

# The Pagosa Sun

## County hosts discussion on potential Stage 3 fire restrictions

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On Monday morning, the Archuleta County administration building was bustling with activity as the Archuleta County Board of County Commissioners (BoCC) sat down with representatives from the U.S. Forest Service and the Office of Emergency Management (OEM) to discuss the possibility of going to Stage 3 fire restrictions.

“Stage 3 [fire restrictions] is a closure of National Forest System public lands,” District Ranger Kevin Khung of the Pagosa Ranger District said.

The discussion between Khung, Archuleta County Director of Emergency Management Mike Le Roux and the BoCC centered around the purpose, repercussions and possibilities of Stage 3 fire restrictions.

“In terms of the Stage 3, I really don’t want to scare-monger people, but the biggest impact is the loss of tourism dollars based on whatever part of the forest, partial or whole, is shut down,” Le Roux told The SUN following the meeting.

Currently, the county is in a Stage 2 fire ban, which includes restricting smoking to indoors and inside cars, no camp or cooking fires of any kind, and restricted welding. BoCC Chair Steve Wadley reminded the public that this was a work session, not a meeting of the BoCC.

“This is a work session, so no decisions are going to be made,” Wadley told the crowd. Commissioner Michael Whiting was absent from the meeting, and Commissioner Ronnie Maez joined the meeting by telephone.

Possibility of a  
Stage 3 restriction

County Administrator Bentley Henderson explained the purpose of the meeting was to talk with Le Roux and Khung about the possibility of a Stage 3 fire ban going into effect for the San Juan National Forest.

Henderson further explained that both men were invited to talk with the BoCC about repercussions and possibilities associated with a Stage 3 ban.

“What I also wanted to do was to put the [BoCC] in a position where if some action was necessary, say towards the end of this week, that we could be doing it with full information based on today’s conversation,” Henderson said.

Henderson then explained that the county was preparing for the possibility of a Stage 3 fire ban.

“If for some reason we need to have a ... special meeting Thursday morning to take action, we would be able to,” Henderson said.

Khung began by explaining that the Pagosa Ranger District had some fires over the

weekend, and, as of the meeting on Monday morning, had five confirmed starts of fires. “[Those fires] are currently full staff and full suppression,” Khung said.

Khung mentioned that the high activity of lightning on Sunday had caused some problems with fires.

“We will dry out over the next three or four days, so I expect that we will get some more smoke in the air and more confirmed starts,” Khung said in prediction for the days to come.

Khung explained the maps of fires he had looked at before Monday morning covered fires from Pagosa clear to the Continental Divide.

“Our jurisdiction [for fires] is more of a patchwork,” Le Roux told the BoCC.

Le Roux explained that by 5 o’clock Monday morning, the OEM had been chasing smoke reports across the county.

“So, currently, we are in Stage 2 restrictions,” Khung said about the national forest.

Khung said that many Forest Service patrols had been traveling around making contact with different individuals about fire restrictions.

“You know, for the most part, not complete compliance, if you will, but pretty good compliance,” Khung said about the Stage 2 ban.

Khung explained that with a Stage 2 fire ban in place, to go up meant going into Stage 3 restrictions, which would close the national forest to the public.

However, Khung mentioned, the national forest could go the other way depending on factors and return to Stage 1 fire restrictions.

Khung mentioned that most of the human fire problems came from unattended camp fires.

Public response had been fairly good, Khung said.

What is a Stage 3 restriction?

Le Roux talked with SUN staff Wednesday to help explain what a Stage 3 restriction would mean to the residents of Archuleta County.

According to Le Roux in the interview, the main effect of the Stage 3 restriction would be closing either part or all of the national forest to visitors.

However, Le Roux explained, as of Wednesday, there are no set perimeters or restrictions for residents of Archuleta County such as in Stage 1 or 2.

“I can’t see anywhere, certainly in the recent history — the last 15 years — I don’t even know if this region has ever even gone into a Stage 3 before,” Le Roux told The SUN.

In Stage 1, for example, smoking was restricted to designated areas, and campfires were permitted in pits; and in Stage 2 campfires of all types are banned and smoking is regulated to vehicles and indoor locations.

