Ironically, however, it could be argued that we in the Western world as a rich people, as rich nations, have much more power to harm the local foodsheds or backyards of many others around the world, with our food dollars and policies, than we have the power to protect them (unless, of course, we stay local). To me, this makes local food a crucial answer even if it isn't the primary goal. Look local first—and when we do reach out for foods from more distant foodsheds, extend the same concern and fairness to their backyards that we do (or should) to our own.

Local food is one key answer to how we can best be responsible in our food choices—personally and policy-wise.

Fairness, as I see it, is the primary goal in our dealings with food. Fairness to ourselves—the health of ourselves and our families, to the health of our local foodsheds, to the health of all people and their backyards, and fairness to the planet and future generations. Ultimately, we might circle back to ourselves and see that our attempt to be fair to all around us is in fact being fundamentally fair to ourselves and our moral well-being. ■

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Fear and Loathing Near Las Vegas

Personal Reflections on the Calf Canyon Fire (Part 1)

BY **CHARLES CURTIN**

It is Sunday, May 8th, just after dawn on the Cañoncito creek north of Mora, New Mexico. I've walked out of the house to see fingers of flames working their way down a hillside across the valley. It's game on! I'm about to find out if weeks of preparation will hold back the fires.

I found myself alone amongst a virtual moonscape of fire-blackened trees.

As hotshot crews light backburns that race upslope to meet the advancing flames, I rehash a mental checklist of what's left to do. The wood is moved away from the house (check). Pumps are set, and hose line is laid (check). Everything possible around the farm has been hosed down (check). Trees and brush around the house cleared to the extent possible (check). I set to work turning off the propane tanks, moving the tractor and my old truck to the fields below the house, and securing the livestock in a mowed and wetted area.

We'd been lucky. The fire's behavior was suppressed by arriving during the most cool and humid part of the day. It would have been very different if the fires had arrived mid-day when spotting off the ridge could have ignited the whole area. I sighed with relief. There might be some fires in a day or two, but it would not be too bad, it would be working down the valley, and now we had a good, blackened area upwind. Our valley was spared, I thought…

I was wrong.

A few hours later, the fire roared across the valley in full fury. This time, rather than a relatively placid descending burn, it was a head-fire driven by 70 mph winds. A wall of 50-foot flames ripped across the landscape. The professional firefighters bugged out to the safety of the fields while a handful of unpaid local volunteers remained to do what they could to protect their community's homes and property.

What the authorities perceived to be scofflaws and troublemakers were largely capable, independent people doing their best to selflessly help their community.

In the end, all the hills on the north side of the valley were blackened—200-plus-year-old ponderosa and junipers charred to a crisp. Once again, we'd been lucky in that between a thinned forest, the protection of fields below the house, and courageous local firefighters, our farm was spared, but every neighbor lost homes or outbuildings.

After the fire, I had expected, as is the usual procedure, for some fire crews to stick around to mop up hot spots and be on call if conditions changed. Instead, they were re-deployed north to combat the flaming front near Holman and Chacon. An eerie quiet descended on the valley as I found myself alone amongst a virtual moonscape of fire-blackened trees. As night fell, the scene was a bit akin to Dante's Inferno and a descent into hell; here and there in the dark, flames licked at a stump or a fallen tree, and occasionally, a previously unburned tree would erupt in a geyser of red-orange flame.

This eerie tranquility was not to last. A few hours later, the wind shifted again, coming straight down the valley blowing sparks and embers toward unburned areas near the farm. Too far from water for pumps, I scrambled with a shovel to put out hot spots. After several hours, I had knocked down the worst of the flames but decided in the long term this action was futile; there were too many sparks and embers and way too much ground for one person to cover. Before the winds picked up, I'd need some help. In my truck I raced down the road looking for crews doing mop-up who could put some water on the situation.

There were no crews to be found. The town was completely deserted!

I drove to the local police roadblock a mile or so down the road. The young cop on duty told me he had no way of contacting fire authorities, and even if he could, no one was coming. All boots on the ground had moved north. He ordered me to go home and wait. But wait for what? Sit by and watch homes burn?

As a last-ditch effort, I asked the cop if I drove another mile down the road to the local fire station would he let me back through the roadblock. He "might" if I was quick about it. I rushed down the road looking for help. Surely someone would be there operating the radios and coordinating local efforts.

Protest in Mora, New Mexico, May 2022 © Charles Curtin

Nothing… the place was shuttered and dark. I spoke to a fire crew topping up water in a brush truck out front. They were not from the area and had no idea where they were—but they said they would send help if they met somebody who was not busy. In short, I was on my own. I drove back through the roadblock and, fearing the worst, headed for home.

By some miracle, the sparks and embers had not yet ignited remaining unburned areas. I went to work again with a shovel covering the flaming remnants of a neighbor's sawmill, and then spent the rest of the night putting out fires near neighbor's homes and outbuildings and knocking out any new fires that cropped up near our place with a shovel or the bucket of our Kubota tractor. At dawn, some fire crews returned and began some mop-up work. I walked home, fell face-first on top of the bed and fully clothed, slept.

Prelude

We'd been spared, in part because I had stayed in defiance of federal evacuation orders. I'd stayed because, as a former burn boss and wildland firefighter, I had experience with wildfire and knew to stay out of the way of the professionals. I believed I could do more for my community and farm by staying. We were many miles from the fire, so the odds of the flames ever reaching us seemed low. We also had some livestock I wanted to keep a close eye on. Because of this decision, I had a front-row seat to the drama unfolding in our valley and across the region.

However, the drama actually began weeks earlier when the fires first approached the nearest town of Mora. Mora is a community of a few hundred people set in a 2,000-square-mile county containing about 4,500 people. That's roughly two people per square mile or about half the number per square mile that denoted the boundary of the frontier. The county is over 80 percent Hispanic, and many of these people also have Indigenous ethnic roots (mostly Pueblo or Apache).

