



## OFFICE OF THE GOVERNOR

September 1, 2021

The Honorable Joseph R. Biden, Jr.  
The President  
The White House  
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue  
NW Washington, D.C. 20500

Through: Robert J. Fenton, Jr.  
Regional Administrator  
Federal Emergency Management Agency Region IX  
1111 Broadway, Suite 1200  
Oakland, California 94607-4052

Dear Mr. President,

Under the provisions of Section 501 of the Robert T. Stafford Disaster Relief and Emergency Assistance Act, 42 U.S.C. §§ 5121-5207 (Stafford Act), and implemented by 44 CFR § 206.35, I request that you issue an Emergency Declaration for El Dorado County as a result of the devastating Caldor Fire actively burning in the county, as well as for Alpine, Amador, and Placer counties, which are impacted as a direct result of the Caldor Fire.

Critical fire weather and exceptional drought conditions led to the explosive growth of the Caldor Fire, which outpaced the relentless efforts of local, state, and federal firefighting personnel as the conflagration tore through Grizzly Flats, Strawberry, and Twin Bridges. Additionally, the Caldor Fire has damaged and destroyed critical infrastructure, with impacts including, but not limited to, communications infrastructure and major roadways. Today, under Red Flag Warning conditions, the Caldor Fire threatens to be one of the most destructive

fires in modern California history as it continues engulfing communities and critical infrastructure posing an immediate threat to life and property.

The need for federal assistance is paramount to prevent catastrophic devastation as the Caldor Fire rapidly advances into the Lake Tahoe Basin. South Lake Tahoe in El Dorado County, home to more than 22,000 residents, faces economic ruin due to potential impacts to tourism and commerce. The looming destruction of local businesses, including hotels, resorts, restaurants, campgrounds, and recreational sites would cripple the regional economy and precipitate significant unemployment.

Furthermore, impact to and contamination of Lake Tahoe would be unprecedented. Designated as an “Outstanding National Resource Water” under the Clean Water Act, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency also identifies Lake Tahoe as a scenic and ecological treasure that is recognized globally as a natural resource of special significance. Historically, 15 million people visit Lake Tahoe annually, infusing hundreds of millions of dollars into the local and state economy.

With the Caldor Fire actively expanding and threatening communities along its 100-mile perimeter, significant evacuation efforts are underway for over 55,903 residents across Alpine, Amador, El Dorado, and Placer counties. This includes densely populated areas such as South Lake Tahoe, which sits on the California-Nevada border. As a result, many Californians evacuated into Nevada, requiring close coordination between the states. In fact, nearly 1,000 evacuated Californians are being sheltered across the state border in Nevada.

As resources are already spread extraordinarily thin from firefighting and recovery efforts on multiple significant fires throughout California, the severity of this fire is such that it will cause significant impacts to the State and to the affected local jurisdictions, making recovery efforts beyond the State's capabilities.

## **INCIDENT OVERVIEW**

As California continues to experience one of the driest years on record and is actively under siege by historic wildfires and unprecedented fire weather conditions, the impacts of climate change are apparent now more than ever. Consequently, I proclaimed a State of Emergency on May 10, 2021, for El Dorado County due to the drought.

California also experienced its warmest July on record<sup>1</sup>, with critical fire weather conditions intensifying and extending into August, as prolonged periods of record-breaking temperatures, high winds, and low relative humidity resulted in numerous Heat Advisories, Excessive Heat Warnings, Fire Weather Watches, and Red Flag Warnings issued by the National Weather Service. These extreme weather conditions have fueled the explosive growth of fires across California, scorching more than 1,887,773 acres as of September 1, 2021, with eight wildfires accounting for more than 1,588,136 acres. The current situation in California is dire, with the Caldor Fire and four additional megafires straining local, state, and federal firefighting resources as numerous communities experience imminent threats to public health and safety.

On August 14, 2021, high heat and elevated fire weather conditions in El Dorado County caused the Caldor Fire to explode in size. In a matter of hours, over 35,000 acres were scorched, including much of the community of Grizzly Flats. Furthermore, the National Weather Service issued a Red Flag Warning across northern California, which included El Dorado County, from August 17 through August 19, 2021, with forecast wind gusts up to 40 miles per hour and minimum daytime humidity of 9 percent. An additional Red Flag Warning was in effect August 21, 2021, specifically for the Caldor Fire area, with forecast wind gusts up to 40 miles per hour and minimum daytime humidity of 20 percent. These continuous fire weather conditions have accelerated the spread of the Caldor Fire, which has incinerated 204,390 acres as of September 1, 2021, and is 20 percent contained.

