NORTH Dakota | Office of the Governor

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November 21, 2024

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

Through: Nancy Dragani, Regional Administrator
Federal Emergency Management Agency
Region VIII
Denver Federal Center
Building 710, Box 25267
Denver, CO 80225-0267

RE: REQUEST FOR A PRESIDENTIAL MAJOR DISASTER DECLARATION

Dear Mr. President,

Since 1953, North Dakota has received 72 federal disaster declarations, 68 of which were extreme weather events. On Oct. 5, 2024, severe drought conditions and extremely high winds reaching nearly 80 miles per hour caused multiple wildfires in northwestern North Dakota to rapidly expand, resulting in widespread damages and significant firefighting response efforts by local fire districts as well as state and federal agencies. On Oct. 6, FEMA Region VIII subsequently declared two Fire Management Assistance Grant (FMAG) Declarations for two of these large uncontrolled wildfires: the Elk Horn Fire (FM-5541-ND) and the Bear Den Fire (FM-5540-ND). These were the first fire management assistance declarations ever approved in North Dakota (ND), showcasing the extent of these fires and the threat they caused to human life, safety and improved property.

Throughout this summer, rain events in the east and central parts of the state established normal to above-normal moisture conditions. The western portion of the state remained out of drought designation until late September. By Oct. 1, areas of ND reached a D3 (extreme drought) designation outlining the wide shift in moisture which contributed to the impact of the historic wildland fires that occurred. The start of our historic fire year began on Oct. 5 and resulted in devasting impacts to electrical and agricultural infrastructure, residential homes, property and the environment.

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Pursuant to Section 401 of the Robert T. Stafford Disaster Relief and Emergency Assistance Act, 42 U.S.C. §§5121-5207 (Stafford Act), and implemented by 44 CFR §206.36, the State of North Dakota requests a major disaster declaration for the Oct. 5-6,2024, straight-line winds and severe wildfires that led to significant damages and emergency response operations for Williams and McKenzie counties. The counties of Mountrail, Ward, Dunn and Oliver were also impacted by fires but did not exceed their per capita impact thresholds in infrastructure damages. This series of fire incidents caused significant impacts throughout the state with the greatest being in the northwestern and central portions of the state.

Weather Summary

Weather conditions contributed to wildfire intensity beginning on Saturday, Oct. 5. A powerful cold front with strong southerly wind approached the state from Montana on Oct. 4. The front moved into the northwest part of the state in the early morning hours of Oct. 5. Winds shifted from the northwest which increased the wind speeds significantly. Low level (surface) moisture was lacking, and although there was a band of clouds with the front passage, there was no rain. Behind the front, northwest winds gusted to nearly 80 mph. These very high northwest winds continued through Oct. 5 and brought increasingly drier air (lower dew points) into the state. The very high winds did not subside until Oct. 6 (NWS, 2024). Fires burning in these weather conditions spread very rapidly.

Comparatively, the spring of 2024 was very wet over parts of northwestern ND, with as much as 200% above normal precipitation in May and June. As a result, the northwest part of the state, which had been designated as D0 (abnormally dry) on the U.S. Drought Monitor, went to the designation of "none." In response to the wet and early spring there was a quick green-up leading to above-average plant growth that became fuel for fire. The summer quickly turned dry. Although temperatures were near average for a ND summer, the extreme heat and lack of precipitation in late July dried out the grassland. On July 25, the ND Agricultural Weather Network (NDAWN) tied the all-time warmest temperature observed since the network began in 1990, with maximum of 111° at Banks Station, north of Watford City (Ritchison, 2024). Many stations in northwest ND did not record a 1-inch daily rain all summer. Many stations in that area went three months without a half-inch daily rain before these fires as well.

By early August, the lack of precipitation began to be reflected in the U.S. Drought Monitor. McKenzie and Williams counties showed designations of D0 and D1 (moderate drought) along the Montana border and reached D2 (severe drought) by the end of August (NWS, 2024). September continued to be very dry with less than 25% of normal precipitation in parts of northwestern ND. Temperatures averaged as much as 8 degrees above normal

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from July through September. These temperatures combined with the lack of precipitation led to vegetation rapidly drying out.

By Oct. 1, D3 (extreme drought) was introduced on the U.S. Drought Monitor for parts of Williams County. That D3 designation was expanded to cover almost half of Williams and McKenzie counties by Oct. 8. Reports from Oct. 14 indicate that the city of Williston had not received a measurable amount of rain in 21 days (NWS, 2024). The first freeze occurred a few days before the fires, ending the growing season, drying out the vegetation and further increasing the fire risk (Ritchison, 2024). Once these fires started, weather conditions created limitations to capabilities and rapidly expanded fire conditions.