“There is not a definitive list of things that we would put in [for Stage 3],” Le Roux said.

The impact and effects to residents, according to Le Roux, are mainly economic.

Businesses that depend on tourism, Le Roux explained, would be the most affected.

“There’s not a lot else we can say no to that we [don’t] already have in Stage 2 [restrictions],” Le Roux said.

What it may mean, Le Roux explained to The SUN, is that residents of the county may have an economic impact from the loss of tourism-based activities.

How do you get to Stage 3?

“So, let’s talk about the mechanics of how you get to a Stage 3,” Khung said. First, according to Khung, you must hit eight of the 10 criteria outlined in the annual operating plan agreed to by the BoCC and Forest Service. To reach Stage 3, Khung explained, seven of the criteria must be reached. “Just based on some of the data that I have,” Khung said, “We are certainly at about six; and seven, eight, nine, 10 will vary a little bit.”

These criteria include:

- 1) A measured 1,000-hour time lag fuel moisture content of 12 percent or less.
- 2) A seasonal energy release component (ERC) above the 80th percentile. Khung explained that currently, the ERC is currently in the mid-80s.
- 3) The ignition component is 80 percent or above.
- 4) A three-day burning index that is above the 80th percentile.
- 5) Fire danger rating adjective class is very high or extreme.
- 6) That fire occurrence is impacting available suppression resources, making adequate initial attack difficult.
- 7) Local area preparedness level is three or above.
- 8) The local area is receiving high occurrences of fires and human-caused risk is expected to increase.
- 9) Adverse fire weather conditions and risks are predicted to continue.
- 10) And, finally, implementation of existing fire restrictions is not adequately reducing human-caused fires.

To be put into Stage 3 restrictions, Khung explained, a decision is made by multiple persons.

“It’s technically made by all the line officers on the National Forest, all the district rangers and forest supervisors in consultation with our fire [danger] officers,” Khung said.

There are certain Stage 3 fire restrictions for certain areas, Khung explained.

Maez mentioned that education was key to keeping Stage 2 restrictions.

Khung explained that there are two key criteria that will be heavily monitored.

First was if the fire restrictions cannot adequately reduce human-caused fires and, second, that the local area is expecting a lot of human-caused fire risk, Khung explained.

“We are monitoring all 10 of those components,” said Khung.

Khung explained that for Stage 3, the Forest Service meets with all partners, and if the Forest Service decides on Stage 3 restrictions, the commissioners will be informed.

“We’re there [for Stage 3], and I don’t expect less,” Khung said.

Human-caused fires are a major concern, Khung explained.

Currently, the mentality is a wait-and-see attitude to Stage 3, Khung explained.

Fire concerns and safety

“We are starting to get to a higher occurrence of fires,” Khung said.

Lightning was a major factor in the rise in fires, and the fires in current conditions are moving quickly, Khung explained.

“This is not unexpected to us, given the snowpack,” Wadley said.

The lack of precipitation and snow in the high country were major causes, Wadley explained.

Le Roux explained that currently in his jurisdiction, there had only been a small number

of noncompliant burners, and he emphasized that the Forest Service was having only slight problems with unattended campfires.

Le Roux expressed some concern over the recent rain, as it seemed this would lead uneducated visitors to feel the fire risks were alleviated.

“There is a risk there,” Le Roux said.

Le Roux explained that whether the forest is closed or not, the lightning strikes are still going to create fires.

Le Roux agreed that education to limit human fires was important.

To keep your house safe, Le Roux explained, do not leave flammable materials close to the home.

Le Roux explained that after someone has called 911, they have a responsibility to find out as much accurate information about a spotted fire or plume of smoke.

Khung warned that cigarettes and campfires can start a fire, but the hot undercarriage of a car could start a fire, as well.

Being mindful of where cars are parked and operating chain saws during certain hours were important details to think about, Khung explained.

Khung said that the Archuleta County Sheriff’s Office and OEM had spoken with the Forest Service about plans for educating the public.

“The conditions on the ground are perfect for a big blowup,” Maez said.

