



# State of New Mexico

Michelle Lujan Grisham  
*Governor*

June 19, 2022

The Honorable Joseph R. Biden Jr  
President of the United States of America  
The White House  
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue  
Washington, DC 20500

Through: Mr. Tony Robinson  
Regional Administrator  
FEMA Region VI  
800 North Loop 288  
Denton, TX 76209

Dear Mr. President:

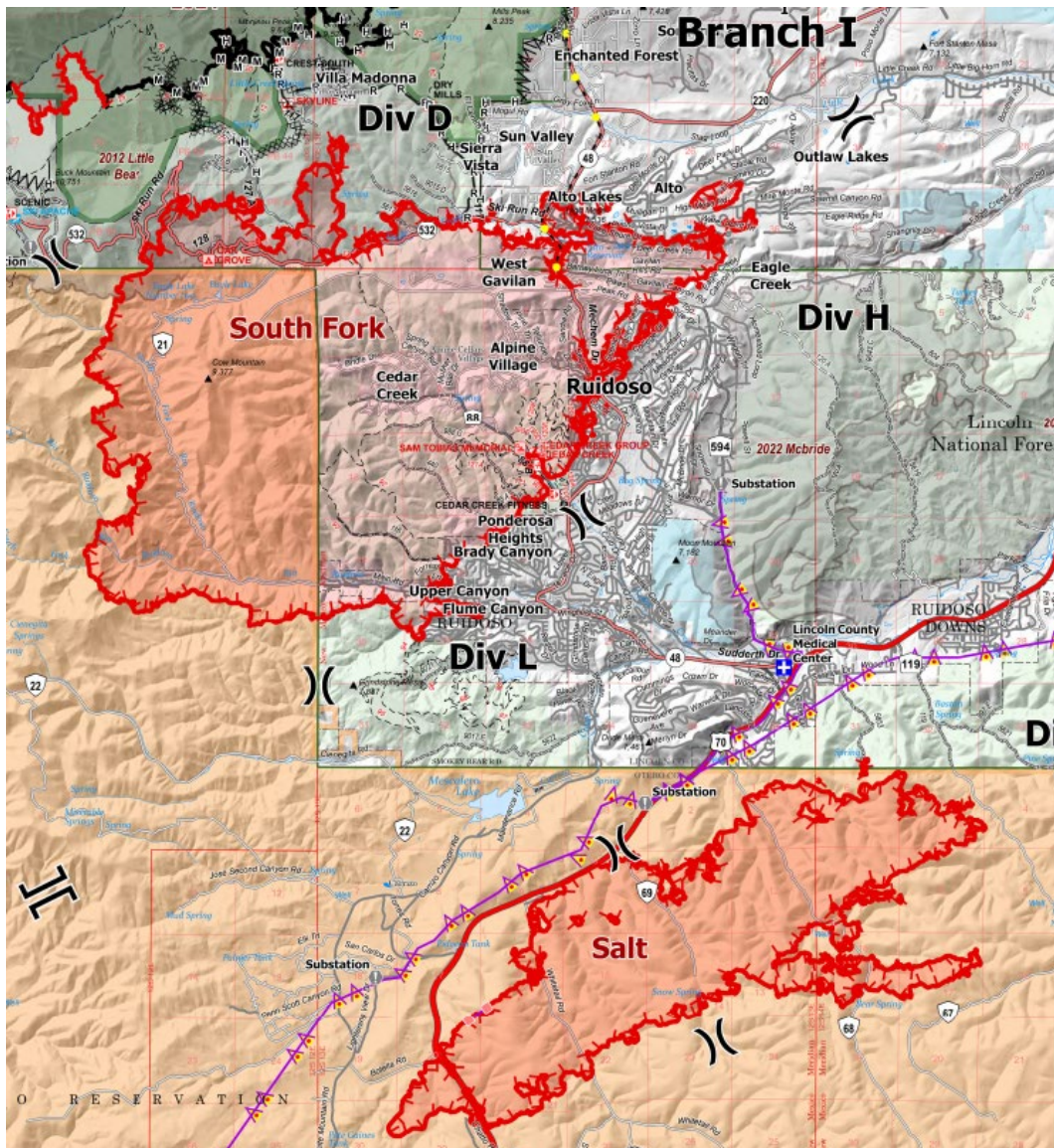
Under the provisions of Section 401 of the Robert T. Stafford Disaster Relief and Emergency Assistance Act, 42 U.S.C. § 5191, and implemented by 44 CFR § 206.36, I request that you grant a Major Disaster Declaration for the state of New Mexico for the South Fork Fire and Salt Fire.

