

Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20510

July 22, 2019

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

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

Dear Secretaries Perdue and Bernhardt:

We are writing regarding our earlier request on cooperative fire agreements. We appreciate your agencies' response, and the determination that Bureau of Land Management and the Forest Service will allow existing cooperative agreements to remain in place for the 2019 wildfire season. This will allow many Oregon fire departments to continue providing an invaluable service. However, a number of local fire departments have reached out to us with concerns that this short-term fix still has gaps and will therefore prevent a number of highly qualified fire professionals from serving on incident management teams. Fire season is here, and fire danger is increasing.

Specifically, we understand that Oregon fire departments will not be able to participate in incident management teams if the department is in one of the following circumstances:

- the department does not have a cooperative agreement in place,
- the department has a cooperative agreement that is expired and has not yet been renewed;
- the department had a cooperative agreement that was written for only six months, expiring on December 31, 2018; or
- the department has an agreement scheduled to end in the midst of this year's fire season.

We have not heard any compelling reason why your agencies cannot renew these longstanding agreements through this fire season. While we understand there are workarounds that would require very seasoned professionals with years of experience to work at very low wages, these solutions would not provide funds for fire department to "backfill" positions and therefore will not meet the needs of our local departments. Given that Oregon fire departments have significant requirements for training, staffing, equipment, insurance, transportation and other ongoing expenses, low-wage individual agreements that do not cover any ancillary expenses shift the burden of federal firefighting to local departments.

We would appreciate your best efforts to address concerns of states and local fire departments, which are ready to help and interested in a fair and equitable long-term solution. These professionals, with long-term agreements that are in flux for this fire season, should have the opportunity to contribute and help battle the inevitable fires.

While we are interested in a longer term solution that fully resolves and corrects the perceived issues with the 1955 law, we hope that you can identify a short-term agreement extension for long-serving fire departments with a track record of supplying highly qualified professionals.

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