

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

November 13, 2019

The Honorable Gene L. Dodaro
Comptroller General of the United States
U.S. Government Accountability Office
441 G Street, NW
Washington, D.C. 20548

Dear Mr. Dodaro:

We write to request the Government Accountability Office (“GAO”) review the Emergency Watershed Protection Program (“EWP”).

In recent years, wildfires have burned large areas of Colorado, Utah, and other Western states. In the West, the risk extends beyond immediate damage to homes and communities. Watersheds in severely burned areas are more susceptible to flooding and erosion, which can threaten critical transportation infrastructure, wildlife habitats, and water resources.

While communities can implement a number of steps to reduce damage and mitigate risk following wildfires, these measures place undue financial strain on property owners and state and local governments. Over the past few years in Colorado and Utah, post-fire flooding and erosion has caused millions of dollars in damage and required significant investments from state and local partners.

The Department of Agriculture’s Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) administers the EWP specifically to reduce financial strain and help landowners and local communities address imminent threats from wildfires. The EWP allows communities to receive technical and financial assistance to quickly address wildfire damage and invest in preventative measures to reduce post-fire flooding and erosion.

In 2018, Utah had one of the most devastating fire seasons on record. Utah County sustained multiple wildfires, including the Coal Hollow, Pole Creek, and Bald Mountain fires. The Pole Creek and Bald Mountain fires burned more than 120,000 acres in the Wasatch mountains and forced more than 6,000 people to evacuate, the largest evacuation in Utah history. The fires left burn scars, triggered debris flows that cause significant damage to nearby homes, and forced additional evacuations. In Duchesne County, the Dollar Ridge fire burned nearly 70,000 acres and 360 structures—including 75 homes—making it the worst fire in state history by structure loss. The fire burned the Strawberry River Valley, jeopardizing 30 percent of the county’s drinking water supply and forcing them to invest \$30 million in water treatment facility upgrades.

Likewise, in 2018, Colorado also had one of its most destructive fire years ever, with over 400,000 acres burned across the state. Major wildfires included the Spring Creek Fire in Costilla and Huerfano Counties, the 416 Fire in La Plata County, and the Lake Christine Fire in Eagle County. Following these wildfires, local stakeholders in both states worked with the NRCS to secure millions of dollars in EWP funding to support recovery efforts. While the funding has helped some

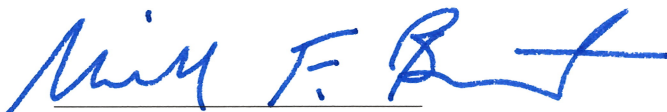
of these communities recover, there is concern with how NRCS approves and completes projects, and other hurdles that communities face in the process of receiving EWP funds.

Therefore, we request the GAO conduct a review of the Emergency Watershed Protection Program, specifically its implementation and effectiveness in helping communities in the aftermath of damaging wildfires. We would like the GAO review to focus on:

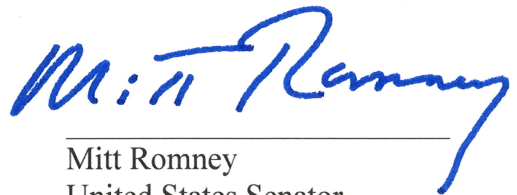
- Application and assistance approval processes under the program, including eligibility requirements that may limit entities such as water districts and ditch companies from qualifying for the program;
- NRCS' selection process, including previous funding recipients;
- Effect of agency staffing levels on program implementation;
- Tax implications and non-federal match requirements of the program, including effects on participation;
- The reimbursement process, including reimbursement for work completed following a disaster but before full project approval;
- Length of time it takes NRCS to approve and implement projects under the program;
- Exigent project timelines and challenges, including opportunities to improve exigent projects in rural areas;
- Opportunities to expand eligible projects, such as weather monitoring and alert system installations to warn of post-fire floods; and
- Agency and stakeholder views on program improvements to better meet the goals and intent of EWP.

Thank you for your attention to these matters. If you have any questions or need more information, please contact Patrick Donovan (Patrick_Donovan@bennet.senate.gov) or Arjun Nijhawan (Arjun_Nijhawan@romney.senate.gov) in our respective offices.

Sincerely,



Michael F. Bennet
United States Senator



Mitt Romney
United States Senator