



FINISHING STRONG

Mickel ends Olympics with sixth in dual moguls 6A

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There's plenty of events this week in the area 3B

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Low snowpack, drought heighten fears of severe wildfire



Paul Valdez, Upper Pine River Fire Protection District's wildfire coordinator, shows how fire embers can get under the siding of a building and start a fire. Covering gaps like these with one-eighth inch or smaller wire screens can prevent embers from infiltrating a home.

JERRY MCBRIDE/Durango Herald photos

'Set up for a really bad year'

BY SCOUT EDMONDSON
HERALD STAFF WRITER

A second consecutive year of below-average snowfall and above-average temperatures has firefighters across the Western United States concerned.

In La Plata County, fire departments are anticipating a particularly severe wildfire season.

"We're set up for a really bad year," said Durango Fire Protection District Chief Randy Black. "We thought last year was going to be bad, and this year's looking worse."

According to the U.S. Drought Monitor, nearly the entire Western half of the United States is facing drought conditions because of a lack of snowfall.

Locally, snowpack in the San Juan Mountains is about 49% of the historical February average – levels similar to 2002 and 2018, when the Missionary Ridge and 416 fires ignited – according to the National Resource Conservation Service.

In a typical year, different regions across the West face heightened drought conditions heading into fire sea-



Paul Valdez, Upper Pine River Fire Protection District's wildfire coordinator, drives past trees that have been logged during a fire mitigation project. (Jerry McBride/Durango Herald)

son. Because so much of the Western United States is already experiencing drought, wildfires could ignite across the region, stretching local, state and federal firefighting agencies thin as they work to protect communities and infrastructure.

Because of that, fire agencies in La Plata County are beginning to front-load resources ahead of the upcoming fire season. But preparing communities for wildfire

requires more than equipping agencies with resources, Black said. That is where homeowners come in.

"You need to be taking advantage of this weather and be making your house as safe as possible," he said.

Home fire mitigation 101

Fire agencies and community nonprofits like Wildfire Adapted Partnerships will send certified staff members to a resident's house and ex-

amine its risk. The home assessments are free of charge and can be a valuable tool to help people learn where to start on their home fire mitigation.

Paul Valdez, Upper Pine River Fire Protection District's wildfire coordinator, has studied wildfires and how they interact with structures for years.

Contrary to popular belief,

See WILDFIRE, 8A

LA PLATA MOUNTAINS

Mining project draws scrutiny

Representative fields questions at community discussion

BY JESSICA BOWMAN
HERALD STAFF WRITER

As the Metallic Minerals exploratory mining project in the La Plata Mountains gains momentum, local opposition is growing.

On Saturday, the La Plata Mountains and Public Lands Coalition, a community interest group developed to oppose the mining project, hosted a Valentine's Day panel focused on protecting the mountain range, and the region's public lands.

The event featured local experts and stakeholder representatives, including Brian Eisenbraun, external relations manager for Metallic Minerals Corp. Hen spent much of the event fielding pointed questions from residents concerned about environmental risks, public lands use and long-term oversight.

The Vancouver-based exploration company acquired claims covering about 19 square miles in the La Platas roughly six years ago to study potentially profitable mineral resources.

About 90% of the project area, northwest of La Plata Canyon, sits on public land managed primarily by the U.S. Forest Service, while the remainder consists of private patented mining claims – a legacy of the 1872 Mining Law.

The project has drawn criticism from residents and environmental advocates who argue disturbance of the wilderness ecosystem and watershed contamination are inevitable consequences of drilling.

"Most of our headwaters are on public lands. So when we talk about La Platas, we're talking about La Plata River and the Mancos River," one panelist said. "Those support thousands of rural and Indigenous residents downstream. So water quality is absolutely vital."

Chara Ragland, president of the Bonita Peak Superfund Community Advisory Group, pointed to the region's mining history near Silverton as a cautionary example, warning that contamination can outlast both companies and regulators.

See MINING, 8A

Does Mother Nature have some tricks up her sleeve?

Winter storm blows into Southwest Colorado; whiteout conditions could make travel difficult

BY SCOUT EDMONDSON
HERALD STAFF WRITER

A potent winter storm blew in this week, bringing strong winds and the potential for several feet of snow in the San Juan Mountains.

The National Weather Service issued winter storm warnings and advisories, as well as high wind warnings, for much of the Western Slope, including the Four Corners. NWS meteorologist Braeden Winters said the storm will last

through Thursday, with two waves of storm energy bearing heavy precipitation and winds.

"At the start of the storm, most of the snow is going to stay up in the mountains," he said.

Durango received a dusting of snow and the mountains had received several inches as of Tuesday morning. Citing inclement weather and poor road

conditions, La Plata County government and the Bayfield and Durango school districts delayed opening by two hours.

Winters said the NWS expects 6 to 12 inches of snow in and around Durango by Thursday morning.

The San Juan Mountains, on the other hand, could see several feet of snow. The Colorado Avalanche Information

Center's weather modeling predicts 20 to 25 inches in most places of the southern San Juan Mountains by Thursday, with higher local totals.

CAIC issued an avalanche warning for the San Juan Mountains on Tuesday morning ahead of the most intense rounds of snowfall. The center

See STORM, 8A