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MY VIEW PAULA GARCIA

Our homeland is burning — now what?

By Paula Garcia

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The burned remains of a Rociada structure caught in the Hermits Peak and Calf Canyon Fire on Sunday.

Nathan Burton/The Taos News

We will forever measure our lives as “before the fire” and “after the fire.”

The mountains that nurtured our communities for centuries and that gave us joy and belonging are being destroyed because of wildfires — one of which we know was a fire ignited by the U.S. Forest Service. The cause of the second remains unknown. Hermits Peak Fire, which was a prescribed burn, and the Calf Canyon Fire, cause to be determined, have become one. Our region is forever changed as a result.

The people are devastated. We lost more than a beautiful landscape. We lost a place that will live only in our memories, and we lost a way of life.

These mountains are the homeland of the families who live here and of a diaspora of generations who consider these valleys and mountains their ancestral home.

The villages and small ranches of Mora and San Miguel counties are the last refuge of the rural poor. Many of the people affected by the fires live in modest, uninsured homes on lands inherited from past generations or small lots where until recently it was possible to carve out a place to survive as a low-income family.

The loss is immeasurable.

For many of us, our assets consist of mobile homes with additions for intergenerational families and freezers full of meat from our small herds of cattle or last season's hunt. We are told the Federal Emergency Management Agency might cover damages from the fire if you have the right documentation. There will be paperwork.

What are the damages to a whole region, dozens of villages, who lost their forest and watersheds? How do we quantify the value of a future without a watershed that provides us with water? How do we place a value on communities of intergenerational families?

No, we cannot. FEMA payments for "wildfire damages" with narrow regulations and procedures will *not* suffice. FEMA is not equipped to compensate for the devastation of a region, numerous communities and a way of life.

Who bears the blame? Is it the U.S. Forest Service bureaucrat who decided it was a good day to burn? Is it over a hundred years of federal management of our former common lands (stolen through Manifest Destiny) that resulted in a tinder box? Is it the lack of political will to put the brakes on climate change?

It certainly is not the fault of the local people who lost logging livelihoods due to restrictions on access to the forests. It is not the fault of wood gatherers who could have helped harvest and thin our forests.

Our communities will never be made whole, and we will never be the same. But we will stay and we will rebuild in a tragically different landscape.

We will love this land with her burn scars, and we will resolve to heal the place that nurtured our communities for generations. We need our government to take responsibility for its folly and to give us the support we need to rebuild.

The U.S. federal government should be held accountable for starting a fire in windy conditions and must provide us with resources to repair our lives and build a new future.

Paula Garcia is a resident of Mora County.