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— News From The States —

EVENING WRAP



By [Kate Queram](#) and [Marisa Demarco](#)

Programming note: National Editor Marisa Demarco is here with the latest in an investigative project. I'll take over a little further down. See you soon!

It's been well over a year since a federal agency accidentally ignited what would become the biggest wildfire of 2022 in the continental United States. Most of the people who lost everything to the blaze still haven't seen a dime from a compensation fund approved by Congress last winter.

The government "took away our retirement — and took away our possibilities," said Nell Rodgers, whose home and property went up in flames last year. "The only thing we can count on is compensation. And that doesn't seem to be coming anytime soon."

For much of this year, States Newsroom outlet Source New Mexico has teamed up with ProPublica as part of its [Local Reporting Network](#) to cover the aftermath of the fire. "[FEMA has paid out just 2% of a fund to help wildfire victims rebuild. Some can't wait much longer](#)," reported by Patrick Lohmann and Byard Duncan, takes us into the historic New Mexico region that people are still fighting to restore.



The Big Takeaway

As Tito Naranjo waited to be sworn in for his deposition in a hotel conference room in New Mexico on July 20, he glanced at his watch. "We're running 21 minutes behind," he said to the lawyers gathered to question him.

He's 86-years-old. And he doesn't have all the time in the world.



Naranjo at his sister's home in Santa Clara Pueblo, New Mexico.

(Adria Malcolm for ProPublica)

Seventeen months after losing their homes and livelihoods in the Hermits Peak-Calf Canyon Fire — a prescribed burn gone wrong — Naranjo and thousands of others in the aging, rural communities in New Mexico's Sangre de Cristo Mountains are still waiting for money to rebuild.

Some might not live long enough to get it.

That money was promised by the president and allocated by Congress: \$4 billion to cover a disaster set into motion by the U.S. Forest Service. The largest wildfire in state history, it ravaged much of northern New Mexico, torching 534 square miles, which is about the size of Los Angeles. The fund is an acknowledgment of the Forest Service's culpability in triggering the blaze.

But the Federal Emergency Management Agency has yet to distribute 98% of the compensation fund, Lohmann and Duncan report.

Faced with delays in getting paid and questions about what FEMA will ultimately cover, a local attorney representing Naranjo and several hundred others recently convinced a federal judge to allow aging, infirm survivors to testify under oath about what they have lost — an unusual move intended to preserve knowledge that their relatives don't have.

Naranjo testified for two hours during the July deposition about the life he and his wife had built near their childhood pueblos, the monstrous fire that made ash of his journals, FEMA's denial of any short-term aid, the future of his land. His 97-acre property is a total loss — the stand of aspen trees, a small apple orchard, miles of fencing and a bridge he had built himself, all gone.



The site of Tito and Bernice Naranjo's former home.

(Adria Malcolm for ProPublica)

The fire took the home he'd shared with his wife for 50 years. Naranjo hasn't laid the first adobe for a replacement home, hammered a fence post or planted a single tree. And with congestive heart failure raising the risk of a stroke, he worries about whether he'll be able to see it through.

"Is it your goal to restore the property as best you can to the way it was before the fire started?" asked Roberto Ortega, an assistant U.S. attorney.

“That can never happen,” Naranjo answered. “I would like to see it, but I saw it in its glory. It was a paradise. That paradise can never be rebuilt.”

FEMA has defended its rollout of the claims office, saying it is moving as fast as a federal agency can. Normally, FEMA offers only short-term disaster aid. This is only the second time it has been tasked with paying survivors so they could rebuild after a federal agency lost control of a prescribed burn. FEMA established policies, hired staff and opened offices in eight months. The pace of compensation picked up in recent weeks.

Antonia Roybal-Mack, Naranjo’s lawyer, said she wants to make sure these victims are made whole if they die before they get a check from the federal government. If they end up filing suit to get what they believe they deserve, “these clients will likely expire before they get their day in court,” she said.

Her clients include farmers and ranchers who lived off land that was burned in the fire or that was washed out in the floods that followed. Like a Vietnam veteran who said he was “blown to hell” in the war, a salon owner who said that her doctors told her that she contracted a lung disease from smoke and chemicals, and a former police chief who recently was treated for cancer for the fourth time, according to court documents.



During a tour of the damage to Naranjo's property with the USDA employees, he points to a mountainside the fire descended as it destroyed his property.

(Patrick Lohmann/Source NM)

Most of the people who spoke with Source New Mexico and ProPublica said they can't rebuild before FEMA pays their claim. Few of those displaced by the fire had insurance. Some said they've already spent their temporary aid; others never got any. FEMA turned down hundreds of households that applied for emergency disaster assistance offered during and directly after the fire.

FEMA has to rebuild some trust. The agency stresses that the claims office is separate from the program that provided limited assistance when people were fleeing their homes. Staffers with the claims office regularly show up at community events, handing out brochures encouraging people to file claims. The claims office advocate holds regular meetings to combat "half-truths and misinformation" about what FEMA will and won't pay for.

"We know that trust is earned by doing what we say we are going to do, and delivering results," FEMA spokesperson Deborah Martinez said.