Incident Summary

On Oct. 3, the ND Forest Service (NDFS) reported above-normal fire activity with high to very high risk for fire starts. These indicators activated state, local and tribal actions such as prepositioning of in-state and out-of-state resources. Sustained winds between 50 and 60 mph with gusts at nearly 80 mph promoted fire growth from starts in northwestern and central portions of ND on Oct. 5-6. Due to critical fire weather conditions, emergency management agencies across the state coordinated with first responder groups to prepare for potential fire response.

The ND Watch Center received a report around 2 a.m. Oct. 5 of a large fire two miles north of Arnegard, ND, 8 miles west of Watford City. As the flames grew closer, troopers with the ND Highway Patrol (NDHP) began notifying residents by going door-to-door to inform them to evacuate the area. Soon after, the McKenzie County Office of Emergency Management issued an official evacuation order. Teams fought through the day and reached containment by that evening with an estimated 700 acres burned. Another fire, referred to as the Midnight Run fire occurred in the early morning hours, one mile south of Charlson, ND. This fire expanded to multiple miles wide by daybreak, totaling an estimated 3,018 acres burned as identified by the ND Department of Emergency Services' (NDDES) Geographic Information System (GIS) Section.

Both fires had limited human impacts due to the high state of readiness fire departments sustained through the critical fire conditions. The fires that arose in the northwest grew quickly and jumped unexpectedly because of the wind. By mid-morning, another fire closer to the central part of the state near Emmet, ND, referred to as the Garrison Fire, required a response from four agencies with an estimated 830 acres.

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By early afternoon on Oct. 5, the Elkhorn Fire was reported 13 miles southwest of Watford City (McKenzie County). Flames were difficult to suppress and contain, pushing the fires to engulf the landscape. By Monday, Oct. 7, the Elkhorn fire had moved into deep, rugged terrain with little to no vehicle access. The fire was burning primarily on federal and private lands. Fire crews focused suppression efforts on protecting farmsteads and securing fire lines to control containment. The ND National Guard (NDNG) Black Hawk helicopters, U.S. Forest Service (USFS) air tankers and Huey helicopters were assigned to this mission for aerial assets. Hand crews were also effective in managing rough terrain but by nature are slower to reach containment.

At the Elkhorn fire, firefighting crews fought rough terrain for 10 days, with hand and aerial crews focused on enforcing fire lines around buildings and hay ground. Low visibility and the lack of line of sight created difficult conditions for fire crew communication. Producers struggled to evacuate and find cattle through rough terrain with fire encroaching due to the high winds and dense fuel loads. The Elkhorn fire destroyed roughly 200 electrical poles, according to McKenzie Electric Cooperative; it also damaged fencing and outbuildings and burned 13,500 total acres.

By the afternoon of Oct. 5, the Bear Den fire had also started in McKenzie County and then burned east threatening the community of Mandaree. By 5:35 pm Oct. 5, the Mandan, Hidatsa & Arikara (MHA) Nation's Emergency Operations Center ordered an evacuation for households outside of Mandaree for the fires in McKenzie County on MHA Nation land. Voluntary evacuations were also encouraged. Through its lifespan the Bear Den Fire threatened 100 residences and 500 other structures, ultimately destroying many miles of fencing, barns, lean-to structures, corrals, sheds and tractor equipment, taking the lives of hundreds of livestock and destroying one home. The Bear Den fire resulted in a loss of power at the Mandaree Water Intake. An emergency generator from Fort Berthold Rural Water powered the intake for several days during the active fires. This power outage forced citizens to closely conserve water.

The Bear Den fire required a variety of resources to reach containment. The NDNG provided two Black Hawks and one hand crew. The Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) facilitated an order of two Super Scooper bombardier 215/214 aircrafts, four large air tankers, and one Type III helicopter stationed in Billings, Montana, through the Miles City Interagency Dispatch Center. The BIA also facilitated the order of the Tallac Hot Shot Crew from the Lake Tahoe Basin Area, USFS. Although resources were limited nationally, NDFS partners were successful in advocating for ND. The Bear Den fire was staffed with 12 Type 6 fire engines from NDFS, Williston Fire Department, Kindred Fire Department, Three Affiliated

Tribes Fire (TAT) management program and contracted engines. The Mandaree Fire Department provided two water tenders and nine pieces of heavy equipment and operators from the Mandaree road department.