With yet another Red Flag Warning in place from August 30 through September 1, 2021, the potential for catastrophe is apparent, as southwest winds in excess of 35 miles per hour are predicted to rapidly advance the fire towards the northeast into South Lake Tahoe. Firefighters face insurmountable challenges as the Caldor Fire continues to exhibit extreme behavior while burning in steep and rugged terrain with critical fuel conditions. Breezy winds have allowed short and mid-range spotting that produces new ignitions, while poor humidity recovery overnight has enabled passive crown fires and limited backburning operations by firefighters.

Unified Command has identified more than 34,834 structures under threat in communities from Placerville to Lake Tahoe, including South Lake Tahoe, Meyers, Pollock Pines, Camino, Somerset, Sly Park, Pacific, White Hall, Kyburz, Strawberry, Twin Bridges, Kirkwood, and many more. An estimated 55,038

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<sup>1</sup> "Assessing the U.S. Climate in July 2021," National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration – National Centers for Environmental Information. <https://www.ncei.noaa.gov/news/national-climate-202107>

residents are under mandatory evacuation orders across Alpine, Amador, El Dorado, and Placer counties, with thousands more having received voluntary notices.

Although preliminary damage assessments have been impossible to conduct due to unsafe conditions and limited resources, initial reports indicate up to 90 percent of the structures within Grizzly Flats have been destroyed. This devastation includes the total loss of the Walt Tyler Elementary School and the Grizzly Flats Post Office, essential pillars of the local community. Within the Grizzly Flats area alone, CAL FIRE's initial damage inspections have identified 729 destroyed structures to date, including 544 residences.

Imminent threats to critical infrastructure include major transportation corridors, communications towers, power transmission lines, and water systems. State Highways 50, 88, and 89 are closed for more than 100 miles, reducing options of escape for evacuees while simultaneously eliminating essential transportation links from the Bay Area to Nevada. Furthermore, impacts to the Lake Tahoe Watershed would be catastrophic, with the added consequence of negatively impacting the Truckee River Watershed, as the Truckee River is the only outlet of Lake Tahoe. The Truckee River Watershed supports the area's 20-billion-dollar economy by providing drinking water to over 400,000 individuals and 7,000 businesses, and is home to sugar pines, tiger lilies, and buttercups—as well as river otter, bobcat, Great Blue Heron, and Lahontan cutthroat trout.

Additional threats include the Cosumnes Watershed and El Dorado County's water sources, such as Jenkinson Lake and 300-million-gallon water facility that provides half of the County's water supply. This watershed is home to important natural resources and productive agricultural lands which are at risk due to the potential mobilization of ash, debris, and household hazardous waste from the hundreds of destroyed structures. Furthermore, the Cosumnes Watershed serves as a tributary to the San Joaquin River, which serves as the drainage channel for the entire 16,000 square mile San Joaquin River basin and discharges into the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta.

Two civilians suffered serious injuries and were transported to hospitals by air ambulances, three firefighters suffered injuries while fighting the blaze, and an officer from the Galt Police Department was tragically killed in a traffic accident while traveling to assist with the fire.

## **RESPONSE OVERVIEW**

On August 17, 2021, I proclaimed, under the authority of the California Emergency Services Act, a State of Emergency in El Dorado County due to the Caldor Fire.

El Dorado County also proclaimed a local emergency. Given the rapid growth and spread of the Caldor Fire, on August 30, 2021, I proclaimed a State of Emergency to exist in Alpine, Amador, and Placer counties due to impacts of the Caldor Fire.

My Office of Emergency Services expanded its State Operations Center (SOC) activation on August 4, 2021, to include response to multiple wildfires occurring in the State, even as the SOC remains activated for COVID-19 response activities and the Southern Border humanitarian mission. The SOC has been activated since March 2020. The State activated its Emergency Plan and deployed all available assets, including local and state mutual aid, as well as mobilizing out-of-state resources. The Inland Regional Emergency Operations Center was also activated as of June 24, 2021 to support the coordination of fire response resources. Additionally, Amador and El Dorado counties activated their Emergency Operations Center at the county level. The California Department of Transportation (Caltrans) Operations Center is also activated to support statewide wildfire response.

