



**SIERRA COUNTY
BOARD OF COUNTY COMMISSIONERS
RESOLUTION NO. 2026-52**

**DECLARING A LOCAL DISASTER DUE TO HISTORICALLY LOW WATER LEVELS AT ELEPHANT
BUTTE RESERVOIR**

WHEREAS, the Sierra County Commission met upon notice of a duly noticed Special. County Commission Meeting on August 7th, 2026, at 9:00 A.M. in the Sierra County Administration Building, 1712 N. Date Street, Truth or Consequences, NM 87901; and,

WHEREAS, pursuant to NMSA 1978, Section 4-38-1, the powers of a county as a body politic and corporate are exercised by its Board of County Commissioners; and,

WHEREAS, NMSA 1978, Section 4-37-1 grants counties those powers necessary and proper to preserve the public health, safety, prosperity, comfort, and welfare of their inhabitants; and,

WHEREAS, the All-Hazard Emergency Management Act, NMSA 1978, Sections 12-10-1 through 12-10-10, authorizes local governments to declare local disaster emergencies whenever the occurrence or imminent threat of widespread or severe damage, injury, loss of life, property damage, or economic disruption exceeds local capabilities; and,

WHEREAS, Elephant Butte Reservoir is the largest reservoir in the State of New Mexico and serves as the economic, recreational, environmental, and cultural centerpiece of Sierra County, supporting boating, fishing, camping, hunting, tourism, hospitality, retail commerce, marina operations, recreational vehicle parks, guide services, restaurants, lodging establishments, fuel providers, and numerous businesses whose economic viability depends directly or indirectly upon reservoir-based recreation; and,

WHEREAS, Elephant Butte Lake State Park is consistently among New Mexico's most visited state parks, attracting hundreds of thousands of visitors annually and generating substantial economic activity, employment opportunities, and gross receipts tax revenues throughout Sierra County; and,

WHEREAS, as of July 30, 2026, Elephant Butte Reservoir has declined to approximately 1.4 percent of conservation storage capacity, containing only approximately 26,732 acre-feet of water, representing one of the lowest reservoir levels observed in decades, having declined from

approximately 12.7 percent capacity only three months earlier and 3.9 percent capacity only one month earlier;

WHEREAS, the reservoir continues to decline despite seasonal operational changes and the cessation of irrigation releases, and Sierra County reasonably anticipates that, absent immediate coordinated state and federal assistance, continued drought conditions, diminished inflows, and sustained historically low reservoir elevations will result in further deterioration of recreational infrastructure, additional public safety hazards, increased environmental degradation, further losses to tourism-dependent businesses, and long-term economic harm to the residents and communities of Sierra County; and,

WHEREAS, the cumulative effects of the historically low reservoir levels constitute not only an environmental and recreational crisis, but also a regional economic disaster affecting employment, business revenues, tax collections, property values, public infrastructure, and the financial stability of local governments throughout Sierra County; and,

WHEREAS, the unprecedented decline in reservoir elevations has rendered numerous public boat ramps, marina facilities, docks, beaches, and recreational access points unusable or severely restricted, substantially reducing public access to Elephant Butte Reservoir and limiting recreational opportunities traditionally available to residents and visitors; and,

WHEREAS, because traditional water-based recreational opportunities have been substantially diminished, it is necessary to maximize alternative recreational opportunities throughout Sierra County to mitigate the economic impacts of the disaster, preserve tourism, and maintain public access to recreational resources wherever reasonably possible; and,

WHEREAS, Sierra County has previously adopted Ordinance No. 18-015 authorizing the operational of recreational off-highway motor vehicles upon County roads under specified conditions and has previously requested that the New Mexico State Transportation Commission authorize recreational off-highway motor vehicle travel upon designated portions of NM 51, NM 179, NM 181, and NM 195 because such routes provide important recreational connectivity and substantially enhance the County's recreation-based economy; and,

WHEREAS, during the present disaster emergency, expansion of lawful recreational access through approval of the requested state highway connectors will help offset the loss of reservoir-based recreation, encourage continued visitation to Sierra County, support local businesses, and promote economic recovery while longer-term restoration of Elephant Butte Reservoir proceeds; and

WHEREAS, rapidly receding waters has exposed decades of accumulated debris, abandoned vehicles, submerged structures, metal, tires, hazardous materials, sediment deposits, and other dangerous conditions that create significant risks to public health and safety and require substantial cleanup efforts before affected areas can safely be reopened to the public; and,

WHEREAS, the declining reservoir has also exposed archaeological resources, historical artifacts, and culturally significant sites requiring evaluation and protection under applicable

federal and state laws, thereby increasing the complexity, duration, and expense of cleanup and recovery operations; and,

WHEREAS, continued low reservoir elevations threaten water quality, fisheries, wildlife habitat, shoreline stability, recreational infrastructure, and the long-term viability of Elephant Butte Lake State Park and surrounding public lands; and,

WHEREAS, businesses throughout Sierra County that depend upon reservoir recreation, including marinas, hotels, vacation rentals, campgrounds, restaurants, convenience stores, fuel stations, sporting goods retailers, fishing guides, recreational outfitters, repair facilities, and other tourism-related enterprises have experienced or reasonably anticipate significant reductions in revenue, employment, and economic activity; and,