Aerial operations dropped over 150,000 gallons of water on the fire from Lake Sakakawea. Hand crews and aerial operations were essential to the success of containment for both the Elkhorn and Bear Den fires. NDFS reinforced the intense nature of these fires noting, "I've fought fires for 23 years across the nation, including international, and can honestly say I've never seen anything like this," said Ryan Melin, Fire Management Officer. The Bear Den fire burned approximately 13,500 acres. Both the Elkhorn and Bear Den fires had similar topography which created unique challenges for fire suppression and took over 10 days to reach 100% containment which is very atypical for this kind of response.

By the evening of Oct. 5, another complex of two fires in Williams County broke out near Ray, Alamo and Tioga. Initial reports were variable with duplicating details as small fires began merging into large fires. The fires crossed U.S. Highway 2, with one of them nearly entering the town of Ray. As fires blazed across the landscape, farmers, residents, local volunteer firefighters and neighboring fire departments worked toward suppressing the flames. Teams cut fire lines into the soil with personal agricultural equipment to protect critical structures and their homes. Many households throughout the countryside and within the communities of Ray and Tioga voluntarily evacuated. Rural residents were notified by first responders to evacuate for immediate life safety. Several fires burned through the night of Oct. 5 as the wind whipped across the landscape, creating challenging and nearly impossible response conditions.

Community members described the scene as apocalyptic. The smoke was so thick in areas you could drive for 3 miles and not see anything. Meanwhile, Ray, Alamo and Wildrose fire departments were watering down the flames. These fires took the lives of two individuals and injured eight other people, with one being a firefighter who was hospitalized for several days. While fire crews fought to protect structures and homesteads, three primary residences were destroyed and an estimated 88,924 acres burned, according to Williams County Emergency Management. Each fire from this event was pushed over 20 miles by the wind, increasing the extent of the fire at a rapid and aggressive rate. The number of fires and complexity of the terrain tested the limits of mutual aid agreements between the volunteer, tribal, local, state and federal fire departments across the region.

The smoke and lack of clarity in communications caused confusion and complicated response. Crews navigated low visibility, rugged terrain and a quickly spreading fire

footprint. The intense heat from dense fuel loads created challenges for responders. The wind threw hot air, gravel and debris at firefighters. These conditions increased the need for periodic breaks, as many were unable to breathe. Ryan Melin, NDFS, also shared, "When we're operating in those zero visibility conditions, you can imagine that it's a pretty eerie feeling as you are trying to do some work at a fairly rapid speed and not knowing where anyone else is."

Mountrail-Williams Electric Cooperative and McKenzie Electric had sustained power outages, with reports of nearly 50 residences without power five days after the initial fire event. Mountrail-Williams Electric also reported 427 poles needed to be replaced, with more than 110 linemen working on restoring power. McKenzie Electric reported approximately 200 power poles that needed to be replaced due to impact from fire. Based on providers' estimates, damages are around $3.7 million to electrical infrastructure specifically. The fires that started on Oct. 5 devoured over 120,000 acres of beautiful ND landscape and citizens' property.

A Whole of Government and Community Response

The resilience of North Dakotans continues to shine through these events. Farmers, ranchers, community members, electric cooperatives, non-profit organizations, first responders and volunteer fire departments embraced the ability to improvise, adapt and overcome. Shelters were opened in New Town at the Johnny Berg Center and in Arnegard at Wilmington Lutheran Church, with several others opening in the MHA Nation. Efforts were coordinated by local and tribal emergency management offices including the MHA Emergency Operations Center staff, McKenzie County Emergency Management and Williams County Emergency Management.

A whole of community approach was taken throughout the response, with the NDFS focusing on suppression efforts while engaging federal, state, local and tribal resources to enhance response capabilities. Fire suppression teams were comprised of local volunteer firefighters, NDFS, NDNG, USFS and NDDES staff. State-to-state agreements bolstered ND capacity by NDFS utilizing its Great Plains Fire Compact to bring in resources from the State of New Mexico and the State of Washington. While firefighters were deployed, the Ladies of Mandaree, part of the Fire Auxiliary, fed and welcomed teams into the Mandaree School. The Mandaree School District provided firefighters with comfort kits including eye drops, Kleenex and cough drops as many individuals experienced personal health impacts from the wind. The Mandaree School gymnasium and locker rooms, where the firefighters were lodging, were plastered with posters created by students in support of the fire teams.

Private businesses such as local convenience stores supported firefighters by donating drinks, snacks and other comfort items.

