

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

December 8, 2020

The Honorable Mitch McConnell
Senate Majority Leader
United States Senate
S-230 U.S. Capitol
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Charles Schumer
Senate Minority Leader
United States Senate
S-221, U.S. Capitol
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Nancy Pelosi
Speaker of the House
U.S. House of Representatives
H-232, U.S. Capitol
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Kevin McCarthy
House Minority Leader
U.S. House of Representatives
H-204, U.S. Capitol
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Leader McConnell, Speaker Pelosi, Leader Schumer and Leader McCarthy:

As you consider an additional stimulus package to address the impacts of COVID-19 on our nation, we urge you to include emergency support for communities recovering from devastating and historic wildfires. A record 2020 wildfire season forced thousands of evacuations, threatened air and water quality, and destroyed homes and businesses across the West. Congress must provide support for these communities as they recover from the fires, and, given that many of these fires burned on federal land, Congress must invest in land management agencies to prevent further catastrophic wildfire.

Investments in the following initiatives would support the short and long-term recovery of local communities impacted by both COVID-19 and a historic wildfire season:

- **Local Economic Relief:** The Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security (CARES) Act, signed into law on March 27th, provided stabilization funds for Tribes, states and larger communities. Many of the communities that were denied direct support through the CARES Act were impacted by the historic wildfire season. In the aftermath of these natural disasters, it is imperative that we ensure all communities are provided the economic support they desperately need. Unfortunately, the CARES Act capped localities able to receive direct support at those with populations of over 500,000. This excludes towns, cities, and rural counties that have been hit hard by the COVID-19 outbreak and fire and should be corrected. Provisions such as those included in *The Coronavirus Community Relief Act*, which provides \$250 billion in stabilization funds for Tribes, local communities, cities and towns across the United States that are struggling amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, would support communities that were excluded from economic relief in the first COVID stimulus package.

- **Investments in Fire Risk Mitigation:** The severity of wildfires experienced across the western United States was likely exasperated by both climate change and unfulfilled forest management priorities. Many wildfires grew uncontrollable under a combination of conditions: unseasonably warm temperatures, high winds, and extreme drought. However, in many instances, forests where these fires occurred were also overgrown and had dense underbrush. We must both address the causes of climate change while investing in our land management agencies. Achieving this requires investments in programs such as the following. One hundred million dollars should be added to each fund.
 - **21st Century Conservation Corps:** By making investments in qualified land and conservation corps, Congress can increase job training and hiring specifically for resources management jobs. This funding will help restore forest health and address the rise in unemployment due to COVID-19. By scaling up the existing network of Service and Conservation Corps, a revitalized 21st Century Conservation Corps will help employ hundreds of thousands of young Americans and complete necessary project work on public lands and in communities across the country.
 - **USFS and BLM - Hazardous Fuels:** Investments in the U.S. Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management Hazardous Fuels programs for projects that are shovel ready, environmentally reviewed, and best for fire-risk reduction is a key tool for restoring forest health and reducing wildfire risks. Given increased drought risk and the damaging respiratory effects of COVID-19, there is an urgent need to increase the pace and scale of our restoration projects, and the Hazardous Fuels program is a linchpin in that effort.
 - **USFS- Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Program:** The Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Program (CFLRP) funds large-scale, community-driven restoration projects with the goal of reducing the risk of megafire, supporting jobs in rural communities, and enhancing wildlife habitat and recreational opportunities across the nation.
 - **USFS - Vegetation and Watershed Management:** This program ensures the productive and sustainable use of National Forest System lands by improving the growth and health of timber stands, reducing the risk of severe flooding and erosion in forests affected by severe fire, and helping keep water clean.
 - **USFS - Water Source Protection Program:** This program which was established in the 2018 Farm Bill to encourage partnerships between agricultural producers, businesses, cities, and the U.S. Forest Service. These partnerships will improve forest health, benefit downstream communities, and bring in new investments from non-federal partners. However, the program has not yet received dedicated funding. As climate change continues to stress our forests and watersheds, investments in local, collaborative programs like WSPP are critical.
 - **USFS - Landscape Scale Restoration:** The Landscape Scale Restoration program is a competitive grant program that funds priority projects identified in State Forest Action plans. Additional funding will help states get ahead of wildfire risk by treating priority acres in the Wildland Urban Interface, ultimately reducing risks and costs associated with wildfire.

