

## **A TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY FIRE POLICY**

**We need a new twenty-first century fire policy that prioritizes public safety. The old policy from an earlier era is failing to keep the most vulnerable safe during climate-driven wildfires. A more effective policy would provide low-interest loans, grants and technical assistance to rural residents to prepare their communities. Decades of research has shown that focusing on fire-safety home retrofits and the zone immediately around structures saves lives and protects property during wildfires. Recent tragic events demonstrate that the old policy that prioritizes reducing fuels in over vast landscapes fails to protect communities.<sup>1</sup>**

### **BACKGROUND**

**Despite extreme dryness and windy spring weather, on April 6, 2022 a crew from the Santa Fe National Forest intentionally started a fire near Las Vegas, New Mexico. The fire quickly escaped and joined with another fire ignited by smoldering piles of woody debris to become the Hermits Peak/Calf Canyon wildfire that burned more than 340,000 acres, the largest wildfire in New Mexico history. Nearly a thousand structures in one of the poorest rural regions of the U.S. were burned to the ground. Three people died in post-fire flooding. More than 17,000 people lost access to potable drinking water and at least 40 acequias (irrigation) systems were damaged. Congress has so far appropriated more than \$4 billion taxpayer dollars to compensate the victims.**

**A Forest Service review found that the “. . . environmental conditions in which the plan was executed generated unforeseen challenges” and recommended changes to how intentional ignitions are managed. Similar recommendations were made in 2000 when another prescribed burn escaped near Los Alamos during windy spring weather causing \$1 billion in damages and destroying hundreds of homes.**

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<sup>1</sup> Treatments far removed from communities are ineffective because climate-drive fires rarely interact with treated areas. See Black, D., E. Barton, A. Rose, D. McKinley, and A. Dugan. 2022. *Forest Carbon Assessment for the Santa Fe National Forest in the Forest Service's Southwest Region*. White Paper. 36p “. . . studies at large spatial and temporal scales suggest that there is a low likelihood of high-severity wildfire events interacting with treated forests . . .”

**The Santa Fe County Commission unanimously passed Resolution 2022-050 on July 12, 2022, requesting that an Environmental Impact Statement be prepared to address concerns over the Santa Fe Mountains Landscape Resiliency project that will clear vegetation on 18,000 acres and burn 38,000 acres in the mountains above Santa Fe. The resolution specifically asked that a comprehensive environmental review be prepared and all burning cease until “. . . risk reduction provided by these reviews is in place.”**

**In 2006 the Santa Fe National Forest analyzed the risk of an escaped prescribed fire in the management of the Gallinas watershed that supplies water to Las Vegas, NM. It found that “burning unthinned stands may pose the highest risk of fire escape.” Despite this warning, unthinned stands were ignited on that windy spring day in 2022. Instead of learning from the Hermits Peak/Calf Canyon catastrophe, the recently approved Santa Fe Mountains project plans to burn 20,000 unthinned acres in the coming years. In addition, the Forest Service is not complying with a New Mexico law that prohibits prescribed burns during red flag warnings.**

## **NEW FEDERAL FIRE POLICY**

**Our out of date fire policy dates from 1995. It was reaffirmed in 2000 when then Secretary of the Interior Bruce Babbitt convened a task force of government researchers in Santa Fe following another escaped prescribed fire that destroyed hundreds of homes and nearly burned down Los Alamos National Laboratory.**

**A new task force is needed today in response to the Hermits Peak/Calf Canyon catastrophe. Unlike the old policy, today’s focus should be on providing public safety in a cost efficient manner. To correct past errors, a revitalized policy should include fire managers outside the Forest Service, the insurance industry, indigenous representatives and conservation groups.**

**A new fire policy focused on public safety will protect the climate, provide clean water and enhance biological diversity. The old policy, which calls for clearing trees and burning millions of acres, results in significant carbon emissions, especially if older trees are logged.**

**Protecting existing natural forests to foster continuous growth, carbon accumulation, and structural complexity — a process known as proforestation — has proven to be an effective way of preventing carbon pollution that fuels wildfire and threatens rural communities.**

**Conventional practices like thinning small trees followed by prescribed fire as has a limited role. However, safe times to burn are increasingly rare in today's warming climate and these routine treatments are only effective in low-moderate fire weather. Updating the antiquated fire policy presents for the first time an opportunity to consider the effects of repeated burning on human health.**

**For more information see the report Working from the Home Outwards that calls for a new Federal fire policy based on recent experiences with wildfires in California.**