

*Washington, D.C. – Congressmen Ben Ray Luján (NM-3) and Martin Heinrich (NM-1) sent a letter to the House Appropriations Committee today urging support for emergency funding so that the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) and the Department of Interior have the resources needed to fight the increased threat of wildfires on federal lands and protect the vital watersheds of New Mexico.*

*Below is the text of the letter:*

June 24, 2011

The Honorable Hal Rogers  
Chairman  
House Appropriations Committee  
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Norm Dicks  
Ranking Member  
House Appropriations Committee  
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Chairman Rogers and Ranking Member Dicks,

As fire season escalates in the Southwestern United States, we would like to bring to your attention to the devastating effects of fire in our state. Due to drought and severe heat, the state of New Mexico is experiencing an unusually high outbreak of wildfires throughout its federal lands.

Historically, when natural disasters befall our nation, Congress has responded to the loss of American lives, property, and communities with emergency supplemental funding to contain the disaster, protect the endangered, and rebuild communities when the threat has passed. While we understand the nation's current need to reduce its deficit, we do not believe that budgetary considerations should deny New Mexicans the same federal assistance that has been provided to the victims of earlier disasters. We are therefore requesting that the House Appropriations

Committee urgently consider legislation to provide emergency supplemental funding so that the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) and the Department of Interior have the resources needed to fight the increased threat of wildfires on our federal lands and protect the vital watersheds of New Mexico.

New Mexico is home to seven national forests and four of them, along with Carlsbad Caverns National Park, are currently experiencing large wildfires. These national forests include our state's mountainous regions and watersheds that feed the streams and rivers that flow into the basins, lowlands and valleys where the majority of New Mexico's population resides. Villages, towns and cities all rely on the health and wellbeing of these watersheds to supply usable water for drinking and irrigation. Should the fires damage these watersheds, then public health, agriculture, and livestock would be severely impacted across the state. Without adequate resources, the USDA and its Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) cannot undertake measures needed to protect the watersheds in New Mexico impacted by wildfires. Because of the unusually high number of natural disasters around the country, including Midwestern floods and tornadoes along with wildfires in the West and Southwest, we are concerned that the NRCS Emergency Watershed Protection Program will lack the resources to address the current fiscal year's natural disasters. USDA officials in New Mexico have indicated that current resources are being used as efficiently as possible, however, with the number of wildfires currently burning in the region, as well as the unusually high temperatures and lack of rainfall, resources could quickly be diminished to a point where impacted watersheds are likely not to receive any federal assistance at all.

Further, we ask that you provide emergency supplemental funding for the Department of Interior's Rural Fire Assistance Program (RFA). RFA is intended to increase local firefighter safety and enhance the fire protection capabilities of rural fire departments by providing basic firefighting supplies and equipment to enhance capabilities to fight wildfires at the local level. The RFA program also seeks to decrease wildland fire-related losses to rural economies through enhanced local fire protection; and assistance to state, tribal and local fire departments.

We appreciate your attention to this matter. Please keep us informed of any efforts to provide USDA and other federal agencies with emergency funding to address natural disasters in our state.

Sincerely,

Ben Ray Luján  
Member of Congress

Martin Heinrich  
Member of Congress

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