

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20510

May 23, 2019

Sonny Perdue, Secretary
U.S. Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Ave., S.W.
Washington, DC 20250

David Bernhardt, Secretary
Department of the Interior
1849 C Street NW
Washington, DC 20240

Dear Secretaries Perdue and Bernhardt:

We write to request your immediate attention to an issue that could have devastating impacts on Oregon and the West in the current fire season. Action must be taken on this issue before any conflagrations break out in the coming hotter, dryer summer months.

We have recently been advised that a longstanding practice which authorizes local fire departments across the state of Oregon to participate and support federal firefighting operations across Oregon, based on resource availability and capability, is being suspended because of a recent review of a law written in 1955. This new interpretation of the 1955 law will unnecessarily limit firefighting resource allocations across the state and limit them so that only local fire departments working within their jurisdictional boundaries participating in local Incident Management Teams could reliably receive federal reimbursement. If this interpretation is allowed to stand then valuable and necessary resources will be stranded, thereby hobbling all of our abilities to fight fires where and when they rise up.

Oregon has seen historically large wildfires in the past few years. In 2018 alone, Oregon had 1,880 fires that burned 846,411 acres across 1,322 square miles – an area larger than the state of Rhode Island. Only with the immediate support of these well-trained and equipped fire departments have we been able to somewhat limit the spread, as well as the economic and habitat damages, of these fires on landscapes affected by climate change and drought.

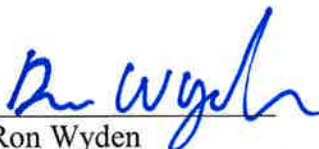
In a review of options to deal with this very serious concern, the U.S. Forest Service has suggested a statewide cooperative agreement that could be signed by all participating Oregon fire departments. This would have to be executed as soon as possible to be effective. Otherwise, this effort could create an administrative burden on the local fire departments as well as state agencies, even as they are simultaneously responding to large and complex fires that pose extreme risk to our forests, rangelands and rural communities.

In the near term, we request that both USDA and the Department of Interior delay implementation of these newly interpreted changes, allowing the federal government to continue to use local resources and directly reimburse local fire departments based on need and


availability in order to deal with the 2019 wildfire season. Longer term, we are interested in a solution that correctly identifies, and fully resolves, the issues identified in the 1955 law that has been seen as a hindrance by this administration.

Thank you for your prompt attention to our request.

Sincerely,



Ron Wyden
U.S. Senator



Jeffrey A. Merkley
U.S. Senator



Greg Walden
U.S. Representative