stoves. Do not vacuum because vacuuming stirs up particles already inside your home.

Dr. Torres also said wildfires cause emotional distress as well as physical damage, and like other traumatic events, wildfires are particularly difficult for individuals with special needs.

“People may fear for their loved ones safety and separation from family members can occur, with hours or days passing before being reunited.” Dr. Torres said “The loss of home and personal items can lead, over time, to depression. The feelings of sadness and vulnerability increase if they lose their homes, pets, livestock, valuables and mementos. Children will react differently to a wildfire and its aftermath depending on their age, developmental level, and prior experiences. Some will withdraw, while others will have angry outbursts. Still others will become agitated or irritable. Parents should be sensitive to each child's coping style. Reassure children that they are safe. You may need to repeat this frequently even after the wildfire is out.”

For more information about recommended actions during smoke events and the health effects related to smoke from wildfires, go online to <http://nmhealth.org> under “What’s New.” For more information about fires in New Mexico go online to <http://nmfireinfo.wordpress.com>.