United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

December 11, 2025

The Honorable Kristi Noem
Secretary of Homeland Security
U.S. Department of Homeland Security
Martin Luther King Jr Ave SE
Washington, DC 20528

Dear Secretary Noem,

We write to strongly urge the immediate approval of the Jemez Mountain Fire Protection Project, FEMA Grant Application 4652-0006, requesting $6,634,825.14 (including the County match of $1,658,706.31). This project is critical to mitigate wildfire risks in one of the nation's most sensitive and strategically vital regions for national security.

Los Alamos National Laboratory (LANL) stands as a cornerstone of America's scientific innovation, technological leadership, and national defense. It plays a central role in maintaining our nuclear deterrence, advancing energy innovation, and addressing the world's most complex security challenges. Yet, LANL and its surrounding communities, whose residents make up much of the LANL's dedicated workforce, continue to face escalating wildfire threats that put both their safety and the nation's security at risk. The region has endured devastating wildfires before – events that underscore the urgent need for action to protect this critical infrastructure.

To protect LANL and the surrounding communities, Los Alamos County has designed a comprehensive water line, power line, and tank installation project. The project, which already has 72% of the project contracted, will provide a reliable water source for firefighting agencies to keep key areas of the mountain wet during peak fire season and bury a vital power line to reduce the risk of ignition. The power line services a communication tower, supporting essential emergency response systems, including Los Alamos 911 services to ensure that first responders maintain the connectivity and resources they need when lives are at stake.

Currently, when wildfires occur, firefighters rely on the Pajarito Mountain Ski Area reservoir, which is accessed through an Authorized Use Agreement, as their primary water source for suppression efforts. This reservoir, however, remains highly vulnerable and drought-stricken, surrounded by dense ponderosa pine forest. If it were compromised, precious time would be lost transporting water from distant sources, driving up fuel and operational costs while compounding risks to LANL, local residents, and nearby public lands. The Jemez Mountain Fire Protection Project's water line and tank installation project would ensure that this reservoir remains full when disaster strikes.

The stakes are clear. In 2011, the Las Conchas Fire, sparked by a downed power line, burned more than 156,000 acres, destroyed 63 homes and 49 structures, and threatened Los Alamos, LANL, and Bandelier National Monument. The cost of fire suppression alone exceeded $48 million, while total estimated damages reached approximately $614 million.

Fourteen years since the Las Conchas Fire, above-ground power lines remain a major wildfire hazard in this region, and their failure can trigger consequences that persist for years through flooding and post-fire recovery efforts. The Las Conchas Fire, and the downed power line that caused it, forced evacuations and suspended operations at LANL—disrupting vital national security and research work central to maintaining U.S. leadership in nuclear and energy technologies. The Jemez Mountain Fire Project's plan to underground power lines is critical to reducing these unnecessary hazards.

While the Laboratory's remote location in the Jemez Mountains was once ideal for secrecy during the Manhattan Project, today that same forested terrain has become increasingly susceptible to fire. A 2022 study identified wildfires as the single greatest environmental risk to the Laboratory's essential systems, including power, water, communications, and onsite facilities.[1] The Los Alamos County Fire Department has repeatedly defended this area, protecting not only residents but also one of America's most critical scientific assets. The Jemez Mountain Fire Protection Project represents a smart, forward-looking investment to reduce the vulnerability of above-ground power lines and ensure reliable water support when wildfire strikes. It will protect lives, infrastructure, and national security while reducing future demands on federal disaster response. We strongly urge prompt approval of this application to ensure Los Alamos County and the State of New Mexico can remain on schedule for construction and implementation.

Sincerely,

Martin Heinrich
United States Senator

Ben Ray Luján
United States Senator

[1] Los Alamos National Laboratory. 2022 Climate Change Vulnerability Assessment and Resilience Plan. https://www.lasg.org/MPF2/documents/LA-CP-22-20631-Final-VARP_6Nov2022.pdf.