

**Congress of the United States**  
**Washington, DC 20515**

June 2, 2022

Gene L. Dodaro  
Comptroller General  
U.S. Government Accountability Office  
441 G Street, NW, Room 1808  
Washington, DC 20548

Dear Comptroller Dodaro,

I am writing to request that the U.S. Government Accountability Office investigate the protocol and processes that the U.S. Forest Service uses to conduct prescribed burns. I also request that GAO provide recommendations to the USFS and Congress on strengthening those processes and reducing risks associated with prescribed burns.

On April 6, 2022, the U.S. Forest Service initiated the Las Dispensas prescribed burn on Federal land in the Santa Fe National Forest in San Miguel County, New Mexico when erratic winds were prevalent in the area that was also suffering from severe drought and dry conditions. At approximately 4:30pm on April 6, 2022, the prescribed burn, which became known as the “Hermit’s Peak Fire”, exceeded the containment capabilities of the Forest Service, was classified as a wildfire, and spread to other Federal and non-Federal land. In addition, a U.S Forest Service pile burn started in January, 2022, reignited and started the Calf Canyon Fire in New Mexico on April 19, 2022. On April 27, 2022, the Hermit’s Peak Fire and the Calf Canyon Fire merged.

As of June 1, 2022 the Hermit’s Peak/Calf Canyon fire has burned 315,830 acres of New Mexican land, destroyed hundreds of homes, and forced tens of thousands to evacuate. Numerous villages have been evacuated, ranches destroyed and businesses impacted. It is the largest fire in state history and still burning. As of June 1, 2022 it is estimated to have cost the State and local agencies \$165.8 million to fight the fire so far. Schools and universities were evacuated and closed. The impact to the watershed of numerous communities and towns is grave. While the President issued a federal disaster declaration on May 4, 2022, the impacted businesses and households will not be made whole without further congressional action.

On May 20, 2022, the USFS suspended the use of prescribed burns pending a 90-day review of its policies and procedures. However, I strongly believe that to restore trust in the USFS and strengthen USFS prescribed burn protocol, the GAO should conduct an independent

investigation and review. I am concerned about the U.S. Forest Service protocols and processes that allowed for a prescribed burn to take place during such a dangerous time. Prescribed burning is an important part of healthy forest management, but we cannot allow a prescribed burn to turn into a wildfire like this ever again.

I request that GAO investigate and, where appropriate, provide associated recommendations on improvements that can be made to either USFS or Congress on the following questions:

- What are the protocol and processes for USFS prescribed burns? How are USFS prescribed burn decisions made?
- What is the extent to which USFS follows its prescribed burn protocols as well as keeps appropriate records about its prescribed burn decision-making?
- Were USFS protocols followed during the Las Dispensas prescribed burn?
- Were USFS protocols followed during the pile burn that led to the Calf Canyon fire?
- What factors associated with both risks and benefits do USFS consider on when, where, and how it initiates a prescribed burn?
- How effectively does USFS evaluate the risks associated with initiating prescribed burns?
- What is the extent to which USFS has safeguards in place during prescribed burns to ensure the burn does not get out of control and turn into a wildfire?
- What is the extent to which USFS works with local stakeholders and communities before and during a prescribed burn?
- What is the USFS protocol for following up with prescribed burns and burn piles such as that which started the Calf Canyon fire to ensure those piles are not still smoldering and potential sparks for wildland fires?

Thank you for your attention to this important issue.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Teresa Leger Fernández". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Teresa" being the most prominent part.

Teresa Leger Fernández