

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

June 22, 2021

Vicki Christiansen
Chief
U.S. Forest Service
1400 Independence Ave., SW
Washington, D.C.
20250-0003

RE: U.S. Forest Service Reimbursement Program

Dear Chief Christiansen,

I write today to urge you to address two issues that could significantly impact Western states and our communities who are at risk of wildfires: the recruitment of federal firefighters and increased communication to local firefighters.

In 2020, nearly 26,000 wildfires burned approximately 10.1 million acres in the West. Unless appropriate measures are taken, the fire season will continue to devastate the communities we represent. It is imperative we do everything we can to treat and manage our forests so that we're not sending our firefighters into raging infernos year after year. If we do not take strong action now, we worry what is happening will become the new normal in every state in the West.

Wildfires have been increasing in severity over the past several years, an increasing threat to our nation's western communities and forests. Coming off of the heels of a historically devastating fire year and entering another that is predicted to be even more destructive, the U.S. Forest Service (USFS) must expand incentives to retain and recruit our firefighters – including volunteer firefighters – by addressing the pay of our firefighters and improving the communication between the USFS and local fire departments and contractors regarding reimbursements for fire-fighting costs on federal lands.

In this past year, 70% of the nationwide acreage burned by wildfires was on federal lands. Having fully capable and staffed teams of federal firefighters is vital to fighting wildfires. That is why it is concerning that to date, approximately 30 percent of federal hotshot crews are understaffed. Staffing these crews will be an uphill battle if we do not address proper compensation. Stagnant wages have not only hurt the recruitment of firefighters, but also left crews severely overworked and understaffed. Another concerning issue in the staffing of crews and the use of wildfire firefighting contractors. According to local news reports, wildfire contractors throughout the West were denied an agreement with the Forest Service to fight fires this season because of price and clerical issues. These contractors were never given the opportunity to correct these issues with USFS. During the peak of wildfire season, not having enough firefighters due to paperwork issues is unacceptable. We must do better by our heroes on the frontlines of these fires by increasing the compensation and fully staffing the crews of federal firefighters **and** volunteer firefighters.

Beyond compensation, communication is another common-sense and much-needed reform. Today, a fire department will submit a reimbursement to the USFS for fire-fighting costs and only hear from the agency once they've been reimbursed—that could be up to one year later. Our local fire departments are left in the dark and on the hook for these costly expenses for extended periods of time. This lack of communication is concerning and unsustainable.

Given the grave issues we've outlined, I respectfully request answers to the following questions:

- What incentives is the USFS exploring to hire and retain federal firefighters?
- How will the agency support volunteer firefighters, including funding for volunteer firefighters?
- How will the USFS improve communication with local fire departments and wildlife contractors?
- How will the agency improve transparency on this matter and the timing of the reimbursement process?

Thank you, Chief Christiansen. We look forward to working with you to develop concrete solutions to these issues.

Sincerely,



Josh Harder

Member of Congress



Jaime Herrera Beutler

Member of Congress