Starting on June 17, 2024, both the South Fork Fire and Salt Fire began on the Mescalero Apache Reservation. The fires developed in a parallel pattern which has enclosed multiple populated areas and, within 24 hours, resulted in direct damage to 1,400 structures, evacuation of more than 8,000 residents, and impacts to water, septic, communications and transportation infrastructure. The state is requesting Public Assistance, Categories A and B, including Direct Federal Assistance, and Individual Assistance for the following jurisdictions: **Lincoln County, Otero County, and Mescalero Apache Tribe.**

Specifically, I request all parts of Individual Assistance, including Housing Assistance, Disaster Case Management, Transitional Sheltering Assistance, Serious Needs Assistance, Crisis Counseling, and Displacement Assistance. I am also requesting Hazard Mitigation statewide, as facilitated through the state of New Mexico's Natural Disaster Hazard Mitigation Plan, which has been approved by FEMA through September 12, 2027.

## **Disaster Impacts**

The South Fork Fire and Salt Fire both began at the nexus of multiple high-fire-risk conditions. The impacted area is under serious drought conditions (reported by the U.S. Drought Monitor), with humidity levels less than 9%. An influx of weather fronts is causing windy conditions with unpredictable and shifting directions. These conditions created a “tinderbox” of a dry, dense fuel-load on the Mescalero Reservation and in the Lincoln National Forest, which exploded into the two significant and uncontrolled fire events. These fires are threatening multiple populated areas, which are generally characterized as dense Wildland Urban Interface areas with high risk to structures and critical infrastructure (see *Figure 1*).



*Figure 1: South Fork / Salt Fire Burn Scar Map as of 6/18/29 at 2359hr (Southwest Area Incident Management Team)*

Drier weather conditions in the region began on June 15, with a high temperature in the low 90s and 20 to 30 percent humidity, accompanied by southwest winds. Winds increased on June 16, with speeds of 15 mph and gusts to 25 mph. Relative humidity dropped to 7 to 12 percent, elevating

fire risk despite wind speeds below red flag warning criteria. On Monday, June 17, these conditions continued, with high temperatures reaching the upper 80s to low 90s and relative humidity levels in the afternoon dropping to 7 to 10 percent. Southwest winds increased again to 15 mph with gusts reaching 30 mph.

Once the South Fork Fire developed, local weather conditions were modified by the fire with increased winds locally, and much higher wind gusts as detected by the Smoke Bear RAWS station (COPN5). These conditions supported rapid and chaotic fire growth on June 17 and again on June 18. A frontal system is expected to push through the region with the fire on June 19 and increase moisture levels but shift winds to the southeast instead of the southwest. This will likely change fire behavior, allowing fires to grow in a different direction and impacting other areas.

These fires are highly volatile and dangerous, largely due to the changing wind patterns which are limiting the ability of firefighting crews to effectively contain the blaze. The combined acreage of the active fires is approximately 23,406 acres; the South Fork Fire stands at 16,335 acres impacting the Village of Ruidoso, Lincoln County, Mescalero Tribal Land, and U.S. Forest Service Land, and the Salt Fire is at 7,071 acres, impacting Otero County, the Village of Ruidoso, Lincoln County, and Mescalero Tribal Land. Fire impacts are spreading quickly and out of control; at the time of this declaration request, we are at zero percent containment and residents and communities continue to lose homes and infrastructure.

Impacts to the affected areas include damage to over 1,400 structures as of the morning of June 19, 2024 and mandatory evacuations for approximately 8,000 people across Ruidoso Downs, the Village of Ruidoso, Upper Canyon, Brady Canyon, Ponderosa Heights, Alpine Village, Cedar Creek, Lower Eagle Creek, Alto Lakes, Sonterra 1, Sonterra 2, Sonterra 3, Sun Valley, Sierra Vista, Villa Madonna, Ski Run Road, and communities west of Highway 48. Fourteen shelters are active and supporting mass care needs. There have been two confirmed fatalities within the first 24 hours of this disaster.