The State Emergency Operations Center was elevated to a Level 2 (Partial) activation, and State Unified Command was led by NDFS and NDDES. The ND Governor's Office sustained an active presence by sharing information, conducting aerial tours of the impacts and communicating to the public via press briefings. The NDDES Division of State Radio was instrumental in managing communications and dispatching resources. The ND Joint Information Center (NDJIC) was also established with representation from numerous partner agencies to establish clear and accurate communications to the public and press.

The NWS and NDFS technical experts informed Unified Command of the long-term possibility of this response leading to the formation of a Contingency Planning Unit. The NWS was instrumental in keeping responders and emergency management informed on forecasts and provided detailed hot spot identification detected on satellite imagery. The NDNG provided aerial assets with crews and one hand crew which was deployed throughout the incident. NDHP and ND Civil Air Patrol (NDCAP) provided aerial assets for damage assessments and to create heat signatures maps using forward-looking infrared (FLIR). These maps allowed fire suppression teams to target efforts toward hot spots.

The ND Department of Mineral Resources (NDDMR) focused on reducing impacts to the energy industry and environment by communicating with operators to conduct voluntary shut-ins of oil wells and facilitation of mutual aid agreements to reduce impacts. The ND Department of Transportation (NDDOT) promoted fire prevention messaging to transporters and provided six all-wheel drive pickup trucks to support fire suppression. The ND Insurance Department actively communicated with those impacted to document damages and conducted fire origin investigations of private and federal lands. The U.S. Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF) worked to investigate the source of the fires on tribal lands. The ND Department of Environmental Quality (NDDEQ) worked to monitor air quality and environmental concerns and to facilitate any environmental remediation. The ND Department of Water Resources (NDDWR) expedited water use requests from fire teams and supported local water districts. NDDWR also provided technical assistance to Fort Berthold Rural Water, which supplied a generator at the Mandaree water intake pump while their power was out.

NDDES formed and has sustained a Recovery Task Force that worked to compile resources and share recovery information. Several non-governmental voluntary agencies also responded to this event. The American Red Cross (ARC) deployed a disaster action team to

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connect volunteers with impacted families. The Salvation Army provided first responders with hydration and food during suppression efforts. The Great Plains Food Bank deployed mobile food pantries to Trenton, Twin Buttes and Hebron. The Department of Health and Human Services (NDHHS) activated the Disaster Supplement Nutrition Assistance Program (DSNAP) and opened its health hotline to address any physical or mental health-related impacts from the wildfire.

The agricultural community was deeply impacted. The ND Department of Agriculture (NDDA) activated the Hay Hotline for producers, communicated with farmers and ranchers regarding animal health, and shared resources for recovery from the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Farm Service Agency (FSA). North Dakota State University Extension shared agriculture-related fire prevention messaging, collected agricultural damage assessments through county extension agents and partnered with other agencies to produce press releases. The ND Stockmen's Association provided reunification services for livestock and resources for fire recovery.

Fall brings in over 130,000 out-of-state recreators for hunting in North Dakota. ND Game and Fish (NDGF) alerted incoming hunters to be situationally aware and focused on fire prevention. ND Parks and Recreation (NDPR) also alerted recreators of fire conditions and enforced stringent burning regulations based on local burn bans and fire restrictions.

Long-Term Implications of Recent Disasters

North Dakota has a long history of fighting fires. The most recent historic year began on Jan. 14, 2021, in Adams County and continued throughout the summer. By Aug. 18, 2021, ND had experienced more than 2,000 fires burning over 120,000 total acres, compared to the 900 fires that burned approximately 12,000 total acres in 2020. Drought conditions expanded the extent of these fires. The fires that began on Oct. 5, 2024, alone burned the equivalent acreage burned from all of 2021.

The impacts and long-term implications of these historic fires is devasting to ND. In some cases, impacts will cost individuals hundreds of thousands of dollars in repairs. Pastures, cropland and countless trees were burned beyond recognition. Many rural residents utilize shelterbelts or windbreaks to provide protection for crops, structures and livestock. Losing these features that help maintain resilience is one long-term impact of these fires.

The loss of equipment and structures to support agricultural operations also threatens the livelihood of ranchers and producers as their operations are no longer able to be sustained. The burden and losses of ranches, farmsteads and livestock will ultimately impact the

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state's economy, food supply and longevity of rural producers and agricultural communities. As recovery progresses, some producers have realized that the devastation was so severe that they are unsure if they will be able to continue.