“Safety is our foremost concern,” Wadley said, in agreement with an earlier comment by Maez.

Economic impact to Archuleta County

The economic impact of the closure of the national forest to the public was a major topic of the conversation between the BoCC and Khung.

Khung warned of the impact of the closure of the national forest to the area.

“I would say the economic impact, in my opinion, would be there,” Khung said.

Khung mentioned that he could not speak to numbers, but that he believed the economic impact would be felt in the Archuleta County area.

Khung explained that Chimney Rock National Monument receives nearly 12,000 visits in the season it is open.

Jennie Green, tourism director, explained in a later interview that Stage 3 fire restrictions could have serious impacts on Archuleta County.

Green explained to The SUN that it is hard to determine what the economic impacts would be from a Stage 3 fire ban.

“It’s not going to be positive,” Green told The SUN.

Since it was only June, Green explained, the monsoon season would not come until at least July, and the monsoons would not solve the problems; only a good winter could fix the problem.

“No one wants Stage 3,” Green told The SUN. “But, the Forest Service is here to manage, they’re not focused on the economics of closing the forest.”

Green mentioned that she understood where the Forest Service was coming from since they were there to protect the land, and that from the town and county perspective, the economic impact was “huge.”

Green explained that this danger had not happened before, and the last time the fire danger was this high was 2002.

“We did not have near the number of people visiting, and that may not have been as big

an issue,” said Green to The SUN.

Green mentioned in the interview that Stage 3 restrictions could be an effect of bringing more people into the area.

Though the area has received rain recently, it was not enough to positively affect the fire danger, Green warned.

Seventy to 80 percent of Archuleta County is public lands, Green explained to The SUN, and if those areas were to close down, there would not be many amenities for the visitors to the area to enjoy.

“We have to protect the community,” Wadley said at the meeting.

Wadley pointed to when South Fork imposed strict bans, and very few businesses reopened after the bans.

Wadley urged the federal groups, local groups, county, town and citizens to come together.

“We’ve all got to come together to protect this community,” Wadley said.

Maez asked Khung if there was any sort of aid for businesses that might be affected by a Stage 3 fire ban.

“It’s a private business, they would need to talk to their insurance, et cetera,” said Khung.

Le Roux explained that the only way to obtain that help would be to declare the county a disaster area.

“That’s a day late and a dollar short for a lot of businesses,” Wadley mentioned.

How can Stage 3 restrictions be prevented?

Following the meeting, Green spoke with The SUN about the effort to help prevent Stage 3 restrictions from being enacted.

“What I took away from the meeting ... what is going to move us into Stage 3 fire restrictions is the inability to stop humans from causing fires,” Green said.

Green told The SUN that she had been in meetings with Khung and Le Roux about new ways to educate people about fire restrictions.

Green described that some major issues with communicating to the public fire restrictions included the lack of ways to contact visitors about fire restrictions, specifically about not smoking outdoors.

“It’s largely the people getting into the national forest, and ... not understanding what a Stage 2 fire ban restriction even means,” she said.

Posters, Green explained, would be posted around town to give out information, and that the Forest Service would approve the information on the posters.

“Education is key at this point,” Green said.

Talking and reaching out to people was vital, Green explained.

Volunteers, for the first time, Green explained, are requested to try to help educate the public about a Stage 2 restriction.

“We’ll see how many volunteers we get to be able to do this,” she said.

Green explained that the two entry points at Coyote Hill and East Fork were the two most-used entrances to the national forest. The plan for volunteers is to set up a booth at these points with a sign labeled “forest information” to try to help educate everyone going into the forest about the restrictions.

“If we get more volunteers, we’ll staff more booths,” Green said.

The call for volunteers states, “Volunteers are needed to staff information tables, distribute flyers and brochures and more.”

Green said that anything that can be done from a tourism standpoint to educate visitors, the better.

If you are interested in volunteering, contact Pam Hotchkiss at the Pagosa Springs Visitor Center at 585-1200, or by email at [visitorcenter@visitpagosasprings.com](mailto:visitorcenter@visitpagosasprings.com).