As of 24 hours after the ignition of the fires, the water treatment facility in Alto Springs has been partially destroyed. Communication systems are currently down across the affected area, which spans over 20,000 acres. All 911 communication services are non-operational and are expected to remain so for the next month. Four public safety communication towers have been damaged or destroyed, severely impacting law enforcement, fire, and EMS communications. Furthermore, power lines to critical infrastructure serving public safety have been completely destroyed, necessitating the use of emergency generators for these services. There is no connectivity for cell phone or landline services due to the destruction of all critical fiber infrastructure.

The impacted area is still largely inaccessible due to the active fire conditions. However, the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency is analyzing the overlay of burn mapping with critical infrastructure.

Critical fire weather conditions are expected to continue under the red flag warning that remains in effect due to low humidity, gusty winds, and an unstable atmosphere. The earliest potential reprieve from fire conditions is expected on Thursday, June 20, 2024, when a backdoor cold front may bring limited precipitation.

## **Active Response Operations**

The Village of Ruidoso and the Mescalero Apache Reservation both declared local states of emergency, citing that all available local resources are insufficient to address the emergency and repair the impacted infrastructure. In support of these efforts, the state of New Mexico has issued Executive Orders 2024-033, 2024-034, and 2024-035, declaring an emergency in Lincoln County and the Mescalero Apache Reservation due to the Salt Fire and the South Fork Fire.

The following state government resources are active and working to alleviate conditions of the disaster through the following actions:

- DHSEM activated its EOC to Level 1 on June 18, 2024, and is still coordinating response measures across the state.
- New Mexico State Forestry has mobilized all available firefighting resources (estimated at 800 personnel in the field), including state, federal, and tribal partners, to respond to the South Fork/Salt Fire and is actively engaged in fire suppression efforts and collaboration with community members.
- New Mexico State Police has deployed 58 officers and patrol vehicles to support emergency operations, has established two mobile command posts with satellite connectivity, and has deployed a 140kw mobile generator.
- The National Guard has deployed 43 service members to Southeastern New Mexico to support traffic control points, establish a staging area, liaise with State Police and the Village of Ruidoso, and provide administrative support to DHSEM.
- DHSEM has deployed a Disaster Case Management team of five staff members alongside a team of three guardsmen to conduct intake and resource coordination to address immediate recovery needs.
- New Mexico's Emergency Support Function 6 has deployed fifteen shelter sites with plans, hosting and feeding approximately 1,000+ individuals, and is coordinating with the Salvation Army for donation management and Team Rubicon for volunteer management. Agency partners have deployed shower and laundry trailers and are coordinating near-term feeding operations and donation distributions.
- The Department of Health organized the relay of the Star Link System to Lincoln County Medical Center to reestablish internet access. The Lincoln County Medical Center has been evacuated, and coordinators are working with the HealthCare Coalition to report and track patients. The Mescalero shelter is receiving assistance to address supply requests, and the Medical Reserve Corps is on standby for medical assistance.
- The New Mexico Environment Department has deployed and is actively managing numerous air quality monitors for surrounding areas. Personnel have been deployed to

assess local drinking water systems, and the state is consulting with the Environmental Protection Agency on upcoming management of household hazardous waste.

- The Otero County Electric Cooperative has 28 individuals deployed in the field and 25 support staff in the office. Seven additional cooperatives are also available to help with materials, equipment and/or crews.
- The New Mexico Department of Agriculture is coordinating livestock and animal evacuation needs. Livestock Bureau personnel are deployed to the Ruidoso Downs Racetrack to assist with active needs for approximately 1,500 racehorses which are being evacuated, of which approximately 1,000 have been evacuated.

### **Active Previous Disaster Operations**

There are additional and significant disaster operations which are ongoing simultaneous to the response operations related to the South Fork Fire and Salt Fire.

#### FM-5492-NM: Blue 2 Fire

On May 16, 2024, two lightning-caused fires (the Blue Fire and Blue 2 Fire) began in the White Mountain Wilderness in the Smokey Bear Ranger District, Lincoln National Forest, necessitating immediate emergency response operations at both the state and local level. Their continued and diligent efforts have worked to create 91% containment, limiting the fire to 7,532 acres burned. However, a significant portion of those burned areas are now being impacted by the South Fork Fire. The close timeframe of these events has drained resources and stretched the capacity of local personnel who have now been in a response posture for more than a month.