- **USFS - National Fire Capacity (previously State Fire Assistance):** The National Fire Capacity program administers the Firewise program, and helps the Forest Service support and assist State Foresters and local communities in building capacity for the prevention, mitigation, control, and suppression of wildfires on non-Federal lands. The program helps State agencies create more fire-adapted communities by implementing pre-fire prevention and mitigation programs described in State Forest Action Plans.
- **FEMA - Building Resilient Infrastructure and Communities (BRIC) Program:** The BRIC program supports states, local communities, tribes and territories, as they undertake hazard mitigation projects reducing the risks they face from disasters and natural hazards. Investments in BRIC will help protect homes and businesses from fire risks, and ultimately reduce the cost of responses to natural disasters, including wildfire.
- **Federal Support for Fire Response Efforts:** In addition to investments in our land management agencies, investments that support our wildland firefighting workforce are critical to ensure communities are properly equipped for fire season. We encourage investment in programs such as:
 - **FEMA - Staffing For Adequate Fire And Emergency Response (SAFER) Grants:** The Staffing for Adequate Fire and Emergency Response Grants (SAFER) program was created to provide funding directly to fire departments and volunteer firefighter interest organizations to help them increase or maintain the number of trained, "front line" firefighters available in their communities. Further investments in these grants will enhance local fire departments' abilities to comply with staffing, response and operational standards.
 - **Interagency Hotshot Crews:** We must make investments to address the demand for Interagency Hotshot Crews (IHC) as wildfire season grows longer each year. Many of the most intense wildfires burned at the end of the traditional season in 2020, when many IHC crews had already completed their contracts or were about to lose their funding, which greatly limited the available resources. Less than a third of the Hotshot Crews who were working at the beginning of the season were still working in October, even though there was still a need for these resources. Increasing available funding for those operations and for additional Hotshot Crews are desperately needed as wildfire seasons grow longer and more intense.
 - **Increasing Pay and Benefits for Wildland Fire Workforce:** Firefighting personnel make sacrifices every day to keep our communities safe. As fire seasons grow longer, we must expand the benefits they receive, and ensure they are fully supported, compensated, and cared for. *We encourage you to direct, through the appropriate report language, the Secretaries of Interior and Agriculture to coordinate with the Office of Personnel Management to review and increase the pay scale for all federal wildland firefighters, and to consider reclassifying seasonal federal firefighter positions as permanent.* The pay scale used to compensate these individuals should reflect the hazardous conditions they endure and extensive training that is required of them. The Secretaries of Interior and Agriculture should ensure that this pay scale is competitive with other wildland firefighting opportunities outside of the federal government. A wage

increase, paired with greater job stability in permanent positions will also help to fill vacancies as the wildfire season grows longer. Additionally, the Secretaries of Interior and Agriculture should consider waiving the annual salary cap restrictions for fire personnel who exceed the GS pay ceiling while working overtime on wildfire emergencies.

- **Fire Recovery Efforts:** We must support the work being done by local, state, and federal officials to revitalize the environmental health, water quality, and economy of communities impacted by wildfires. Congress should consider investments in the following programs:
 - **USDA - Emergency Watershed Protection (EWP) Program:** Congress created USDA's EWP Program in 1973 to help communities protect their watersheds and mitigate damage after a natural disaster. EWP is funded on an as-needed basis, but as of August 25, the USDA had less than \$43 million left to spend on EWP projects. Without supplemental funding, the USDA may not have the funds to partner effectively with local governments and private property owners as they recover from natural disasters. Additionally, given that states and local governments are still feeling the economic impacts of COVID-19, which may make it difficult to meet the local match requirements typically required for EWP projects, we encourage providing direction that would allow the USDA to cover up 100% of EWP project costs.
 - **Long Term Investment in the U.S. Forest Service:** The National Interagency Fire Center estimates that over 47,000 fires burned more than 8.5 million acres. Over two-thirds of the affected acreage is on federal land and almost 4 million, or 45 percent, is Forest Service land. Because significant wildfires affected Forest Service land in Colorado, Oregon, Utah, California, and elsewhere, states continue to struggle to restore land, water, infrastructure, and ecosystems. The Forest Service will be an important partner in long-term recovery efforts and must be able to invest in rehabilitation on National Forest System lands, including reforestation, repairing trails and facilities, restoring habitat, and other measures. While both the Department of the Interior and the Forest Service fund short-term burned area stabilization, the Forest Service has limited ability to fund burned area rehabilitation activities. Therefore, Congress must provide sufficient funding and direction to support long-term wildfire recovery and rehabilitation on Forest Service land.

Communities that have been fighting the public health and economic impacts of COVID-19 are now also now beginning the long journey of recovering from catastrophic wildfire. Congress has the power to not only help these communities recover, but also to make federal investments in sustainable forest management to ensure they are better prepared for the next season. We urge you to consider the timely need for wildfire mitigation, suppression, and recovery in the next COVID-19 stimulus package.

Thank you for your consideration of this request.

Sincerely,



Joe Neguse
Member of Congress



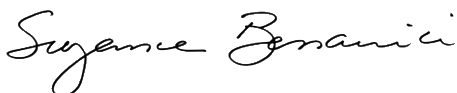
Ron Wyden
United States Senator



Earl Blumenauer
Member of Congress

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Dianne Feinstein
United States Senator



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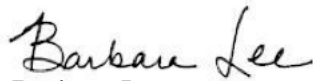
Michael Bennet
United States Senator



Ann Kirkpatrick
Member of Congress

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Martin Heinrich
United States Senator



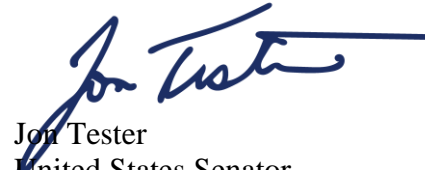
Barbara Lee
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Patty Murray
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