

**Congress of the United States**  
**Washington, DC 20515**

The Honorable Sonny Perdue  
Secretary of Agriculture  
1400 Independence Avenue, SW  
Washington, D.C. 20250

The Honorable David Bernhardt  
Secretary of the Interior  
1849 C Street, NW  
Washington, D.C. 20240

October 29, 2020

Dear Secretary Perdue and Secretary Bernhardt:

This wildfire season, the State of Colorado has faced unprecedented emergency conditions. Devastating wildfires have occurred in several Colorado counties, forcing mass evacuations, threatening air and water quality, destroying homes and businesses, and resulting in the tragic loss of human lives.

Unseasonably warm temperatures, extreme drought, and high winds have contributed to the rapid growth of several fires throughout our state. Three of the state's five largest fires have occurred in 2020. The East Troublesome fire grew sixfold in size in a matter of 24 hours and is the second-largest fire in state history. The Cameron Peak fire, which began burning in August, has grown to over 200,000 acres - the largest fire in Colorado history. These fires continue to burn, in addition to the Middle Fork fire, the Williams Fork fire, the Lefthand Canyon fire, and the Calwood Fire. Thousands of Coloradans have been evacuated, leaving behind their homes and businesses.

These late season fires are not normal. Typically, October marks the beginning of winter weather patterns in Colorado. As fire seasons grow longer, the availability of resources to our local communities gets stretched thinner. Given the historic nature of these fires, their destructive impact on local communities, and that they largely occur on federal lands, our support for the federal wildfire personnel who fight and contain these fires is absolutely critical.

Therefore, we respectfully request the following:

1. Coordinate with the Office of Personnel Management to review and increase the pay scale for all federal wildland firefighters. The pay scale used to compensate these individuals should reflect the hazardous conditions they endure and extensive training that is required of them. Please ensure that this pay scale is competitive with other wildland firefighting opportunities outside of the federal government. Now more than ever, this critical profession must receive a comfortable, livable wage. A wage increase will also help to fill vacancies in these positions as the wildfire season grows longer.
2. As you consider the new pay scale, please eliminate any hiring of GS-3 or below in wildland firefighting and forest technician positions. Firefighters deserve a competitive salary and should be paid at GS-4 or above as they start out.

3. Consider reclassifying seasonal federal firefighter positions as permanent. Given that the wildfire season is growing longer and more destructive, we must invest in a full-time workforce. This will not only improve our effectiveness in fighting wildfires throughout the year, it will also provide greater job stability to the wildfire personnel keeping us safe.
4. Consider waiving the annual salary cap restrictions for fire personnel who exceed the GS pay ceiling while working overtime on wildfire emergencies.
5. Consider the creation of a paid leave category for firefighters to take at least a week of paid time off. Our firefighters take on both physical and mental burdens in keeping our communities safe. A critical piece of supporting them is allowing them the time to rest and recover after difficult experiences.
6. Consider your capabilities for expanding and administering mental health services to both federal and non-federal firefighters. Providing these resources will not only ensure that firefighters receive the help and support they deserve, it will also help end the stigma regarding seeking mental health support.

We write to urge you to evaluate your current policies, consider the above requests, and contact our offices with what, if any, Congressional actions are needed to enact and support them. Our firefighting personnel sacrifice so much 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.

Thank you for your consideration of this request.

Sincerely,



Joe Neguse  
Member of Congress



Michael Bennet  
United States Senator



Ed Perlmutter  
Member of Congress



Jason Crow  
Member of Congress



Diana DeGette  
Member of Congress

cc: Michael Rigas, Acting Director, Office of Personnel Management