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June 7, 2022

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SELECT COMMITTEE ON INTELLIGENCE
JOINT COMMITTEE ON TAXATION

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

The Honorable Thomas J. Vilsack
Secretary, U.S. Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Avenue, S.W.
Washington, D.C. 20250

Dear Secretary Haaland and Secretary Vilsack:

I write with serious and time-sensitive concerns regarding your agencies' preparedness needs ahead of what is shaping up to be another potentially catastrophic wildfire season.

Oregon is still struggling to rebuild after two, back-to-back horrific fire seasons. The 2020 Oregon wildfire season was one of the most destructive seasons on record: destroying thousands of homes and small businesses, devastating multiple communities, and burning more than 1 million acres with wildfires that continued to burn into November - a true oddity for the Pacific Northwest, where the wet season normally starts in early October. The 2021 wildfire season ramped up early due to an abnormally dry spring coupled with low snowpack levels amid an ongoing and severe drought. With this early start, the 2021 season quickly outpaced prior years with nearly 10 times as many acres having burned as of July 20 compared to the previous year. Another fire season like this would further devastate our communities as well as our firefighters, who risk their lives and tear themselves away from their homes and families every summer to protect Oregon's treasured landscapes.

As we move into the 2022 fire season, weather data already points to disturbing trends. Oregon remains stuck in severe to exceptional drought conditions across the state. This combined with an apparent state-wide temperature inversion - an anomaly when it persists any longer than a week - all points to yet another dangerous fire season. I have heard in years past that agencies needed resources - in terms of funding and workforce- to better position and prepare for the wildfire season. With the passage of the bipartisan Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA) in November 2021, your departments received this much-needed support. Now, more than six months after being given this new flexibility, we are past time for action.

The Department of the Interior released its 5-year Monitoring, Maintenance and Treatment Plan to Address Wildfire Risk in April 2022 and the U.S. Forest Service released its 10-year Confronting the Wildfire Crisis Strategy in January 2022. While both documents lay out common-sense goals, please provide answers to the following specific implementation questions:

Please provide an update with specifics on how the wildfire prevention and suppression funds from the IIJA have been allocated and dispersed to the field thus far, including how the funding amounts to each region were determined.

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How many acres in Oregon will be treated using funds authorized by IJJA? Following this and related investments, how many acres will need to be treated to address the hazardous fuels backlog on the landscape?

How do your departments plan on achieving these strategies when there are 20% vacancy rates for permanent wildland fire positions in Oregon? What plans are in place to fill these positions? What areas of Oregon have been identified as “difficult to recruit” and have any of your agencies used IJJA hiring incentives? If not, will you use those incentives this summer?

How do you plan on retaining and reforming your workforce structure in light of the ever increasing length of wildfire season - coupled with the increased goals of fuel treatment acres?

What is the status of the distinct ‘Wildland Firefighter occupational series? When can we expect that to be rolled out so these brave people can be recognized and compensated for putting their lives on the line every summer – instead of being labeled as a Forestry Technician?

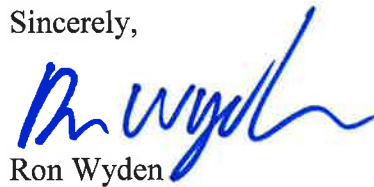
What additional steps have your departments and agencies taken to prevent another season where interagency requests for wildland firefighting crews and engines go unfilled due to insufficient personnel?

How have your departments and agencies coordinated with local fire departments in Oregon in preparation for the 2022 fire season?

I look forward to receiving your detailed responses to the above questions in time for Oregonians to prepare for this fire season. In addition, I urge your continued efforts to bring wildland firefighters the pay rates, career development, and health care, especially mental health, support they deserve. I also urge increased partnership and coordination with state and local fire response - including local fire departments who often bear the brunt of community coordination when wildfires move into the wildland-urban interface, and an emphasis on effective and efficient fuels treatments near communities and vital natural resources.

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

Sincerely,



Ron Wyden
United States Senator