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**NEWS / COMMUNITY**

## The Hermits Peak-Calf Canyon Fire damaged watersheds the state won't likely assess for years

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Burned Area Emergency Response Team specialists assess Culvert off of Forest Service NFSR 156 Road in Hermits Peak-Calf Canyon Fire burned area.

Public domain photo via BAER

Watersheds in Northern New Mexico are taking a hit as monsoons push wildfire ash and debris into sources, threatening water systems, people and aquatic life.

“Hermits Peak-Calf Canyon and some of other fires in 2022 fire season have dramatically changed the landscape and condition of our watersheds,” said hydrologist Phoebe Suina.

Damage to watersheds, or drainage basins, is connected to how badly burned the area is, and over 80,000 acres are classified as severely burned so far from the Hermits Peak-Calf Canyon fires by the Burned Area Emergency Response team.

Badly burned soil doesn't retain water, and charred vegetation doesn't slow down water runoff, which can lead to rain pushing sediment and debris to lakes and rivers after wildfires, according to the U.S. Geological Survey. Floods and runoff bring excess nutrients and other materials like major ions

and metals to watersheds. And the water becomes cloudy — more turbid.

Suina (Cochiti / San Felipe) is the owner of High Water Mark LLC, a company that helps communities after wildfires. She's seen these negative effects on the state's watersheds. Her organization works with other partners on watershed management and rehabilitation, and has been aiding the restoration of a number of watersheds damaged by the largest wildfire in state history.

Drinking water is also at risk when watersheds are damaged. In Las Vegas, N.M., the drinking water supply is being threatened because a majority of their water comes from the Gallinas watershed that the Hermits Peak-Calf Canyon Fire torched, Suina said.

Last month, the village of Chacon was temporarily left without running water when the fire cracked a rock formation of a spring that supplies over 130 homes with drinking water, diverting the water flow to another location.

N.M. Environment Department spokesperson Matthew Maez said via email that “restoring watersheds that have been impacted from past land use practices” is critical in making sure communities have healthy water quality.

Watersheds near charred regions are seeing flash floods following intense rains. Where burn scars can't retain precipitation in the soil, Suina said, floods overtake infrastructure like roads, bridges, homes and acequias are being flooded due to areas where the burn scar can't retain precipitation in its soil, Suina said. She has seen damage firsthand in the smaller watersheds of Sapallo and Gallinos.

Santa Fe National Forest hydrologist Amina Sena said there's flooding now in areas that don't experience it. “The area of Ledoux, which is usually a meadow, it turned into a river in this post-fire flood scenario,” she said.

Aquatic life is also suffering the consequences of the wildfire, a blaze lit by the U.S. Forest Service as a prescribed burn during a megadrought — the result of human-caused climate change.

Two of the top injuries to rivers and streams are commonly caused by wildfires. One is high temperatures that cause lower levels of dissolved oxygen, killing fish and other aquatic life. The second is excessive nutrients, which can also impact dissolved oxygen levels. Both have been observed in the Upper Pecos watershed, according to NMED's Surface Water Quality Bureau.

State watershed monitoring

Amigos Bravos is a nonprofit that works to keep New Mexico's waters clean, and Deputy Director Rachel Conn is concerned about New Mexico's slow progress in monitoring rivers and how few resources the state has for the effort.

"Our waters are not monitored as often as they should be," Conn said, "and that's a real danger and risk to human health, as well as wildlife."

It takes 10 years for the Surface Water Quality Bureau to monitor all of the watersheds in the state. About one-quarter of the state is assessed every two years.

"That's a really low rate of water quality monitoring and of assessment of knowing what's going on in our watersheds," Conn said.

Watersheds that the Hermits Peak-Calf Canyon Fire burned will likely wait years before the state gets to them again: the Upper Pecos watershed isn't supposed to be looked at until 2029; the Upper Rio Grande watershed isn't set for another assessment until 2027; the Mora watershed isn't projected to be monitored until 2025.

"Hopefully, with the recent fires, we can get some monitoring in these systems that aren't on their cycle," she said.

Suina said catastrophic fires — Hermits Peak-Calf Canyon, the Black Fire, Las Conchas — "really should be an impetus to look and maybe bring up the timeline or prioritization of those particular watersheds."

But Maez said there are not any anticipated changes to the monitoring

schedule. He said due to funding and staffing limitations, the Surface Water Quality Bureau currently has no post-fire monitoring plans.

“This is the most efficient combination of monitoring designs, given current funding, to meet the objectives outlined in the 10-year monitoring plan,” Maez wrote via email.

Sena, with the Santa Fe National Forest, said the state’s monitoring schedule is based on limited resources and capacity, and the entire state of New Mexico has a lot of surface water to cover. Other organizations help monitor watersheds as well, she said, a task taken up by the Upper Pecos Watershed Association and the Hermit’s Peak Watershed Alliance.

Maez wrote via email that other organizations monitoring water “may have an existing agreement to perform surface water quality improvement or restoration projects” and are often funded through the Clean Water Act or NMED’s River Stewardship Program grants.

“That (NMED) rotation, timing and their ability to monitor rivers is really based on their capacity as an organization,” Sena said.

The state environment department conducted emergency responses for other disasters in the past, such as following the Gold King Mine spill in San Juan County in 2015 and the Little Bear Fire near Ruidoso in 2012, Maez wrote.

There needs to be more funding and resources allocated by legislators to research the consequences, both immediate and long-term, of watersheds damaged by wildfires, Suina said. She referenced studies that were done after the Las Conchas Fire and Cerro Grande that have aided in understanding the consequences from other wildfires on watersheds.

“It’s time to roll up our sleeves. We’ve got a lot of work to do. And it’s not going to be done soon,” Sena said. “It’s a commitment of time — and probably a long commitment of time — that our communities and us, we need to work together and help restore the resiliency of these watersheds.”

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