

# THE CERRO GRANDE FIRE BOMBSHELL

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## ABSTRACT

On 4 May 2000, the Bandelier National Monument initiated a prescribed fire south and west of the town of Los Alamos, New Mexico, and Los Alamos National Laboratory (LANL) to reduce accumulated forest fuels near Cerro Grande Peak. On 5 May, the fire was declared a wildfire because the fire had jumped its designated perimeter and fire behavior was extreme caused by high wind events and heavy fuel loads. With these heavy fuel loads and strong consistent 40 mph winds, along with steep slopes over the majority of the terrain, the wildfire sustained erratic behavior throughout its duration. In its most extreme state on 10 May, the wildfire was carried by very high winds, with embers blowing a mile or more across fire lines to the north, south, and east, entering Los Alamos Canyon, and moving towards the town and LANL. The fire eventually burned 48,000 acres.

The fire also destroyed 230 homes, which were located adjacent to the Santa Fe National Forest along the perimeter of the town. No tree thinning or fuel reduction had occurred on Forest Service land and this resulted in extreme fire behavior and high fire intensities next to private residences. The LANL, in contrast, created fuel breaks and completed tree-thinning projects after the Dome Wildfire of 1996 threatened its southern boundary. Consequently, LANL suffered minor structural losses and experienced primarily low-to-medium fire intensities.

On 7 May, the western area of the town of Los Alamos was evacuated, and on 8 May, the LANL was closed, which lasted for 3 weeks. As the fire progressed, the entire town of Los Alamos was evacuated with the eventual evacuation of the White Rock community. More than 25,000 residents, including LANL employees, were affected by the fire.

The combined cost of rehabilitating the burned watersheds to prevent flooding, cost of suppression, settling personal property losses, and restarting the LANL is estimated to exceed US\$1 billion. In February 2001, the New Mexico Legislature passed Senate Bill 1, which allows local county governments to declare emergencies that allow the removal of overgrown trees and brush next to communities on National Forest lands for wildfire protection purposes.

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