

Draft remarks for oral testimony on June 10, 2020
(note that written testimony is not requested)
Laura F. McCarthy, New Mexico State Forester
to the U.S. House of Representatives
Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests and Public Lands
As a witness at the virtual forum entitled:
*"When Disasters Collide: Examining Coronavirus Impacts on
Wildland Fire Operations and Vulnerable Communities"*

Good afternoon Chairman Haaland, Ranking Member Young, and Members of the Committee. My name is Laura McCarthy and I am the State Forester in New Mexico. Thank you for the invitation to participate in this virtual forum. My goal is to provide you with a perspective from my state, which is already in the middle of a very active fire season. I'll start back three months ago, March 10, when our training with local volunteer firefighters was in full swing along with hiring more than 300 administratively determined emergency wildland firefighters. By March 10 we'd had more than 200 small fires and our fire season seemed like it was off to a normal start. March 11 brought the report of the first confirmed cases of COVID-19 in New Mexico. Things changed rapidly for us as we geared up to adapt our wildland fire policies and procedures to comply with Governor Michelle Lujan Grisham's executive and public health orders.

Coronavirus has a cascading impact on Wildland Fire Operations as you see as I walk you through our experience. First, we had to consider ways to screen firefighters for coronavirus before mobilizing them to an incident. We had to consider test availability, and the time delay for emergency response. We had to modify our training plans: forgoing large group training with local fire departments, using online, self-paced curriculum, and scheduling our work-capacity field testing in cohorts of five people.

The next concern was to adapt our fire management practices to avoid community spread among firefighters. We made changes to our procedures for transportation to incidents, requiring social distancing in vehicles. We wrote instructions for dispersing camp operations so that modules would have separate sleeping and eating spaces, and planned catering with individually-wrapped meals delivered to the separate areas. We planned for virtual briefings and established procedures to follow if we'd need to bring in resources from across state lines.

Then we started planning for an incident-within-an-incident: when a coronavirus infected person would be discovered on the fire lines and we'd need to isolate that person and anyone they'd been in contact with; while fighting the fire; while mobilizing additional resources to compensate for those we'd taken off the fire; while arranging for testing; and the list of cascading impacts continues on.

By April 10, now two months ago, the interagency wildland fire community – from the Fire Management Board to the GACC (Geographic Area Coordination Centers) to our SWCG (Southwestern Coordination Group) to our state fire management team – were all wrestling with the same issues. Forest Service Chief Vicki Christianson's message emphasizing rapid response and fire suppression was welcome news and helped ease tensions between state and federal agencies. The GACC wrestled with written guidance and provided a plan covering pre-, during-, and post-incident management for each functional area of fire operations. But then I am in a state with a Governor who is extremely serious about containing the coronavirus, so the interagency preparation helped me develop our state-level response and provided some assurance that our interagency community would all be on the same page. At least in theory, and within New Mexico.

Then on May 10, before the ink was dry on the interagency guidance, we had our first test. A human-caused wildfire in northern New Mexico sprang to life in an area that has been in severe drought for the past 18 months. We did not catch the fire on initial attack and we ordered a Type 3 Incident Command Team. We put our policies into place and we even added a new innovation – a decontamination module comprised of a truck, water tank, electrolyzed or ionized salt water, and a pressure spray system used to disinfect tools, vehicles and other equipment that could potentially transmit the virus. We had employees self-assess, and were pleased when some decided not to mobilize because of recent exposure. We had space for each Division to isolate in their own camp. We put statewide fire restrictions in place to minimize human-caused fires. We were feeling we'd passed the first test with a simple incident.

But not so fast. The next day the fire spotted, and a firefighter we brought in developed coronavirus symptoms the day after. We isolated the individual, and because of our practices of transporting people in small groups and isolating in camp, we kept the potential infection to 5 people. We brought the five for testing, which turned out to be negative, and put the fire out. But the cycle started again several days later when a firefighter from another agency who had been out on the line had a positive test.

More testing, waiting, wondering, and taking resources off the board. This is firefighting with coronavirus.

With the background of this experience, I'll wrap up with four points that speak to the need for Congress to act to support wildland fire operations.

1. States and local governments need personal protective equipment (PPE): preventing an incident-within-an-incident is a new and critical priority and this can be accomplished with emergency supplemental funding for the State Fire Assistance and Volunteer Fire Assistance programs at a level 20% above the current appropriation. In New Mexico the State move quickly to secure PPE for local wildland firefighters to be protected against the coronavirus. Additional federal resources will enable us to replenish these critical supplies for the duration of the wildland fire season.
2. Sustained annual appropriations for Volunteer Fire Assistance (VFA) is also critical: we keep firefighters and the public safe with strong local initial attack close to home. State and local agencies are responsible for responding to 80% of the nation's wildfires on any jurisdiction. The VFA program supports volunteer fire departments in communities with 10,000 or fewer residents. These fire departments lack adequate resources and rely on volunteer staffing. We are finding in New Mexico that with the stay-at-home guidance, local volunteers are available to respond in larger numbers than before. But they face acute resource challenges, because the equipment, training, and apparatus they need to fight wildland fire is so different from the equipment they use for structure fires. The Volunteer Fire Assistance program helps thousands of fire departments across the country bridge this gap, providing greater ability to suppress wildland fire with resources close to home, boosting initial attack success, and reducing the need for mobilization of resources from other states.
3. To keep fires small, we also need the support of State Fire Assistance, which prepares states for aggressive initial attack through activities that range from training to contracts for aircraft. Suppressing wildfires when they are small is the key to reducing fatalities, injuries, property losses, and costs. Training of state and local resources is critical for consistency when these fire fighters are out on the line. And because this wildfire season is further complicated by the

coronavirus pandemic, aerial firefighting will be necessary for aggressive initial attack strategy in support of our ground-based resources.

4. Now is not the time to let up on prevention, and stimulus funds for fuels reduction and community protection will help rebuild rural economies. State Fire Assistance increases should also include funding for hazardous fuels reduction treatments to improve community safety, protect valuable watersheds and reduce the impact of future wildfires. Between FY18 and FY19 the number of acres treated quadrupled, from 40,000 to 190,000 acres. States are focused on reducing fuels in high risk areas and will contribute funds to leverage federal dollars – for example in New Mexico we created a \$2 million/year forest restoration fund to match the federal funds. And fuels reduction stimulus will create jobs. A New Mexico study showed that every \$1 million of forest restoration generates 26 jobs in rural areas, which is comparable to the return on investment for other sectors, like construction in urban areas.

The coronavirus is an added stress on Wildland Fire Operations and the interagency community has made good plans. With resources from Congress these plans can be successful to protect the public, firefighters and natural resources from catastrophic wildfire.