On July 14, 2021, the National Multi-Agency Coordinating Group raised the Wildfire Preparedness Level (PL) to 5, only the third time in the past 20 years the nation has reached PL 5 by mid-July.

As of September 1, 2021, the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection (CAL FIRE) reported 15,042 personnel, 1,321 engines, 390 hand crews, 351 bulldozers, 368 water tenders, and 110 helicopters assigned to battle and suppress wildfire incidents across the State, with additional fixed-wing aircraft assigned daily. The California National Guard (CNG) has 1,006 personnel, including 131 out-of-state National Guard personnel activated for the wildfire firefighting effort. Activated aircraft include 11 helicopters for fire suppression and medical support, as well as eight Modular Airborne Firefighting System aircraft for fire suppression. Additionally, pre-positioned Cal OES Fire and Rescue and local government mutual aid resources include 498 engines and 27 water tenders.

As noted above, there are multiple active and very significant wildfires burning throughout the State with little to no containment, which are stretching firefighting resources to their limits. During the initial growth of the Caldor Fire, critical firefighting resource requests were unfilled, and the next available assets were over 12 hours away in southern California. Furthermore, California has

requested 150 engines from all 50 states through the Emergency Management Assistance Compact and to date has received 36 engines and 153 personnel. The State of California and local governments continue to struggle with catastrophic wildfires throughout the state as well as the extreme costs to infrastructure and resources resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic. Unfortunately, limited assets and personnel are available and assigned to the Caldor Fire due to active incidents across the State and the country.

Despite scant resources, the State of California, local governments, community-based organizations, and volunteers have taken extraordinary steps to respond to the Caldor Fire. Nine evacuation shelters had an overnight population of 889 survivors, with the American Red Cross and other Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster providing support to the community and disaster survivors. At least 15 California state agencies are activated and providing assistance, both in the field and in the SOC, for the fire. This includes the California Department of Social Services, which is assisting with shelter operations is providing support to individuals with access and functional needs. Adding complexity to an already-challenging situation, the primary evacuation route from South Lake Tahoe was into Nevada. California has been working closely with Nevada to ensure that evacuated Californians' needs are met.

Californians, including first responders across the State, local officials, and volunteer organizations are exhausted. In addition, COVID-19 has also impacted the number of volunteers available to support those impacted by the wildfires. The last several years have taken a toll on the people and the property of this State. Although Californians are resilient and step up to the challenge, when disasters hit one right after another, assistance is needed from the federal government.

## **DISASTER IMPACTED POPULATION PROFILE**

According to the U.S. Census Bureau's 2019 Small Area Income and Poverty Estimates, California's official poverty rate is 11.8 percent, slightly lower than the national 12.3 percent, and ranks 26th amongst all states and Washington D.C. When considering an alternate poverty measure that compensates for cost of living and benefits factors, California ranks 2nd in the nation after Washington D.C. at 17.9 percent, compared to 13.1 percent nationally. In addition, during the second quarter of 2020, nearly three million Californians were unemployed, representing more than 14 percent of the nation's total unemployment. In 2019, California's nonfarm jobs accounted for 11.5 percent of the nation's jobs. These jobs decreased by more than two million or 13 percent in that second quarter

due to COVID-19, a steeper drop than the 12 percent for the United States, and about 12.5 percent of the nation's job losses.

According to the Centers for Disease Control's Social Vulnerability Index, El Dorado County has a high level of vulnerability in the category of Minority Status & Language, indicating that there may be segments of the impacted communities that require targeted support to ensure equitable distribution of recovery resources. Demographic data from El Dorado County indicates significant and disproportionate impacts to vulnerable populations, including individuals at lower income levels, the elderly, disabled, and those that are medically electricity dependent. In addition, those at lower income levels are also experiencing higher rates of unemployment due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Grizzly Flats, the community suffering the greatest impact thus far, as reports indicate the fire nearly decimated the community, has a greater elderly population (35.5 percent) and a greater poverty rate (8.7 percent) than the broader population of El Dorado County, which is detailed in the 2021 El Dorado County Demographics enclosure.

