



A fire season like nothing we have seen before

From your Executive Director....

New Mexico faced a disastrous fire season this year. The largest fires in the state's history burned both north and south, harming people, property, and natural habitats. We should step back and ask why this happened. The easy answer, at least for some of the fires, is that controlled burns got out of control. **The real answer is climate change.** Human-caused climate change has doubled the forest aridity in our region since the 1970s, according to the American Association for the Advancement of Science. We see climate impacts in reduced Spring snowpack at higher elevations and greater evaporation due to record-breaking temperatures in streams and the forest floor. As a result, our forests are more susceptible to fire and fires are more challenging to manage.

At New Mexico Wild, we recognize that climate change is now the primary threat to our wildlands. We are adjusting our work accordingly. This Member Advisory provides background on the recent fires and what we are doing to reduce those threats in the future.

Mark Allison
Executive Director
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What happened this year to New Mexico forests

The Calf Canyon/Hermits Peak fire in the Santa Fe National Forest northwest of Las Vegas was the largest wildfire in recorded state history. The Hermits Peak fire began from a controlled burn managed by the US Forest Service. The Calf Canyon Fire started from remnants of a controlled burn in 2021. The fires merged in April of this year. The fire burned more than 350,000 acres: 540 square miles. It is now 100% contained.

On top of the northern New Mexico fires, a major southern fire started in May. The Black Fire appears to be human-caused and began in the Gila National Forest and then spread to much of the Aldo Leopold Wilderness. It burned 325,000 acres—making it nearly as large as the Calf Canyon/Hermits Peak fire. In one week in May, the Black Fire grew by more than 100,000 acres. To date, the fire is also 100% contained.

Both fires caused lasting harm to habitat. The Calf Canyon/Hermits Peak fire has had a devastating impact on nearby human communities.



The Black Fire started in the Gila National Forest and then spread to much of the Aldo Leopold Wilderness. (Photo USFS)

Impact on people

The Calf Canyon/Hermits Peak fire destroyed 903 structures and 330 homes. More than 15,000 residents were forced to evacuate. Public land closures have limited recreation and traditional wood gathering. Smoke from the fire was a health hazard for residents. More than 2,000 residents applied for FEMA disaster relief. Flooding is now a grave concern because of the fire-scarred slopes.

Impact on wildlife

Some animals have adapted to fires by fleeing or hiding. However, with fires as large as these, finding safe refuge is difficult. Fish populations can be devastated by ash and other contaminants in the mountain streams and lakes. Smaller fires are part of the natural ecosystem in forests. However, little is understood about how these large-scale fires impact wildlife.

Impact on water resources

Wildfires affect the quality and quantity of water for people and nature, sometimes for years after the fire. In the West, 65% of our water comes from these forested watersheds. Vegetation on stream banks and slopes burns away and rainstorms can flush vast quantities of ash, sediment, and nutrients downstream, changing the habitat for wildlife. The EPA is currently doing a study on the impacts of wildfires on water quality.

What New Mexico Wild is doing in response to a more fire-prone climate

We are advocating with Federal and State land management agencies to modify their controlled burn protocols to be more sensitive to conditions on the ground in the state.

This summer, we launched our "Wilderness Defenders" program to utilize volunteer observers in Wilderness areas of the state. These volunteers will check on conditions and report observations. Specially trained volunteers will do some reconnaissance of this year's burned areas once they are safe to enter.

We've engaged a climate change science firm to prepare a baseline study of aridification in New Mexico and to provide recommendations on both adaptation strategies and areas of the state that will be most affected.

Our policy staff are working with others on water resource issues so that decisions are inclusive of the impacts on wildlands of New Mexico.

We continue to work on meeting the Administration's America the Beautiful conservation goals to protect 30% of habitat by the year 2030.



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