

Remarks During a Briefing on Wildfires in Santa Fe, New Mexico

June 11, 2022

The President. Well, Governor, thank you very much. Before I begin, we're on National Guard property. I just wanted to say that the National Guard, obviously, is controlled by the Governor, except when federalized. And I have federalized you a number of times nationwide to fight fires, to fight every disaster we've had. And my son was a major in the National Guard. And I think the people don't quite understand the extent—the extent—of the work you do and the risk you take for us.

And secondly, there's an expression where I come from: "God made man, then he made some firefighters." You're all crazy—[*laughter*]*—*but I love you. I grew up in a neighborhood called Claymont, Delaware, when we moved from Scranton when coal died. And although my parents weren't in the coal mines—they were in sales—but the economy shriveled, and we moved down to this little steel town. And I went to a little Catholic school across from the fire department—a fire station. And everybody I grew up with, you either became a cop, a firefighter, or a priest. I wasn't qualified for any of them, so here I am. [*Laughter*]

I—but you know, just so you know, I've done too many individual and mass funerals for firefighters and hotshots and—and you're an incredible group of people, I mean, a truly incredible group of people. Anybody—and the overwhelming human instinct is, you run away from a fire, not into it. And the only thing that protects firefighters is more firefighters—the only thing. More firefighters.

And I just wanted to say that at the outset, because I—you have my indebted gratitude. And my fire department saved my life literally, not figuratively. My house got struck by lightning, and it mostly burned down. It had to be rebuilt.

Saved—the thick—the smoke was so thick, Gov. It was literally that thick. And you couldn't see through the windows or out the windows. And the floors were collapsing, and these guys went in and did two things: Most importantly, they got my wife out—I was in Washington when it happened—and saved our cat. But equally important, almost—not equally, but important—I have a '67 Corvette they got out. [*Laughter*]

And so, at any rate—but my point is, you're incredible. And so, Governor, thank you. And Senators Heinrich and Luján, thank you very much for all you do. And Teresa Leger Fernández and—you know, Herrell, and you know, Stansbury, and all Members of the House doing a great job.

And—but maybe the proudest thing I've done is, I appointed the first Native American to be a Cabinet member. But she's only been in New Mexico 35 generations. You're a newcomer. [*Laughter*] A newcomer.

But look, a special thanks again to the firefighters—over 4,000 of you. Over 4,000 of you are putting your lives on the line.

And we're about to receive a briefing about the largest, most destructive wildfire in America so far this year and the largest wildfire in New Mexico's history. I just flew over some of the damage. And Air Force One is so damn big we couldn't go in, but we flew the perimeter of the fire. And it's an astounding amount of territory.

And the impact on families that have been there for so long are so consequential. And in this—in a way—you know, there's, you know, nearly 700,000 acres. And a new fire just started—

have just started. Thousands of people displaced. Ranchers wiped out. Schools shuttered. And wilderness that looks like a moonscape. You could see parts of it where I was able to see.

And I'm thinking about what you're thinking, and that is our responsibility. It's not a gift. We have a responsibility to help this State recover, to help the families who have been here for centuries, and the beautiful northern New Mexico villagers who can't go home and whose livelihoods have been fundamentally changed.

Governor, let me be clear: We will be here for you in response and recovery for as long as it takes. As long as it takes. And I learned something about this Governor: When she asks something, I just say, "Yes." [Laughter] But I don't think there's——

Governor Michelle Lujan Grisham of New Mexico. Can you get the Legislature to do that?

The President. Well, that's—[laughter]—that's what we're trying. You know, I've publicly gone on record of supporting it—of supporting it. That is 100 percent—anyway. There—I hope we're able to get that done. I know that Ben Ray is working like hell in the House to get passage. But we're going to—I have a little more trouble in the United States Senate. We have 50 Democratic Senators, which means we have 51 "presidents." [Laughter]

And so it's—you know, we've got to get a consensus, and we can't—not a consensus, in some cases, if they insist on it being a—requiring cloture, and we need 60 votes. So it remains to be seen.

And so—but you know, when you asked for major disaster declaration, Governor, I immediately responded, providing millions of dollars in housing assistance and cash grants and funding for emergency responders—not because they're doing any favor; it's an obligation. I think we have a responsibility, as a Government, as a—to deal with the communities who are put in—in such jeopardy.

