

Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20515

September 24, 2020

Sonny Perdue, Secretary
U.S. Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Avenue, SW
Washington D.C. 20250

David Bernhardt, Secretary
U.S. Department of the Interior
1849 C Street N.W.
Washington D.C. 20240

Dear Secretaries Perdue and Bernhardt:

We write to request that you expedite the initiation and completion of the Burned Area Emergency Response (BAER) program to address the recent raft of catastrophic wildfires in Oregon. In order to effectively prevent further damage after the wildfires are contained, we urge you to work in coordination to determine as soon as possible the appropriate response to the affected areas in Oregon.

A combination of climate change, historic droughts, a lack of proper forest management, dry forest conditions, and strong winds have brought a series of catastrophic wildfires to Oregon. Over 1 million acres have burned, and many fires continue to burn in the state and across the country. These fires have destroyed critical infrastructure, thousands of homes, and have tragically taken the lives of multiple Oregonians. As the Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management, first responders, and the firefighters on the ground work around the clock to contain these fires and keep local communities safe, we need to be prepared for any issues that arise post-wildfire season as well. In particular, Oregon's water supply and quality may be severely damaged after the wildfires. Damage to watersheds may lead to contaminated water due to high temperatures and put the health of Oregonians at risk. The BAER program can help determine the urgent and appropriate response to these post-fire effects in Oregon.


As the last week has brought welcomed rain and moisture to combat these wildfires, the severe damage caused to the forest landscapes and soil through burn severity and intensity significantly increases the risk of landslides and flooding events. On September 18, 2020, the National Weather Service in Portland, OR, issued a flash flood watch in the recently burned areas, including the Northern Cascade Foothills and the Northern Oregon Cascades. They stated that people, structures, and roads located in the Northwest portion of Oregon, "may be in serious risk from rapidly moving flash flooding and debris flows."

The BAER program provides critical information to Federal, State and local emergency response agencies in order to provide assistance to communities, private landowners and all who may also be affected by potential post-fire damage. The potential danger of landslides and flash floods in Northwest Oregon must be addressed immediately in order to ensure the safety of Oregonians. We ask that you respond to the following questions by October 1, 2020:

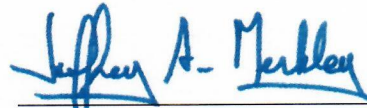
1. What treatments are being proposed for the Northwest region of Oregon to mitigate the risks of flash flooding and severe landslides?
2. Do you have the resources necessary to propose an expedited BAER report to the appropriate agencies?
3. What coordination policies are in place among the relevant agencies, to address the wildfire damage across the state of Oregon?
4. What watersheds in Oregon have been damaged or destroyed due to wildfires?
5. What does the anticipated recovery process entail to protect human health and safety?

As Oregonians continue to battle hazardous air quality due to wildfire smoke, the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, and the wildfires that continue to burn, the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the Department of Interior must have all the necessary resources to mitigate landslides and flash flooding in the areas impacted by these wildfires. We thank you for your commitment to respond to these devastating wildfires and appreciate your immediate attention to this urgent matter.

Sincerely,



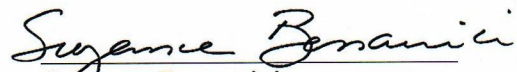
Ron Wyden
United States Senator



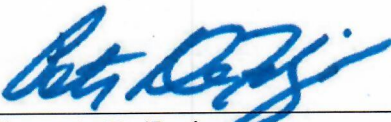
Jeffrey A. Merkley
United States Senator



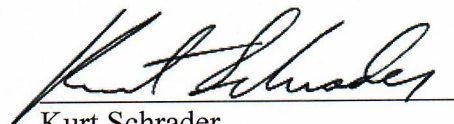
Earl Blumenauer
Member of Congress



Suzanne Bonamici
Member of Congress



Peter A. DeFazio
Member of Congress



Kurt Schrader
Member of Congress