

Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20510

June 16th, 2022

The Honorable Tom Vilsack
Secretary of Agriculture
U.S. Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Avenue, SW
Washington, D.C. 20250

Dear Secretary Vilsack,

New Mexico is experiencing an historic wildfire season that is creating significant challenges for communities throughout the state. As part of ongoing post-fire response and recovery efforts, we urge the United States Department of Agriculture, including the Carson and Santa Fe National Forests, to address firewood needs for communities in New Mexico who are impacted by catastrophic wildfires.

The Hermit's Peak/Calf Canyon fire is the largest fire in New Mexico's recorded history, and prolonged extreme drought, worsened by a changing climate, increases the likelihood of continued catastrophic wildfires. So far this year, the acreage burned in the U.S. exceeds the prior 10-year average by 112%, and states in the Southwest are disproportionately impacted by severe wildfire and ongoing drought.¹ Catastrophic wildfires have resulted in ecological damages, loss of homes, soil burns, and degradation of watershed health, and periods of elevated fire risk have resulted in restricted access to forests, limiting the ability of many communities to harvest necessary firewood.

Counties in New Mexico rely on wood far more than the national average. For example, according to the 2018 Census, nearly 39% of homes in McKinley County, NM, were wood-heated, while the national percentage was less than 2% for the same year.² For many homes in northern New Mexico, firewood is the primary source of heat.³ Harvested firewood is especially important for small, rural, and low-income communities that rely on wood for heating during winter months as well as for cooking year-round. As a measure to combat the ongoing wildfires, access to National Forests in northern New Mexico has been severely limited, impeding communities' ability to harvest firewood.

¹ *National Significant Wildland Fire Potential Outlook*. (June 1, 2022). Predictive Services National Interagency Fire Cent. https://www.predictiveservices.nifc.gov/outlooks/monthly_seasonal_outlook.pdf

² Ortman, J. & Raglin, D. (February 26, 2018). *More Than 30% of Homes Heated With Wood In Some Counties* <https://www.census.gov/library/stories/2018/02/who-knew-wood-burning-fuel.html>

³ *Taos-area Small Diameter Wood Products Feasibility Study*. (November, 2020). Del Medio Forestry. <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5fb74a26c544385564699e6d/t/611fc87393d1f143bc8e4407/1629472908886/TaosCountyWoodProductsFeasibilityStudy+%282%29.pdf>

Part of post-fire recovery will involve combating heat insecurity for families impacted by wildfires. Firewood banks, modeled after foodbanks, provide firewood to low-income communities and are an essential form of fuel assistance while there are restrictions on forest access. Assistance like firewood banks will be fundamental to serving New Mexican communities in the aftermath of these historic wildfires.

We ask that USDA work as quickly as possible to address critical firewood needs in impacted New Mexican communities. Specifically, we recommend that the Forest Service offer contracts to local logging businesses to cut trees suitable for firewood in National Environmental Protection Act (NEPA) cleared areas and transport and unload this wood at pre-identified community locations. Sourcing wood from forests will address a critical home heating need while saving local residents from unnecessary and burdensome transportation costs.

Communities in New Mexico have a unique relationship with our state's forests, and their needs must be a priority as we work to recover from the current wildfire season. Firewood banks are an important tool to safely and equitably rebuild from the impacts of ongoing wildfires, and we urge the rapid deployment of available resources to ensure New Mexicans can meet their energy needs.

Sincerely,



BEN RAY LUJÁN
United States Senator

/s/ MARTIN HEINRICH
United States Senator



TERESA LEGER FERNÁNDEZ
Member of Congress



MELANIE STANSBURY
Member of Congress