These facts are important because Mora is strong in tradition and independence and has long viewed outsiders in general, and Anglos in particular, with suspicion. And with good reason: the last time the feds arrived in force was during the 1847 Taos revolt when the U.S. Cavalry shelled Mora—burning it to the ground. This was followed in the 1850s by the government taking possession without compensation of 800 prime acres from the Mora Land Grant. And in 1916, still more communal lands were auctioned off over local objections on the steps of the San Miguel Courthouse. So, when the fires approached, and the police, the National Guard and firefighters rolled into town and ordered the locals to leave, for many, it tore the scab off historical wounds.

In addition, by order of emergency management, the power was cut to prevent additional fires from downed power lines. As was typical for many people, I lived for weeks with the roar of a generator amidst a jumble of extension cords, without water, and with minimal amounts of food. As supplies ran low, the community was up against another threat—roadblocks.

A series of roadblocks would pop up and disappear without any apparent logic. The challenge was, unless you found a sympathetic sheriff, once you left, you were not allowed to return. At one point, I left for a food run to Las Vegas on an open road, only to find it closed on the way back. The police confiscated our driver's licenses and forced us to sit in line. After an hour of waiting, without explanation, they gave us back our licenses and sent us on our way.

Government trucks with sympathetic drivers were used to smuggle in food and supplies.

I understand the need not to have a community that had been evacuated vulnerable to the potential looting of abandoned homes and businesses. At the same time, there were people present in the community for a good reason. Some helping family and neighbors, others were too old, infirm, or poor to leave. Evacuation is expensive and many people simply could not afford to do it. It would have made more sense to have people who were staying register and be given a pass card to get through the roadblocks and receive help from the authorities. Often the roadblocks felt like unnecessary harassment. There were ways to sneak in through back roads—so it became yet another issue to overcome in our efforts to assist neighbors or tend to livestock.

The situation became so dire that locals had to set up their own food distribution center. When private pickup trucks hauling food for the community were halted at roadblocks, government trucks with sympathetic drivers were used to bring food and supplies past the police blockades. Tempers reached such a pitch that people began running roadblocks. Some firefighters were confronted at gunpoint, and a senior politician threatened to pull out all firefighting resources, reportedly saying of the people in Mora, "*Let them burn*." This further fueled anger and mistrust, and community protests erupted.

The aftermath © Charles Curtin

Meanwhile, concurrent with the roadblocks and other challenges, the fires had taken out the cell towers in the valley. While there was a temporary tower setup behind the electric co-op, this only covered a small area within the town of Mora. Many of us daily took our place next to La Jicarita Telephone Co-op to hear news of where the fire was and to contact loved ones. The communications blackout in much of the valley further endangered people by denying them up-to-date information and hampering the work of firefighters who also had poor communications. All of this was unnecessary because mobile cell towers do exist and (the world over) are used in times of conflict or crisis. It was not lost on the locals that widely available tools and technologies were not employed to help make everyone's efforts easier and safer.

Concluding Thoughts

Eventually the roadblocks ended. The power and internet returned, and finally an officially sanctioned food distribution center was established. The tensions eased and people began returning to the valley—many of them to find their homes and livelihoods destroyed.

The whole experience was an abject reminder of the profound disconnect in understanding how to meaningfully engage and interact with a community-in-crisis. The authority's efforts to protect public safety were ignorant at times of what the people's real needs were and for a period of time outside authorities became yet another stressful reality to overcome.

Meanwhile, what the authorities perceived to be scofflaws and troublemakers were largely capable, independent people doing their best to selflessly help their community. As my experience bore out—local engagement was necessary and important in guiding the outside authorities in a more cohesive understanding of what was needed to be or real assistance the community.

However, all this was soon to change, as in the wake of the fire profoundly different forces took hold, the implications of which will be the focus on the next installment of this article. ■

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PUBLIC LANDS LEASE WILL TRIPLE NM'S RENEWABLE ENERGY CAPACITY

The New Mexico State Land Office recently completed an auction of about 147,685 acres of public land for wind energy production. The leases, which went to Pattern Energy, will increase renewable energy (RE) capacity on state land to more than 1,200 megawatts (MW), compared with about 400 MW in 2019. Public Lands Commissioner Stephanie García Richard said that it was the largest RE lease sale in the state's history. The project is expected to be three times larger than the state's current largest wind farm, making it the largest in the Western hemisphere.

The lands leased were part of the larger SunZia Wind Project, which will ultimately have a capacity of 3,000 MW in Lincoln, Torrance and San Miguel counties. The project will generate enough electricity to power 2.9 million homes. That will be augmented by the 1,050 MW Western Spirit Wind project, which was completed in December 2021.

Wind power is currently ranked second, after coal, in New Mexico's total electricity generation. Wind alone generated about 30 percent of the state's electricity in 2021, when renewables for the first time accounted for the largest share of in-state electricity generation. Most of the wind projects are in eastern New Mexico. The 11 leases sold were mostly in central New Mexico: five in Lincoln County, four in Torrance County, and two spanning Torrance and San Miguel counties. The winning bids totaled about $9.3 million. The State Land Office expects them to produce $196 million in revenue during their lifetime of operation (through 2077). The revenue will go to the Land Office and its beneficiaries—mostly public schools, universities and hospitals.

Pattern's new leases brought New Mexico's total wind farm lease count to 26. The state also has 12 solar power leases, and the Land Office reported it has 56 applications being processed. Pattern Energy has already built nearly 1,600 MW of wind projects in New Mexico and has committed to $6 billion in wind energy and related infrastructure projects in the state over the next decade.