WHEREAS, the resulting decline in visitation threatens the loss of jobs, business closures, reduced investment, decreased property values, and substantial reductions in gross receipts tax revenues relied upon by Sierra County and its municipalities to provide essential governmental services; and,

WHEREAS, the reduction in reservoir access may increase demands upon County emergency responders, law enforcement, public works personnel, and other governmental agencies responsible for protecting public safety, maintaining access to public facilities, responding to hazardous conditions, and coordinating recovery efforts; and,

WHEREAS, the extraordinary conditions presently affecting Elephant Butte Reservoir exceed the financial, personnel, and operational capabilities of Sierra County acting alone, and additional assistance from the State of New Mexico and the federal government is necessary to protect public health, safety, infrastructure, natural resources, businesses, employment, and the regional economy; and,

WHEREAS, Elephant Butte Reservoir is a critical component of the Rio Grande Project and has historically provided stored water supporting irrigated agriculture throughout the region, and historically low reservoir storage threatens the availability and reliability of water supplies upon which farmers, ranchers, agricultural producers, irrigation entities, agricultural workers, and related businesses depend, thereby compounding the economic consequences of the present disaster and threatening the long-term viability of agriculture within Sierra County and the surrounding region; and,

WHEREAS, immediate coordinated governmental action is necessary to protect public safety, stabilize the local economy, remove hazardous debris, restore recreational access where feasible, protect cultural and environmental resources, assist affected businesses and workers, and pursue all available disaster relief, emergency management, infrastructure, and economic recovery funding.

NOW, THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED, that pursuant to the authority granted by the All-Hazard Emergency Management Act, NMSA 1978, Sections 12-10-1 through 12-10-10, the Sierra County Board of County Commissioners hereby declares that the historically low water levels at

Elephant Butte Reservoir constitute a Local Disaster Emergency affecting the health, safety, welfare, economy, environment, and natural resources of Sierra County.

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the County authorizes the use of all available County personnel, equipment, property, and financial resources reasonably necessary to respond to and mitigate the impacts of this disaster.

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the Board requests that the Governor of the State of New Mexico recognize this disaster emergency and authorize all available emergency assistance, disaster relief, infrastructure funding, technical assistance, and economic recovery resources available through the Department of Homeland Security and Emergency Management, Department of Finance and Administration, Energy, Minerals and Natural Resources Department, State Parks Division, Economic Development Department, Department of Environment, Department of Transportation, and all other appropriate state agencies.

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the Sierra County Board of County Commissioners respectfully requests that the Governor, the New Mexico Department of Transportation, and the New Mexico State Transportation Commission expedite review and approval of Sierra County's pending request authorizing the operation of recreational off-highway motor vehicles upon designated paved portions of NM 51, NM 179, NM 181 and NM 195, recognizing that expanded recreational access constitutes an important component of the County's disaster response and economic recovery efforts.

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the Board requests the Governor seek all available federal assistance, including assistance from the Federal Emergency Management Agency, United States Bureau of Reclamation, United States Army Corps of Engineers, United States Department of Agriculture, United States Economic Development Administration, Small Business Administration, United States Department of the Interior, and any other federal agency administering disaster assistance, economic recovery, infrastructure, environmental restoration, or emergency management programs.

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the Sierra County Board of County Commissioners requests that the State of New Mexico and appropriate federal agencies recognize the impacts of historically low Elephant Butte Reservoir storage upon farmers, ranchers, agricultural producers, irrigation entities, agricultural workers, and agriculture-related businesses, and provide all available assistance to protect agricultural water supplies, sustain agricultural operations and employment, mitigate economic losses, preserve agricultural infrastructure, and support the long-term viability of agriculture within Sierra County and the surrounding region.

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that Sierra County specifically requests assistance for:

1. Removal of hazardous debris, abandoned vehicles, hazardous materials, sediment, and other public safety hazards exposed by declining reservoir elevations;
2. Environmental assessment, remediation, and restoration of exposed reservoir lands;
3. Protection, documentation, and preservation of archaeological, historical, and cultural resources exposed by declining water levels;

4. Repair, relocation, extension, and restoration of boat ramps, marina facilities, docks, recreational infrastructure, and public access facilities;
5. Economic assistance for businesses, employees, municipalities, and governmental entities adversely affected by the decline in reservoir-based tourism;
6. Tourism recovery initiatives, infrastructure improvements, marketing assistance, and economic development projects intended to restore recreational use and visitor activity; and
7. Expedited approval by the New Mexico State Transportation Commission of recreational off-highway motor vehicle access upon designated portions of NM 51, NM 179, NM 181, and NM 195 to expand recreational opportunities, promote tourism, and mitigate the economic impacts resulting from historically low reservoir levels;
8. Any additional state or federal assistance necessary to protect the public health, safety, welfare, economy, natural resources, and long-term prosperity of Sierra County.

APPROVED, ADOPTED, AND PASSED on this 7th day of August, 2026.

**BOARD OF COUNTY COMMISSIONERS
OF SIERRA COUNTY**


James Paxson, Chair


Approved by Phone
Hank Hopkins, Vice-Chair


Sandy R. Jones, Commissioner

Attest:


Amy Whitehead
Sierra County Clerk

