

WILDLAND FIRE AND THE VERMEJO FIRE DEPARTMENT

Fire is a natural component of the ecosystems of Vermejo. Ponderosa pine forests, by far the most common forest type on the property, historically had a naturally recurring fire interval of 6 to 13 years. The southern Sangre de Cristo Mountains have a high number of lightning strikes per year and lightning is the cause of most wildland fires in the region. Drought and years of fire suppression have increased the severity of fire behavior in the southwest. The region is seeing a trend of extreme fire behaviors where fire can have an average spread of anywhere from 50-100 acres per hour. Recent large fires in the region include the Ute Park Fire, Cook's Peak Fire, and the Hermit's Peak and Calf Canyon Fires.

Colfax County District 7

The Vermejo Fire Department (Colfax County District 7) is a county volunteer fire department that covers most of Vermejo and is run by volunteers that are also Vermejo staff. Vermejo's Fire and Safety Coordinator heads up the department as the district Fire Chief. The fire department has both structural and wildland fire fighters. The Vermejo Fire Station is located on the Spring Canyon Ridge near headquarters and houses a training facility and bays for the department's engines.

Vermejo - CCD7 Engines include:

Type 1 - Freightliner	1,500 gallons 4x4
Type 1 - International	1,000 gallons
2 Type 6 - F350 Super Duty	250 gallons
Type 7 - Roxor	100 gallons
Water Tender - Ford	3,000 gallons

Vermejo will also be adding two new units: a Type 3 and a Type 6 in 2024.

The Vermejo Fire Department has 12 firefighters. In addition to being structurally trained, every member of the department is also wildland fire certified. To become a certified wildland firefighter, you must attend and pass S130/190 Introduction to Fire course put on by New Mexico State Forestry. In addition to the entry level courses, you must also pass an arduous pack test by hiking 3 miles in 46 minutes, with a 45-pound backpack or weighted vest.

Wildland Fire and Response

When a fire is reported, a staffed engine with 2-3 Vermejo Wildland firefighters will respond with a Type 6 engine and are likely to be the first on scene to assess the fire. Fire behavior is relayed by radio or phone by the incident commander to incoming Vermejo resources and to New Mexico State Forestry, Cimarron District. After a size up, additional outside resources (neighboring departments) may be deployed or told to stand down. Initial fire sizes can range from a single tree lightening snag to a multiple acre fire. In 2023, CCD7 responded to 12 wildland fires on Vermejo.

Fires are suppressed by cutting lines, using sawyers to remove brush and trees, air resources (helicopters and seat planes that drop slurry) back burning, and direct attack with type 6 and 7 engines using water.

CCD7 volunteers and engines also may be requested to assist at larger regional fires. In 2023, CCD7 staff rotated shifts manning the Type 1 engine for structure protection on the 340,000+ acre Hermit's Peak/Calf Canyon Fire near Las Vegas, NM.

Large Wildland Fires on Vermejo

In 2001, the York Fire burned 5,625 acres in Upper York Canyon on Vermejo. In 2002, the 92,000 acre Ponil Complex Fire burned portions of the Philmont Scout Ranch, the Valle Vidal Unit of the Carson National Forest and on to Vermejo along Cerrososo Canyon. At the same time, the Spring Fire burned 6,850 acres on Vermejo in upper Spring Canyon and the top of the Canadian as well as 20,000+ acres on Tercio Ranch in Colorado. The West Fork Fire burned 5,311 acres in 2008 in the upper Chimney and Mercer canyons and in 2010 the H12 fire burned 5,100 acres from north of Bernal Lake up to the Colorado border north of Pena Flor.

Managed Fire

Vermejo Forestry and CCD7 are working with New Mexico State Forestry to include managed fire as a response option in some areas. If conditions are favorable, a managed fire would allow low intensity fire to burn in a designated fire management unit instead of immediately trying to suppress or put out the fire. Returning fire to the ecosystems is a goal of the Forestry department to clear out decadent grasses in the undergrowth, overly dense patches of small trees, or low branches while returning nutrients to the soil. Managed fire, along with forestry treatments could prevent a future catastrophic crown fire and would begin to return a natural fire component to the forest ecosystems on the property.

EMS Response

Vermejo has an EMT and Wilderness Medical First Responder team comprised of 10 members who are under local medical direction. Each member attends an 8 day in-person Wilderness First Responder course where they are challenged with numerous real worlds situations including trauma and medical events. Every member of the EMS team attends continuing education sessions annually as a part of the training regime.

Frequently Asked Questions:

1. If I see a fire, what should I do? Provide your best estimate of where the fire is and the size and color of smoke plume. Example: 1 mile south of Crow Gate, small plume of grey smoke, flames are not visible. Make radio/cellular contact with the Vermejo front desk or any Vermejo staff member and they can relay information to Vermejo Fire Department or New Mexico State Forestry.

2. What happens if there is a medical emergency? In the event of a medical emergency, Vermejo's medical team will respond to the incident and provide (BLS) care. Responders are trained to stabilize patients and in a non-emergent situation, transport patients by POV to our local hospital for care. Should a patient need a higher level of care (ALS), responders will call for transport from Raton Fire and Emergency Department. Vermejo EMS is currently in the process of adding an ambulance to our team and as a result, making patient transport easier and more available.