

STATEMENT OF VERONICA SERNA  
Senate Budget Committee – March 8, 2023

Good morning, Chairman Whitehouse, Ranking Member Grassley and distinguished members of the committee. I want to thank you for giving me this opportunity to share our story with you today.

I am Veronica Serna, Mora County Commissioner, District 1 from Mora, NM, one of the poorest of 33 counties in New Mexico. We are situated in the remote Sangre de Cristo mountains of Northeastern New Mexico approximately 150 miles from the closest metropolitan city, Albuquerque, NM. Mora County spreads across 1,934 sq miles with a population just over 4,000. Mora County's population has slowly dwindled over the last century when the population was at about 14,000 according to the various historical documents I was able to research. Back in the day, Mora County had multiple Mom and Pop stores throughout the county offering fresh meats, produce, assortment of various necessities, clothing stores, a few hardware and department stores, filling stations, saloons, restaurants, a slaughterhouse, title company, and utility cooperatives. Mora even had its own mortuary, a theater and two school districts. Today, we still have the two school districts but with a combined enrollment of less than 500 students, and the two utility cooperatives. Other than that, we are down to 4 gas stations (2 in Mora proper and another 2 in Wagon Mound along Interstate 25), a few restaurants but otherwise have become a food desert (especially after 5 pm as most businesses, including restaurants close by that time).

With limited services and opportunities, Mora County was struggling even before the disaster of the Hermits Peak/Calf Canyon Fire. By the spring of 2022, according to NOAA NIDIS (<https://www.drought.gov/states/new-mexico/county/mora>), there had been historical drought conditions for Mora County since 2018 ranging from Moderate Drought (D1) to Exceptional Drought (D4) with Severe (D2) and Extreme Drought (D3) being most prevalent, thereby creating a perfect environment for a massive disaster. Despite this background, the Hermits Peak Fire was started as a prescribed burn by the US Forest Service on April 6, 2022, on the Santa Fe National Forest in our neighboring county of San Miguel. As a result of the 70 to 90 mile an hour winds, by that afternoon, this fire spread beyond its projected boundary. According to InciWeb, it was declared a wildfire by 4:30 that afternoon. The Calf Canyon Fire, which was from a dormant pile burn holdover or sleeper fire from January 2022 that reignited in April because of the unprecedented winds, merged with the already out-of-control Hermits Peak Fire. On April 22, 2022 the wildfire crossed into Mora County at which time Mora County called for an Emergency Meeting to declare our State of Emergency. By that afternoon evacuations began on the western end of the county and continued for several weeks. Within a few days, the fire reached the mountain that held all our communication towers and torched them to a crisp, leaving us without a way to communicate with each other, and most seriously, with first responders, including firefighters, law enforcement, and EMS. Most evacuations were not fully lifted until about mid-June. However, it wasn't until August 21, 2022, that this fire was declared 100% contained. Today, we are still dealing with very limited and spotty radio and cell service as obtaining manufactured parts for communication towers became a challenge after the Covid pandemic. The Hermits Peak/Calf Canyon Fire burned 341,735 acres and was declared the largest fire in the history of New Mexico.

Mora County lost over 220 structures with about half of those being a primary resident (the rest were either secondary or seasonal homes or miscellaneous structures). With many of our residents displaced because of limited housing availability in the county, living accommodations have been made for them in the neighboring counties and as far away as Albuquerque, NM. With FEMA operating under the Stafford Act in 2022, the maximum award for home replacement was only \$37,900, which is not adequate to even consider a simple mobile replacement, let alone to rebuild. In our culture, many of

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our residents have lived in adobe homes that have been passed down through several generations. With no mortgage on most of these homes, consideration for homeowners' insurance has often been overlooked, uninsurable, or simply unaffordable.

The devastating fires required that electric service be powered down to help keep fire fighters safe as they fought the fires and to help prevent other fires from igniting if power lines broke. As a result of this, many homes lost appliances and food that was stored in freezers and refrigerators. One of the things that separates Mora County from those in an urban setting is that many of these people survive by raising livestock and harvesting beef and wild game every year to provide for their families. They fill multiple freezers with meat, chili, and other crops they harvest in the fall to provide food until the next season. All of this was lost.

The other resource that helps subsidize utility expenses in this area is firewood. More than half the households in the county rely only on firewood to heat their homes with many still utilizing firewood for cooking. With the loss of all the timber that was traditionally harvested in the fall for winter use, many of these households are left converting to expensive propane or electricity (which in rural areas can be very unreliable due to frequent power outages and the fire's damage to the power grid) or having to pay outrageous prices for those who do bring firewood to sell to this area. It will be many years, if not decades, before these mountains will provide trees large enough to provide an adequate firewood supply once again for these households.

