

September 14, 2022

The Honorable Deb Haaland
Secretary, U.S. Department of the Interior
1849 C Street, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20240

Dear Secretary Haaland:

I appreciate the Department of Interior's August 2nd response to my inquiry on this year's wildfire season and the progress your crews have made to combat fires this season. However, increased fire risk in Oregon this month indicates that more information is required to ensure Oregonians remain safe and prepared. Oregonians want detailed plans on how the Department will use the recent increases in funding for wildfire prevention and to further address wildland firefighter staffing shortages. Please respond to the following questions by Monday, October 3, 2022:

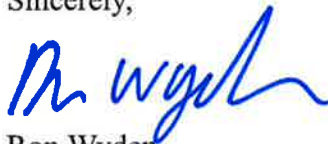
- How many of the Department's 7.1 million acres of "very high" or "high likelihood of exposure to wildfire" are within Oregon? While it is excellent to see \$30 million in Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA) funding heading to Oregon to address 150,000 acres of hazardous fuels over the next two years, what are the plans to address the remaining very high or high wildfire risk acreage within the state? Is the plan to tackle 150,000 acres in Oregon every two years or is there a different plan?
- The State of Oregon has been working on statewide wildfire risk maps. How are you incorporating that data into prioritizing hazardous fuels treatments across the state? Have you been coordinating with the State, industry, or other private landowners to maximize fuels treatments across jurisdictional boundaries?
- I would like more information regarding how the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) in Oregon is increasing prevention efforts with the regional prevention team concept and the ongoing work with the University of Oregon's ALERTWildfire program and the coordination with Oregon State University that helps with detection and to verify real-time fire ignition, fire behavior, and weather information.
- As Oregon is seeing more common late summer wind events and red flag outlooks as a result of climate change, initial attack crews are starting to be hard to find as seasonal crews in the southwest are slated to end. As of this date, there are eight hotshot crews in the Southwest region that are listed as unavailable due to being "out of season," meaning their time-limited positions have expired. These crews would be of huge benefit as Oregon continues to battle potentially catastrophic fires. How are you planning on

addressing these essential crew shortages while the region sees these on-the-ground changes?

- I am glad to hear the Department is developing a broader firefighting workforce strategy to guide the composition and transformation of the workforce over the next several decades. I look forward to hearing more about the details of the strategy. If there are any legislative solutions that would ease this transition please provide me with that information.

I greatly appreciate the continued dedicated efforts of the land management agencies your Department oversees to contain and respond to increasingly devastating wildfires. I stand ready to support wildfire prevention, response, and recovery for all Oregonians.

Sincerely,



Ron Wyden
United States Senator



United States Department of the Interior

OFFICE OF THE SECRETARY
Washington, DC 20240

The Honorable Ron Wyden
221 Dirksen Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senator Wyden,

Thank you for your June 7, 2022, letter to Secretary Haaland regarding the Department of the Interior's (Department) preparedness for the current wildfire season. The Secretary asked that I reply to your letter on her behalf.

Climate change is leading to hotter and drier weather resulting in drought and the accumulation of dead and dying vegetation that fuels more intense wildfires. A significant portion of southern and central Oregon remains in severe to exceptional drought conditions, and overall, every western state has some measure of moderate to exceptional drought. As we have seen in prior years, these conditions often lead to severe wildfire risk. Resources are currently prepositioned to address those geographic areas with the highest potential for wildfire risk.

Longer and more challenging wildfire seasons necessitate an interagency response framework to ensure the safety of firefighters, communities, and resources. No single organization is capable of managing wildfire on its own, a dynamic that is clearly observable in Oregon where there is an appreciable intermix of federal, Tribal, state, and private lands. Coordination with all entities is necessary for effective wildfire response. For example, the Bureau of Land Management is actively engaged with the Central Oregon Fire Chiefs Association and meets regularly with federal partners and local fire departments in the state to discuss cooperative agreements and to ensure an integrated approach to wildfire operations and response.

The Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA) provided the Department with important authorities and funding to help us to immediately prepare for the wildfire season and take critical steps to address wildfire risk. The Department has identified a total of 7.1 million acres of land under its jurisdiction as having a very high or high likelihood of exposure to wildfire. As an initial investment, we have allocated \$81 million in IIJA hazardous fuels funding to reduce wildfire risk across all geographic area of the country based on the bureaus' determination of priority needs. A total of \$30 million is targeted for Oregon over the next two years to address 150,000 acres of high risk hazardous fuels.

In coordination with the Department of Agriculture (USDA) Forest Service and the Office of Personnel Management (OPM), the Department recently finalized plans and began implementing the pay provisions included in IIJA. Beginning in mid-July all wildland firefighters in primary and secondary positions started to receive supplemental pay totaling

\$20,000 or 50 percent of their base pay, including pay retroactive to October 1, 2021. Employees will receive supplemental pay increases each pay period for the rest of this fiscal year (FY) and FY 2023. Based on analyses completed by the three agencies, it was determined that the challenges associated with the recruitment and retention of wildland firefighters is widespread, so the IJA supplemental pay provisions apply to wildland firefighters in all geographic areas. We estimate that the annual cost of this initiative to the Department in 2022 and 2023 will be roughly \$60 million.

In June 2022, OPM notified the Department and the USDA Forest Service that it finalized the Wildland Firefighter Occupational series directed by IJA. The Department is in the process of reviewing its current position descriptions to make sure that they align with the newly developed Wildland Firefighter position classification standards and include the wildland firefighter qualifications and responsibilities identified by OPM. The Department has one year to complete this work. The new job series better reflects the true nature of wildland fire management and provides wildland firefighters with a clear path to career development and advancement.

The suite of wildland firefighter workforce incentives directed by IJA is an important step forward to improving recruitment and retention. Funding increases proposed in the FY 2023 President's Budget will support the conversion and hiring of more than 800 Full-Time Equivalent personnel. Additionally, the Department, the USDA Forest Service and OPM continue to collaborate on reforms to wildland firefighter pay and plan to work with the Congress on a long-term, permanent solution. Moreover, the Department is developing a broader firefighting workforce strategy to guide the composition and transformation of our workforce over the next several decades. Collectively, these actions further our vision to build a wildland firefighting workforce that is available year-round to respond to wildfires and address wildfire risk during periods of low wildfire activity.

While IJA does not appropriate supplement funding for suppression operations, Public Law 117-103, the Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2022, established a Suppression Operations Reserve Fund and provided additional new budget authority through 2027 to address the increasing costs of wildfire suppression. As wildfire seasons become longer and more costly, the availability of the Reserve Fund is an important lifeline to ensure continued operational wildfire response once Suppression Operations program funds are drawn down. So far in FY 2022, the Department has received transfers from the Reserve Fund on two occasions, once in November 2021 totaling \$45 million, and once in July 2022 totaling \$200 million.

Thank you again for interest in the Department's Wildland Fire Management program and our ongoing progress in implementing the wildland fire provisions of IJA. The Department appreciates the support that it has received from the Congress to better position itself for increasingly challenging wildfire seasons. If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me at [REDACTED]

Sincerely,

Jeffery Rupert
Director – Office of Wildland Fire