Calls from fire victims to a mental health hotline shot up this spring. And in August, [U.S. Sen. Ben Ray Luján](#) greeted President Joe Biden on a visit to New Mexico by handing him a letter criticizing delays in payments.

New Mexico Gov. Michelle Lujan Grisham said on a recent visit to the burn scar that the message from FEMA is to wait, just as it was last summer: "That's what you're hearing from everyone: 'I don't know what I'm supposed to do. I'm waiting.'"

There's a lot more to this story. [Read the whole thing here.](#)



State of Our Democracy

Hi, it's me, back to depress everyone with news about American politics, which today begins with Donald Trump warning union leaders in Michigan that they'd better endorse him for president if they'd like to continue having a union. Of course, it's not clear how many of them got the message, since Trump delivered it during a visit to a non-union auto parts factory, [the Michigan Advance reported.](#)

"They have to endorse Trump," Trump told the non-union crowd at Drake Enterprises, who

probably do not really care one way or the other which candidate the unions prefer. “If they don’t, all they’re doing is committing suicide.”



“They have to endorse Trump,” Trump said about Trump, without giving one single reason why they might actually have to endorse Trump.

(Photo by Scott Olson/Getty Images)

The visit came one day after President Joe Biden visited striking United Automobile Workers [on a picket line near Detroit](#) and affirmed his support for the union's demands, including a 40% pay increase and better pension benefits. Trump did too, sort of, telling the striking workers — the vast majority of whom were not at his campaign event at the non-union factory — that he “truly hope[d] you get a fair deal for you and your families,” even though “it doesn't make a damn bit of difference” because the entire automotive industry will crumble as Americans turn to electric vehicles.

Having done ... something (it's not clear what) to (sort of attempt to) earn the union's endorsement, Trump spent the rest of his speech begging for it, primarily by launching entreaties at UAW President Shawn Fain, who is the president of the striking union and did not attend the purported union rally at the non-union business.

“Shawn, endorse Trump and you can take a nice two month vacation, come back, and you guys are going to be better than you ever were,” Trump said. “The other way, you won't have a vacation, Shawn. And in a short period of time, you're not going to have a union. You're not going to have jobs. You're not going to have anything.”

Fain is likely unmoved by this impassioned plea. He declined to meet with Trump in Michigan, and [blasted the former president's decision](#) to “hold a rally for union members at a non-union business” as a “pathetic irony.”

“I don't think the man has any bit of care about what our workers stand for, what the working class stands for,” he said Tuesday during [an interview on CNN](#). “He serves the billionaire class, and that's what's wrong with this country.”

Another big ol' flaw in American democracy: Gerrymandering, in which lawmakers exploit the redistricting process by redrawing boundaries to favor their own political party, effectively [bypassing the will of the voters](#). Unsurprisingly, [voters don't like this](#). Unsurprisingly, lawmakers don't really care. Once you've devised a way to remain in office without courting votes, it's pretty easy to ignore voters, even when they're literally standing in front of you telling you how much they hate gerrymandering.

Lawmakers in North Carolina got an earful of that testimony Wednesday as voters from

across the state descended on a three-hour public hearing on redistricting. Some speakers lambasted Republicans for hijacking the process to entrench their own power. Others described their exhaustion with gerrymandering in general, which they said worsens partisanship, erodes democracy and makes it easy for lawmakers to ignore their constituents' needs and opinions, [NC Newsline reported](#).



*Definitely for sure listening to and considering your comments.
(Screenshot via NC Newsline)*

“I am not a public speaker nor a political activist,” said John Suddath of Raleigh. “I’m just an 87-year-old man concerned about the state of democracy — little d — in this country, and particularly North Carolina. I can’t recall a time when I felt that the right to vote, and that each vote counts, was in such jeopardy.”

Other speakers had concrete requests, like additional hearings for proposed maps and greater transparency throughout the redistricting process. Lawmakers — the ones that were there, anyway — responded to this thoughtful testimony by dismissing it entirely. The districts are already being drafted, said state Sen. Ralph Hise, chairman of the Senate Redistricting and Elections Committee. There will be no additional public hearings.

There was no need to address calls for more transparency, which Republicans had dispensed with ahead of time via a budget measure restricting public access to draft maps and lawmaker emails containing references to redistricting. Prior to this year, that material was available after the final plans were approved.

Basically, it’s not hard to predict the outcome here: The maps will favor Republicans, particularly in the state’s congressional districts, which are currently split evenly between the two parties.

“I strongly suspect that on the congressional seats, which are now split 7-7, that the Republicans are going to draw something to give it more like 9-5,” said state Rep. Abe Jones, a Raleigh Democrat and a member of the House Redistricting Committee.

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One Last Thing

Earth will become a barren wasteland uninhabitable for mammals in a scant 250 million years, according to research [published this week](#). Other life forms will continue for another 1 to 2 billion years, because other life forms are not *weakling mammals* who rely on *weakling cooling mechanisms* like *circulatory systems* and *air conditioning*, which will prove ineffective when the planet is just a large-scale Florida.

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