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A New Fire Policy for a New Era

The deepening drought, drier than normal conditions, and plenty of fuel mean that New Mexico is expected to experience one of its worst fire seasons in years. Even worse, according to the federal government's research, New Mexico's natural environment, development patterns across the West and the changing climate are expected to make larger, more destructive fires a more regular occurrence in the years to come.

We need to be prepared.

This changing environment is scary, but by combining our resources, working together and recognizing this new reality, we can deploy our resources effectively to reduce the threat. As governor, I will work with community leaders and our neighboring states to ensure that we are addressing the immediate and long-term needs to protect our state and communities. My effort will focus on the following steps:

1. Develop a cohesive Fire Management Strategy that focuses on suppressing fires, keeping our forests and wildlands healthy, and establishing effective land management programs.

Healthy lands are less likely to burn than overgrown, poorly managed lands riddled with easy fuel. Forest health and dry conditions are two key contributors to the increase in wildfires. We need a statewide, coordinated strategy to prevent wildfires and mitigate the damage when fires do occur. I will bring together relevant federal, state, local, tribal and nongovernmental entities to develop a cohesive fire management strategy. This collaborative approach is the best way to prevent inefficiencies and overcome the gaps associated with patchwork jurisdictions.

Wildland-Urban Strategy

This strategy will also help us better protect that fragile zone connecting the wild and human communities - known as the wildland-urban interface (WUI). This is the zone where fires jump from forests and shrubland to human developments. As New Mexico grows, more people are moving and working closer to these WUI zones and increasing their exposure to wildfires. This makes fighting wildfires

more complicated and costly due to the proximity of homes to natural areas, and these areas are expected to continue to grow.

Prevention and Mitigation

A cohesive strategy must include a stronger prevention plan with a greater focus placed on thinning forests and other fuels reduction, especially in WUI areas, and will enhance the mutual goals of wildfire risk reduction and responsible stewardship of natural areas while ensuring that cultural and economic interests are preserved.

Watershed Management

Finally, we must pay attention to land management in watershed areas. Wildfires can cause significant damage to a community's drinking water; and in the aftermath of a fire, watershed areas are at risk of flooding and other post-disaster emergencies such as landslides that can result from eroding soil.

2. Create easy-to-use collaborative agreements to ensure that federal, state, tribal, and local governments are working together on fire mitigation and suppression; and protect local communities from crippling firefighting costs.

Fires do not observe jurisdictional lines. Local, state, tribal and federal fire teams often work together to fight fires. In a well planned situation, the closest equipment is deployed to begin fighting a new fire as quickly as possible. Federal and state forest services work together with local communities and government agencies like the park system to develop and implement brush clearing and defensible space strategies; and local, state, federal and tribal governments make shared-resource agreements so that fire response is not delayed by confusion over which jurisdiction is in charge or who will pay for it.

Ideally, those responding to fires have been properly trained and fire fighting costs do not bankrupt local jurisdictions. However, as overall federal fire funding has declined, and local jurisdictions have been forced to reduce staff and training, the ideal world is not often the reality on the ground. Collaborative agreements are essential to help ensure that resources are used most effectively and efficiently.

Most agreements are negotiated long before fires occur and are constantly updated to reflect changes on the ground and lessons learned from other fires. They take leadership, commitment, time and money to develop. Unfortunately, the current administration's lack of leadership in land management and fire planning is hurting the coordination and collaboration necessary to mitigate the threat of fire, fight fires and lessen their impact.

As governor, I will bring together multiple jurisdictions including federal, state, tribal, and local governments to break down silos of response so we can better control and suppress unwanted fires and create effective, collaborative fire strategies and training. Every New Mexican should receive the same level and quality of service no matter where they live. By working together, we can help communities with less experience or fewer resources better prepare for fires and respond to disaster when it strikes and make it safer for all New Mexicans. For example, we can create easy-to-use template agreements; help negotiate staffing and funding agreements between local communities; and help local communities participate in programs that allow local fire departments to buy or borrow excess equipment from the U.S. defense and agriculture departments. By working together, sharing resources, and making sure that firefighters statewide have equal training, we can see to it that New Mexicans are protected across the state.

3. Assist and Support local efforts and help communities develop Community Wildfire Protection and Adaptation Plans.

We need to help New Mexicans prepare for wildfires at the local level. Communities across the western U.S. are developing Wildfire Protection and Adaptation Plans to reduce the risk of fires, and be better prepared when fires occur. In Boulder County, for example, Colorado's Wildfire Partners program helps property owners prepare for future wildfires by conducting property assessments with a trained mitigation specialist, identifying wildfire vulnerabilities, and other forms of assistance. Property owners who complete their required mitigation earn a certificate, which is accepted by local insurance companies to maintain or receive coverage.

These local initiatives are effective, but many communities who want to be proactive against wildfires don't know where to start. As governor, I will order state officials to help local communities in New Mexico develop and implement local Wildfire Protection Plans. These plans will address regional, local, and individual roles in protection and adaptation, and will fit within our cohesive statewide prevention strategy.