#### DR-4652-NM: New Mexico Wildfires Flooding, Mudflows and Straight-line Winds

The 2022 fires were unprecedented in New Mexico's history, and included two events which were the result of federally prescribed burns, one of which was the largest fire in New Mexico history. Events took place across multiple mountainous areas, where ongoing burn scar flooding, mudflow, and debris flow has resulted in an active response environment during spring runoff and monsoon season events. DHSEM continues to allocate significant resources to manage federal programs supporting these events, including the Hermit's Peak/Calf Canyon Claims Office, which is administering a compensation program for claimants impacted by these fires.

#### DR-4529-NM: Covid-19 Pandemic

The Covid-19 pandemic is another major event which is under active management by DHSEM. To date, New Mexico has incurred at least \$340M in PA costs associated with responding to the pandemic. For most state and local governments, this was the first federal declaration in more than a decade, stressing capacity and requiring significant amounts of time and personnel to provide testing for the general public, procure and distribute personal protective equipment (PPE) to those performing essential jobs, procure and distribute medical equipment to health care workers directly engaged in the fight against COVID-19, and provide vaccines to hundreds of thousands of individuals throughout New Mexico.

The state of New Mexico has exhausted all available funding and personnel in its attempts to mitigate this emergency and repair damaged infrastructure. Public entities in New Mexico face ongoing challenges as they respond to this disaster while also managing concurrent impacts due to previous wildfires and the other disasters outlined above. These disasters are stressing already high turnover rates, strained budgets, and response capabilities at both the local and state levels. The state has determined that this incident is of such severity and magnitude that effective response and recovery is beyond the capabilities of the state and the affected local governments, and that supplementary federal assistance is necessary.

## Summary

As local and state entities continue to respond to concurrent disaster impacts, these disasters are stressing already high turnover rates, strained budgets, and response capabilities at both the local and state levels. Further, in accordance with 44 C.F.R. § 206.36, federal assistance is necessary to supplement the efforts and available resources of the state and local governments, disaster relief organizations, and compensation received by insurance for disaster-related losses.

I have determined that this incident is of such severity and magnitude that effective response and recovery is beyond the capabilities of the state and the affected local governments, and that supplementary federal assistance is necessary. I am specifically requesting Individual Assistance, including SBA Disaster Loan Assistance, Transitional Sheltering Assistance (TSA), Serious Needs Assistance, and Displacement Assistance, as well as Public Assistance, Categories A and B, including Direct Federal Assistance (DFA).

I certify that for this major disaster, the state and local governments will assume all applicable non-Federal shares of costs required by Public Law 93-288, as amended.

I am requesting Direct Federal Assistance for: U.S. Army Reserve assistance; Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency technical assistance; Environmental Protection Agency assistance with household hazardous waste removal; emergency protective measures for our watershed and any potential emergency response resources for ongoing flooding; and assistance from the Federal Communications Commission, including for emergency communications to assist in counties that have experienced a loss in cell towers, radio towers, and other disruptions; and mass care and evacuation assistance, including potential transportation for possible long-term evacuations of citizens.

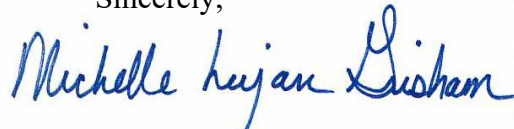
I anticipate the need for a Private Property Debris Removal Request. In accordance with 44 CFR § 206.208, the state of New Mexico agrees that it will, with respect to debris removal:

1. Provide without cost to the United States all lands, easements, and rights-of-way necessary to accomplish the approved work;
2. Hold and save the United States free from damages due to the requested work, and shall indemnify the Federal Government against any claims arising from such work;
3. Provide reimbursement to FEMA for the non-Federal share of the cost of such work in accordance with the provisions of the FEMA-State Agreement; and
4. Assist the performing Federal agency in all support and local jurisdictional matters.



I have designated Ali Rye, State Director, New Mexico Department of Homeland Security and Emergency Management, as the Governor's Authorized Representative and State Coordinating Officer. She will work with the Federal Emergency Management Agency to coordinate continued recovery efforts, and they may provide further information or justification on my behalf.

Sincerely,



Michelle Lujan Grisham  
Governor

Enclosures

OMB No. 1660-0009/FEMA Form 010-0-13

Enclosure A (Individual Assistance): Disaster Impact Photos

Additional Documentation: Governor's Executive Order