Natural resources from this area are how many of the residents survive or subsidize their living. They use, barter, or sell these products. We have many residents who negotiate timber for logs/lumber, latillas (decorative thin logs), and firewood. There are many landscapers who deal with live trees and decorative rock, usually moss rock. Then we have those who sell Christmas trees between seasons to get them through to the next season of operation. This fire burned so hot it left nothing surviving in many areas. It burned hundreds of thousands of acres of trees to the root and burned off the moss from the rock as well as cracking many of the large rocks to pieces. We have a few outfitters who had to put their hunting operations on hold due to the wildlife and dangerous situations within the mountains due to all the burnt trees with a subsequent loss of their customers. Agriculture has also been a resource many rely on in this area. Herds of livestock had to be reduced because of the limited grazing permits along federal lands and the loss of grazing on private land due to the fire, in addition to the loss of hay crops both because of the evacuations and the damage to the irrigation systems. There are many areas where the fire burned so hot it caused the soil to become hydrophobic and may not grow vegetation for several years to attract wildlife back into the mountains or provide adequate grazing for domestic livestock. With this being the case along the burn scar, there is nothing to hold back any precipitation thereby creating perfect conditions for a second devastating situation.

The other issue we face is the supply of native seedlings to help reforest our mountains is not enough. The New Mexico State University J.T. Harrington Tree Farm in Mora has been providing seedlings for most of the western portion of the country, but with this fire, the currently supply (300,000 seedlings) is insufficient for our immediate need. New Mexico alone will need hundreds of millions of seedlings just for this state, let alone the other western states.

If the fire was not bad enough, on July 1, 2022, we were once again hit with another disaster when the monsoon season arrived along the burn scar, bringing multiple flooding events, day after day after day and continued until mid-September. This was far from abnormal rainfall for Mora County. In fact, under normal conditions, it was not enough precipitation to take us out of a drought

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condition. However, I learned from foresters that the darkness and heat of the burn scar attracts rain clouds which explained the daily rainfall all along the burn scar from the south in San Miguel County, through Mora County, and dissipated as it got to burn scar on the border of Colfax County, some 45 miles all told from south to north. With the flooding disaster, we had to evacuate once again some of the residents along the burn scar as their homes were being affected and threatening their safety. Today, we still have residents displaced because of the damage the flooding events caused to their homes, wells, septic tanks, and roadways. As a result of the flooding events, three lives were lost in San Miguel County and one in Mora County. Daily, we would make every effort to keep up with the weather forecasts and advise residents to leave their homes to try to keep everyone safe.

Another major issue we face due to the flooding events is that the acequias<sup>1</sup> have filled with silt, ash, and debris and pretty much eradicated them, leaving no way for water to flow to deliver drinking water for livestock nor water for irrigating fields downstream for crops, thereby leaving no hay harvesting for winter feeding. Many of the fields below the burn scar were also ruined with multiple flooding events leaving fields full of silt, ash, and debris—too much for vegetation to grow. Even if we figure out how to clean out the acequias and clear the fields, we are expecting the flooding events to continue for the next few years until trees and vegetation grow to help retain and control the flow of water.

If the cost to the federal government to fight this fire wasn't enough to consider making changes, the loss to local government and the people in our communities should be considered. In addition to the personal losses many individuals suffered, there will be a great loss of revenue to our County as property taxes will have to be adjusted with the loss of structures, timber, or other resources that were previously taxed. With so many residents being displaced and living outside of the county, gross receipt taxes will decline. One of my serious concerns is how can we bring these residents back to Mora County. My hope is that they haven't become complacent where they currently are and dread or refuse to come back to the devastated landscape, even if we are able to get them into another home. What can we do to encourage our displaced residents to return? How can we rebuild to provide opportunities for our youth to consider remaining in the community with viable careers? The pandemic did a job on the entire world, but this disaster totally drained our community not only financially, but emotionally and psychologically as well.

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<sup>1</sup> Acequias are centuries-old irrigation ditches that not only are political subdivisions of the State and as such have their own governance, but they are important cultural institutions that ensure the survival of our communities of which many communities were built around. We depend on them to irrigate our farms, grow food, raise pasture, provide drinking water for livestock, and recharge our ground water. Water is life and considered sacred in our culture.