

NEW MEXICO DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH  
Secretary Catherine Torres, M.D.

For Immediate Release:  
June 3, 2011

Media contact: Chris J. Minnick  
Cell: 575-649-0754

### **Dept. of Health Advises Residents to Take Precautions with Smoke from Wildfires**

(Santa Fe) – The New Mexico Department of Health is advising residents to take special precautions due to smoke and ash from several wildfires burning in New Mexico and Arizona. Sensitive groups such as the elderly, small children or any individuals with respiratory or heart problems should leave the area where the smoke levels are high until the smoke dissipates or stay inside as much as possible. People with chronic respiratory or heart disease are also urged not to use swamp coolers as they will pull the smoke inside.

Air quality conditions associated with smoke are especially important for people with underlying health conditions such as asthma, emphysema, and cardiovascular disease. If symptoms associated with these conditions do not respond to the usual recommended medications, people are advised to see a health care provider immediately.

“Smoke can hurt your eyes, irritate your respiratory system, and intensify chronic heart and lung problems and people with heart disease may experience chest pain, rapid heartbeat, and shortness of breath or fatigue,” said Department of Health Cabinet Secretary, Dr. Catherine Torres. “If there is smoke nearby, remain indoors and close doors and windows to limit smoke inhalation. Also be sure you have the medicines needed for your chronic heart or lung problems.”

The Department of Health recommends using a high-efficiency particulate air (HEPA) filter on air conditioners to reduce breathing problems. A HEPA filter may reduce the number of irritating fine particles in indoor air. When smoke levels are high, do not use anything that burns, such as candles, fireplaces, or gas stoves. Do not vacuum because vacuuming stirs up particles already inside your home.

The Air Quality Bureau of the New Mexico Environment Department operates monitors at multiple locations around the state. These monitors gather information about air quality conditions and help to keep the public informed. Data from these monitors can be found at <http://air.nmenv.state.nm.us/>. The Forest Service also operates some equipment monitors in New Mexico near specific wildfires. Data from these monitors is available at <http://www.satguard.com/usfs/default.asp>

In areas without air quality monitoring equipment, visibility can serve as a good substitute in determining air quality. The following chart includes guidelines for determining air quality from visibility.

Visibility Category	Visibility in Miles
Good	10 miles and up
Moderate	6 to 9
Unhealthy for Sensitive People	3 to 5
Unhealthy	1½ to 2½
Very Unhealthy	1 to 1¼
Hazardous	¾ mile or less

The procedure for making personal observation to determine smoke concentrations in as follows:

- Face away from the sun
- Determine the limit of your visibility range by looking for targets at known distances (miles). Visible range is that point at which even the high contrast objects totally disappear
- After determining visibility in miles, use the chart to determine the appropriate visibility category.

To stay safe from wildfires the Department of Health recommends the following:

- Talk to your neighbors about wildfire safety and to plan how the neighborhood could organize during and after a wildfire.
- Make plans to take care of children who may be on their own if parents can't get home. Find out who has special needs or skills.
- Conduct a family fire drill so your children know all the ways to escape your home. Make sure they understand that they should never hide or stop to take belongings.
- Teach children to dial 911 in an emergency and tell dispatchers their address and the reason for the call. Post emergency phone numbers near every phone.
- Assemble a disaster supplies kit to have supplies ready before an emergency occurs. The kit should include a three day supply of water with one gallon per person and for pets, one change of clothes and one blanket per person, a first aid kit with necessary medicines, emergency tools including a battery powered radio and flashlight with extra batteries, sanitation supplies, and extra car keys and cash or travelers checks.
- Install a smoke detector on each level of your home. If you live in a forested area, you may want to keep face masks on hand to protect you from smoke.
- Rake leaves, dead limbs, and twigs away from the base of your home. Remove tree limbs near the ground and dead branches that extend over the roof. Ask the power company to clear branches from power lines.

For more information about the health effects related to smoke from wildfires, go online to <http://nmhealth.org/eheb/index.shtml>. For more information about fires in New Mexico go online to <http://nmfireinfo.wordpress.com>.

###