And today I'm announcing the Federal Government is covering 100 percent of the cost of debris removal and emergency protective measures for the next critical months that are—in this recovery.

And then there's going to be a strong bridge until we—that we pass the Hermit's Peak Fire Assistance Act, introduced by Senator Luján and Senator Heinrich and your—and Senator Fernández, as well as Stansbury, to fully compensate—fully compensate survivors for their total loss.

We're also providing funding and loans for small businesses, farmers, and ranchers. And we need to be sure this doesn't happen again. We know the circumstances of Hermit's Park and Calfe [Calf]* Canyon Fires are unique, starting with the prescribed burn.

Every year, the Forest Service, to put this in perspective—they do a pretty damn good job—conduct 4,500 prescribed burns. 99.8 percent go as planned. And—but this time, tragically, it did not. And that's why the Forest Service has just put a complete pause on prescribed burns in our—in the Forest Service lands. And it's conducting an intensive 90-day review, which will make public the—all the detail of that review. And this needs to happen. And I'll be briefed on the results, and we'll brief the world on the results—the country on the results.

And for folks at home, there are hundreds of fire—of Federal personnel on the ground trying to help you get through this. I think, if you take a look, the most important thing you can do is register with FEMA, which allows you to get assistance you deserve and you need quickly. And

* White House correction.

there's a FEMA mobile app that allows you to quickly register for assistance. And it's available in Spanish as well.

And our Director of FEMA, who I think has done an incredible job—how many folks you have here now roughly?

Federal Emergency Management Agency Administrator Deanne Bennett Criswell. Just under 400.

The President. Just under 400 here. And it's—I don't—we—if you don't have phone service yet, you have Disaster Recovers—Recovery Centers in Mora and Las Vegas where you can register as well.

And we also have a team on the ground to help you register. And FEMA is calling every person who is denied assistance—anybody denied assistance—to ensure they get the help they need and in the language they speak.

A lot of, you know—you know, you've got to know how to know. You've got to know what you need to know to be able to get something done. I can walk into the Library of Congress—one of the great libraries in the world—if you don't know how to work the card catalog, it's not very much use to you. I mean it. You've got to know how to know.

And so we've learned, in our administration, that it's not just enough to provide the help but let people know how they can access the help, and when they can't, how they can go about to fix that. And so eligible residents can sign up for a State program that provides benefits to buy groceries and hot meals as well.

For the longer term, but beginning right now, we have to help with the combined impacts of drought and wildfires and—which threaten your vital watershed. And it's hard to explain to people back east when I talk about this, because we've gone to—we've spent some time, the FEMA Director and I, in other parts of the country—in Northern California, Oregon, up in Idaho—to explain what we're talking about, the scope and size and the consequence, and how the watershed is not—not literally—but in fact are evaporating in many places. Find yourself in a position where it has vital, vital impact.

And through the bipartisan infrastructure, we've—are already investing hundreds of millions of dollars in the State—of your drought relief and wildfire mitigation and water infrastructure.

And as the monsoon season approaches, we've authorized another \$22 million to protect critical water infrastructure from postfire flooding and debris flows. And the work starts today. It starts today. Not next week, not next month. Today.

The bottom line is, Gov—to the people of New Mexico: We'll do whatever it takes, as long as it takes, to follow your leadership and what—telling us what you need. And I promise you, I—and I—and we kind of joke. They say the "Governor is on the phone." I say, "Just tell her yes." And then I start the conversation. Y'all think I'm kidding. I'm not kidding. *[Laughter]*

So I'm going to stop here. And I guess we're going to get—start the briefing, if we could. And—but I guess, David, I'm talking to you first. You're Secretary of the Department of Homeland Security and Emergency Management, so I'm going to yield to you. Okay?

[At this point, the briefing continued; no transcript was provided.]

NOTE: The President spoke at 3:18 p.m. at the New Mexico State Regional Training Installation Facility. In his remarks, he referred to Secretary of the Interior Debra A. Haaland; and New Mexico Secretary of Homeland Security and Emergency Management David C. Dye.

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