

**Congress of the United States**  
**House of Representatives**  
**Washington, DC 20515-3103**

July 21, 2025

The Honorable Tom Schultz  
Chief  
United States Forest Service  
Sidney R. Yates Federal Building  
201 14th St SW  
Washington, DC 20227

Dear Chief Schultz:

I am writing to get answers about the U.S. Forest Service's (Forest Service) management of the Laguna Fire. The fire is currently destroying thousands of acres of the Santa Fe National Forest and has killed and maimed the livestock of local ranchers in Rio Arriba County, New Mexico. I am incredibly thankful for the brave men and women who work day and night to fight and address wildfires in New Mexico. However, communities in northern New Mexico have completely lost trust in the agency's wildfire decision-making given the Forest Service's recent history of starting the Hermit's Peak/Calf Canyon Fire in 2022.

Forest Service staff informed my office on June 30 that after a lightning strike started the Laguna Fire, the agency decided to not immediately contain the fire. Instead, the Forest Service would let the fire burn in order to further the agency's forest management goals—essentially treating it as a controlled burn, not a wildfire.

As you know, the fire jumped fire lines on July 11 and spread quickly out of control. The blaze killed and maimed livestock in its path, devastating the livelihoods of local ranchers who have grazed cattle on French Mesa and other adjacent forest lands for over a century. These Forest Service grazing permittees have shared photos of charred, deceased cattle, and live cattle who have sustained burns severe enough that they are unable to see, nurse their calves, or even stand. These disturbing reports only account for a small portion of herds that are still unaccounted for.

Please answer the following questions related to the Laguna Fire:

- Given the ongoing drought conditions throughout the Southwest and lack of snowfall received in the area over the previous winter, why did the Forest Service decide not to fully contain the fire, despite these ongoing risks? Why was the strategy of full containment not a top priority?
- Did recent Forest Service staff reductions have any effect on the agency's decision-making during this fire?
- How many full- and part-time staff did the Santa Fe National Forest employ on June 1, 2024? How many full- and part-time staff did the Santa Fe National Forest employ on June 1, 2025?

- How many full- and part-time staff did the Forest Service's Southwestern Region Office employ on June 1, 2024? How many full- and part-time staff did the Forest Service's Southwestern Region Office employ on June 1, 2025?
- What actions did the Forest Service take to communicate with local ranchers whose cattle were grazing on Forest Service land within the fire area? Can you confirm that the Forest Service keeps up-to-date maps on cattle grazing and uses those maps in its wildfire management decision making?
- What compensation does the U.S. Department of Agriculture have available to provide the permittees who have lost livestock due to the fire?
- What has the Forest Service done and what will they do to help local ranchers locate their missing livestock?
- As you may be aware, the area around the Laguna Fire is also home to a number of historic homestead sites dating back several hundred years. In addition to the ruins of buildings, a historic church and cemetery are threatened by this blaze. Did the Forest Service consider these historic sites when it made its fire management decisions?

The livestock in these herds are more than mere farm animals, they are the livelihood of our rural communities in New Mexico, and represent the lifeblood of our entire way of life in Rio Arriba County. As New Mexico has painfully learned from the Hermit's Peak/Calf Canyon Fire, New Mexicans will feel the damage from this fire for generations to come. The forests that have burnt to ashes are integral to the culture, history, and economy of the communities embedded in them.

Northern New Mexico had an extremely dry winter, is in a prolonged drought, and is currently experiencing a warm summer with erratic winds and weak monsoon rains. I understand that the removal of deadwood and other fuel biomass through prescribed burns is a necessary tool to prevent wildfires, but it should only be done based on the best available science and in the safest conditions.

In a previous letter to Forest Service Chief Randy Moore in May of 2022, I expressed my deep concern about the prospects of another fire resulting from Forest Service managed burns and the level at which the agency engages with the local community when planning these events. I hoped that the Forest Service could make strides in the long process of restoring the community's trust. This incident indicates the Forest Service is failing.

I respectfully request and appreciate your timely response.

Sincerely,




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Teresa Leger Fernández  
Member of Congress