

TERESA LEGER FERNÁNDEZ
3RD DISTRICT, NEW MEXICO

COMMITTEE ON
EDUCATION AND LABOR

COMMITTEE ON
NATURAL RESOURCES

COMMITTEE ON
HOUSE ADMINISTRATION

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

WASHINGTON OFFICE:
1432 LONGWORTH HOUSE OFFICE BUILDING
WASHINGTON, DC 20515
P: (202) 225-6190

SANTA FE OFFICE:
120 S FEDERAL PL SUITE 110B
SANTA FE, NM 87501
P: (505) 428-4680
F: (505) 986-5047

www.fernandez.house.gov

June 14, 2022

The Honorable Thomas J. Vilsack
Secretary
United States Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Ave SW
Washington, DC 20250

Dear Secretary Vilsack:

I write to follow up on my request to President Biden last week to direct the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) to pay the full cost of the Emergency Watershed Protection Program to protect the lives and property of affected landowners and restore the damaged Gallinas Watershed. As you know, the Hermit's Peak/Calf Canyon Fire has caused significant damage to Las Vegas' watershed. That damage now poses substantial risk to New Mexican communities. There is a high likelihood in the next three years a catastrophic flood could devastate not only the Gallinas Watershed, but the city of Las Vegas itself. This could happen in one month, next year, or even the next three years in a row.

USDA's Emergency Watershed Protection Program is crucial to the remediation of the Gallinas Watershed and to protect the surrounding communities from flood damage. The program is an important resource to prevent erosion and flooding but requires a 10 percent match. This amount is unreasonable given that the fire has devastated the local economy.

As I informed the President, USDA has the authority to waive the 10 percent cost share under 7 CFR § 624.11. The U.S. Forest Service started the fire that damaged the watershed. It is the federal government's responsibility to take accountability for this damage and assist New Mexican communities to the fullest extent possible in the recovery from this disaster. Further, it is financially unrealistic to expect sponsors in the area to be able to pay a 10 percent cost share.

USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) should assess the requests for assistance from private landowners as quickly as possible. Once approved, USDA should immediately obligate the necessary funds to implement protective measures for landowners. It is imperative that NRCS is able to start work on the ground before the monsoon season begins in New Mexico this July.

Thank you for your attention to this important issue. I trust that you will take the necessary steps to protect New Mexican communities and families from catastrophic floods in the Gallinas Watershed.

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
Member of Congress