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News Release

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Pass Fire grows to 7,261 acres on Gila National Forest

Low intensity fire continues consuming understory fuels in grass and pine forest

TRUTH OR CONSEQUENCES, NM, May 26, 2023 – The Pass Fire on the Gila National Forest, Black Range Ranger District has grown to approximately 7,261 acres since it ignited May 18. It is currently located south of New Mexico Highway 59, about 1.5 miles west of Wolf Hollow Campground, and along the northern Gila Wilderness boundary. A Type 3 Incident Management Team will assume command of the fire tomorrow morning.

“We are allowing fire to play its natural role in this fire-dependent ecosystem, while protecting firefighter and public safety, infrastructure, and other values at risk,” said Agency Administrator Elizabeth Toney. “The fire burned fairly quickly through continuous grass across Cooney Prairie, and is currently creeping through pine understory, backing down slopes and occasionally torching in regenerating junipers.”

Ponderosa pine forests in the Southwest were sculpted by frequent, low-to-moderate fire conditions that promoted open, multi-aged stands on a diverse landscape with variable fuels that resisted large continuous fires. A century of wildland fire suppression has altered the composition of forests in the Southwest in a way that promotes high-intensity, large-scale fires. There is a critical need for low to moderate-intensity fire to be allowed to return to these forests, at a pace and scale that we have not experienced in our lifetimes.

Firefighters are using control elements, such as roads, trails and landscape features to prevent damage to infrastructure and keep the fire within a pre-identified area. They are currently removing fuels around Wolf Hollow Campground and Trailhead. It is not recommended to camp at Wolf Hollow due to the likelihood of fire reaching the area and heavy localized firefighter activity.

Functional fences and other range infrastructure have been identified and protected from burning by fire crews where possible, by pulling fuels away from wooden fenceposts and stays and running weed-eaters. Small burnout operations have been and will continue to be used to consume fuels and establish containment line around the historic Indian Creek Cabin and along

the south side of Highway 59. Using fire in this way allows crews to safely engage the fire on their terms and timeline, directing it around or away from values at risk.

Several fire scars exist around the area of the Pass Fire, which will help serve as containment features, should the fire reach them. Pass Fire ignited within the 2009 Bull Fire perimeter, which removed a large amount of ladder fuels from much of the area. The 2012 Whitewater Baldy fire scar is a few miles west of the western edge of the Pass Fire, and the more distant 2021 Johnson Fire and 2022 Black Fire scars lie to the south and east.

Limited values at risk in the area will be protected as appropriate if fire reaches pre-identified management action points. The large planning area allows for the Pass Fire to ultimately encompass about 75,000 acres south of Highway 59, including much of the northern Gila Wilderness east of Indian Creek, north of the Middle Fork Gila River and the Adobe Springs and White Rocks trails, and west of the East Fork Gila River and Beaver Creek.

Please use caution when entering or passing through the area, as heavy firefighter traffic and activity may exist along area roads. Air inversions are likely to cause low-lying smoke to settle into valleys overnight that may obscure visibility for travel. Smoke has been observed in Indian Creek and the Gila River drainages, impacting the Gila Cliff Dwelling National Monument, area campgrounds, and residential areas near Gila Hot Springs. Smoke-sensitive individuals should follow recommendations at [NM Fire Info | Smoke Management](#).

More information about the Pass Fire is available at [Nmgnf Pass Fire Information | InciWeb \(nwcg.gov\)](#) and on New Mexico Fire Information at [Fire crews responding to Pass Fire near Indian Creek CabinNM Fire Info](#) For more information contact Maribeth Pecotte at 575-388-8211 or Maribeth.Pecotte@usda.gov.

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