Additionally, as the fire continues to grow, it is directly impacting Alpine, Amador, and Placer counties, which are adjacent to El Dorado County. These counties, too, include vulnerable populations. Alpine, Amador County, and Placer counties have elderly populations that represent approximately 30 percent, 27 percent, and 20 percent of the counties' respective populations, as compared to the state average of 14.8 percent. Nineteen percent of Amador County's population is disabled, as is 16 percent of Alpine County's population, as compared to the state average of 10.3 percent.

## **HISTORICAL INFORMATION**

California continues to recover from multiple, consecutive disasters that warranted and received Major Disaster Declarations in recent history, including the 2021 wildfires (FEMA-4610-DR-CA). The 2020 wildfires (FEMA-4558-DR-CA and FEMA-4569-DR-CA) were historic events that consumed over 4.2 million acres statewide and destroyed over 17,000 structures, including over 10,000 homes. These fire impacts devastated large swaths of arable land and affected crops, including the vital vineyard industries of Napa and Sonoma Counties, forestry operations, and even the homes of agricultural workers – all of which are further impacted by exceptional drought conditions.

Between 2017 and 2019, California received five Major Disaster Declarations that included the February 2019 flooding and mudslides (FEMA-4431-DR-CA and FEMA-4434-DR-CA), the Carr and Mendocino Complex Fires in the Summer of 2018 (FEMA-4382-DR-CA), the Hill, Woolsey, and Camp Fires in November 2018



(FEMA-4407-DR-CA), and the Thomas Fire and subsequent Montecito debris flow (FEMA-4353-DR-CA) in 2017. Collectively, these significant events have claimed lives, destroyed thousands of homes, and disrupted the economic viability of numerous communities across the State, whose long-term recovery will be adversely affected by the ongoing fire siege.

In addition to the recent fires, California is still very much engaged in the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic (FEMA-4482-DR-CA), which has far-reaching impacts statewide. As COVID-19 cases continue to increase due to the delta variant, Alpine, Amador, El Dorado, and Placer counties have a combined ICU capacity of only nine beds available.

The compounding impacts of the multiple successive and, in many instances, simultaneous devastating disasters over the past several years cannot be understated.

## **CERTIFICATION**

I certify for this emergency the state and local governments will assume all applicable non-federal shared costs as required by the Stafford Act.

## **CONCLUSION**

In recent years, despite investment of billions of dollars on fire prevention and mitigation efforts, the overwhelming challenges of wildfires continue to expand. As demonstrated above, the communities impacted by the Caldor Fire include vulnerable populations, such as low income, elderly, and disabled residents, as well as recipients of government assistance. Coupled with the significant impacts to already vulnerable communities and the inevitable loss of homes and critical infrastructure, the Caldor Fire will have devastating economic and infrastructure impacts within the affected communities. This fire represents yet another relentless and successive disaster to strike California, coming during the surge of the delta variant of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, the ongoing response and recovery from the other numerous and significant wildfires burning in California, and in the immediate aftermath of record-breaking wildfires in 2020.

Pursuant to 44 CFR § 206.35, the incident is of such magnitude and severity that effective response is beyond state and local capability, requiring supplementary federal assistance to save lives and protect property, public health, and safety. Because of this disaster, the State of California is specifically requesting an Emergency Declaration for Public Assistance categories A and B, and Direct Federal Assistance, to include Department of Defense Air Assets to immediately mitigate the impacts of the Caldor Fire, shelter supplies and water for 55,000



evacuated residents, U.S. Department of Agriculture's assistance in evacuating large animals, hazardous household waste removal, mass care, evacuation assistance for individuals with access and functional needs, and ambulatory support for El Dorado, Alpine, Amador, and Placer counties.

As this disaster progresses, subject to additional programs warranted, we reserve the ability to amend this request for additional federal assistance.

I have designated the Director of the California Governor's Office of Emergency Services, Mark Ghilarducci, as the State Coordinating Officer for this request. Mr. Ghilarducci will work with the Federal Emergency Management Agency in continuing to assess damage and may provide more information or justification on my behalf.

Sincerely,



Gavin Newsom  
Governor of California

Enclosures:

2021 County Demographics

2021 County Social Vulnerability Index

National Weather Service – Caldor Fire Weather Conditions

Stafford Act and State Disaster Declarations for Last 24 Months

OMB No. 1660-0009/FEMA Form 010-0-13

List of Federally Recognized Tribes in California