4. Dedicate state resources to protecting New Mexicans - not ripping apart families on the border.

New Mexico's resources - especially our personnel and hard-earned taxpayer dollars - must be used in a way that best serves our state's short- and long-term interests. The increase in wildfires cannot be ignored; and protecting our state from this growing risk must be our top priority. We need to get more personnel on the ground, faster; and, since we expect the length of fire season to expand, we need more personnel available for more of the calendar year.

The Trump and Martinez administrations want to use New Mexico's National Guard to support a misguided "zero tolerance" policy against families seeking asylum in our country. This Spring, more than 60 New Mexico Guardsmen were deployed to the border in supporting roles; Governor Martinez is expected to eventually send 150 Guardsmen to help with these efforts. This policy is not consistent with New Mexican values, and does little to help our communities. Moreover it diverts important resources and personnel from protecting our communities from fire.

Therefore, I have called on the current governor to redeploy the Guardsmen sent to the border so they can help fight fires and protect our families. Whether they are helping with fire prevention or fighting wildfires, we need our National Guard to help protect our families - not ripping apart families on behalf of President Trump. If she fails to do this, I will make it one of my first acts as Governor.

As Governor, I will also ensure that the state's Fire Marshall and the State Forestry Division have adequate staff and resources to provide assistance to and coordination among the state's 367 fire departments, and federal, tribal, military, private and nonprofit entities that play a role in protecting our state from fires. One priority will be increasing the number of staff available to help the state's smaller departments take advantage of programs like regional Fire Academy trainings, cohesive mitigation strategies, collaboration programs and resource sharing.

5. Ensure we have enough trained firefighters, in the right locations, at the right times.

Longer fires seasons means we need more firefighters available. As detailed above, I will commit more of our state resources, including our National Guard, to protecting New Mexico's interests. Our well-trained National Guard personnel participate in fire fighting training and do everything from air and ground fire suppression to evacuations and medical assistance. However, the need for more boots on the ground remains a challenge. National Guard personnel are a vital part of our fire-fighting efforts, and with many local fire departments - especially volunteer departments - facing staff shortages before fire season even starts, we need every member of the Guard who is available.

As governor, I will seek more funds for New Mexico's Youth Conservation Corps which provides salaries to hire 18- to 24-year-olds for seasonal fire fighting work, and expand how the funding can be used to increase staffing roles for longer periods of time, and reduce administrative burdens for local jurisdictions.

I will also dedicate more resources to ensuring that staff receive the training they need to be most effective. The state's Socorro-based fire academy provides excellent training to some 4,000 new and current fire fighters each year.

Participants come from New Mexico's 367 fire departments, as well as tribal departments, the private sector and other states. We need to make sure that ALL firefighting personnel can take advantage of the Academy's programs by providing more opportunities for those individuals who want training but cannot make it to Socorro. I will instruct the state's Fire Marshall to work with local departments to expand the number of local and regional training programs, as well as online and hybrid training courses to make sure that every New Mexican firefighter is getting the training they need.

6. Develop building codes, legislation and partnerships that promote fire adaptation compliance and fire mitigation activities.

Finally, we need to ensure that we are working together to employ the latest and best fire safety procedures and practices.

The state needs to update building codes to improve fire safety and we need to enforce code compliance consistently throughout the state. We also need to ensure we have the staff, and funding, necessary to enforce building codes. My administration also will develop incentives for builders and homeowners to utilize landscaping and construction to harden buildings against fires.

However, reducing our fire risk requires community-wide efforts. Therefore, we must encourage other community leaders to help promote fire safety throughout the state. For example, the New Mexico Association of Counties and the U.S. Bureau of Land Management are working with local communities and non-profits to develop Community Wildfire Protection Plans that map out how communities can reduce the risk of fire. Fire safety partnerships are also being developed with the private sector. In an effort to reduce property risk in wildfire-prone areas, the National Fire Protection Association worked with the insurance company USAA to develop the Firewise program, which incentivizes policyholders to fire harden their properties. As governor, I will work with the state fire marshall and others to encourage more partnerships between the public, private and non-profit sectors.

I will modernize existing state parks to make them "firewise" - better preparing them for and protecting against fire danger such as by clearing dead brush, fire hardening buildings and campsites and educating visitors about fire safety - so that we can use our parks more safely and not have to close down as often during fire season. In addition, my administration will work with the federal government to ensure they are making the same productive efforts with their park resources and campgrounds.

I will prioritize infrastructure improvements that can help protect our communities during times of natural disasters such as wildfires. For example, cell phone coverage has not kept pace with the growing number of New Mexicans

who have “cut the cord” on their telephone landlines and now rely exclusively on cell phones for voice communications. We need to ensure that cell phone coverage is reliable and consistently available so that life-saving programs such as Reverse 911 reach all New Mexicans - even those who rely exclusively on their mobile phones.

Conclusion

We need strong, pragmatic leadership, collaboration, and a comprehensive strategy to mitigate and address wildfires in New Mexico and throughout the West. In Congress, I worked with other Western State leaders to update the federal government’s funding for wildfires. In the past, U.S. Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management have shifted money from fire prevention and forest restoration programs to cover cost overruns on fire suppression activities. Funding is stretched. As governor, I will commit needed resources not only to fire suppression, but to planning, mitigation and recovery efforts. By working together, we have the best opportunity to protect our state and our families.