As recovery and response efforts were coordinated, resources were limited due to ongoing disasters nationally such as Hurricane Helene and Hurricane Milton. Many of the firefighting resources were scarce as the National Fire Preparedness reached Level 5. This translates into a heavy commitment of national resources. Across the country, there were 29 large fires happening simultaneously, requiring all hands on deck as resources were redirected. This tested the limits of in-state capabilities and capacity. These national strains highlighted the importance of contingency planning. This resulted in the potential activation of the Wildland Fire Task Force, which identified 23 fire departments offering resources (personnel or trucks) that would be available to support wildland fire response.

Commitment to Resilience

NDDES maintains an Enhanced Mitigation Mission Area Operations Plan approved on Feb. 5, 2024. The plan highlights our state's close partnerships with 106 local, tribal, state, private and federal organizations, showcasing a whole of community and whole of government approach to mitigation. In addition to enhanced plan status, ND is also approved for all delegated authorities under the Program Administration by State (PAS) pilot program. Close relationships and continued collaboration provide a strong foundation toward initiating and completing mitigation initiatives in collaboration with the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA).

Using data-driven methods and learning from previous events' damages and experiences, North Dakota strives to be proactive and showcase our commitment to resilience through multiple mitigation measures. There have been 501 total mitigation actions completed since 1997 with a total of $313,150,004 spent on mitigation within the state. Pew Charitable trusts and the National Institute of Building Science identified in 2020 that the use of effective mitigation projects, such as those used in ND, can save $6.54 in long-term response and recovery costs for every $1 invested. This savings brings the state into the highest category of savings in the country with a total of $2,048,001,027 saved.

NDDES staff continue to show our state's commitment to continuous improvements and mitigation. For FY2022, ND received its first competitive project from the Building Resilient Infrastructure and Communities (BRIC) grant program, allocating over $10 million for the City of Lincoln's wastewater system. There were also two FY2022 Flood Mitigation Assistance (FMA) projects selected totaling over $70 million in assistance for the cities of

Bismarck and Mandan. Another $10 million was selected under the FY2023 BRIC program for the relocation and improvement of the water intake used by the City of Washburn's water treatment plant.

When comparing our performance nationally for these grant programs, ND consistently remains at or near the top in terms of projects selected. For FY2022 BRIC, ND ranked 25th nationally in terms of federal dollars selected but was 6th nationally when comparing the amount of funds selected against the state's population. For FY2022 FMA, ND ranked 3rd nationally in terms of federal dollars selected and was 1st nationally when compared to population. These rankings and metrics clearly outline the commitment ND has developed to implement an effective statewide mitigation program.

Conclusion

Pursuant to 44 CFR§206.36, I have determined that the straight-line winds and severe wildland fires that occurred Oct. 5-6, 2024, were of such severity and magnitude that effective response and recovery are beyond the capabilities of the state and affected local jurisdictions. For the reasons described in this letter and its supporting documentation, I respectfully request that you declare a major disaster for the State of North Dakota with an incident period of Oct. 5, 2024, to Oct. 6, 2024, for McKenzie and Williams counties. The current expected costs for this disaster event are expected to exceed $8 million total, of which $3.7 million in damages to electrical infrastructure have already been validated by FEMA Region VIII as part of our Preliminary Damage Assessment (PDA). The other impacted counties of Mountrail, Ward, Dunn and Oliver are identified in the supporting documentation since they sustained damages from this event, however, since they were not able to exceed their per capita impact thresholds they cannot be designated if a disaster declaration is subsequently approved.

As in previous disasters, I am also requesting North Dakota be designated as a Public Assistance Managing State, and that the Hazard Mitigation Grant Program be implemented on a statewide basis. I certify for this major disaster that the state and local governments will assume all applicable non-federal shares of costs required by the Stafford Act 93-288.

We have designated Brig. Gen. Mitchell Johnson and Homeland Security Director Darin Hanson as the State Coordinating Officers (SCOs) for this request. They will work with FEMA to coordinate damage assessments and may provide further information or justifications on my behalf.

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Thank you for your consideration of this request for a Major Presidential Disaster Declaration for the State of North Dakota and for your continued support as we recover from continuous disaster conditions.

Sincerely,

Doug Burgum
Governor

Enclosures: Enclosure A: Executive Order 2024-06

Attachment A: NDDES and FEMA Region VIII Summary for North Dakota Wildfires
Attachment B: ND Presidential Declarations Map (1993 – 2024)
Attachment C: Packet from State Climatologist

CC: Senator John Hoeven
Senator Kevin Cramer
Representative Kelly Armstrong
Brig. Gen. Mitchell R. Johnson Director, North Dakota Department of Emergency Services
Darin Hanson, Director, North Dakota Division of Homeland Security
Justin Messner, Disaster Recovery Chief, North Dakota Division of Homeland Security

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