

Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20515

March 4, 2026

Tom Schultz, Chief
United States Forest Service
United States Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Ave., SW
Washington, DC 20250-0003

Dear Chief Schultz:

We are writing to urge the United States Forest Service (USFS) to prioritize proactive wildfire mitigation efforts across the West, which faces historically low mountain snowpack and heightened wildfire risk ahead of the 2026 fire season. Proactive action by federal land management agencies will help save lives, taxpayer dollars, and protect our Western forests and watersheds.

Snowpack conditions in the Rocky Mountains, particularly in Colorado, are deeply concerning. As of March 3rd, 2026, Colorado's snowpack stands at roughly 60% of the median snow water equivalent in most basins. These levels point to an early and sustained drying of forests and rangelands, and could lead to a longer and more severe, and potentially catastrophic fire season. Over the last several decades, low snowpack has become less the exception and more the rule, and it demands a shift toward earlier and repeated forest health treatments in collaboration with the local communities most at risk.

We are concerned that, across 11 Western states, the USDA and Department of Interior (DOI) fired nearly 8,700 public servants, and cut 26% of Colorado's public lands workforce in 2025. USFS alone has reduced staffing by 16%, approximately 6,000 full-time equivalents, over the last year nationwide. These severe staffing shortages led to a 38% reduction in hazardous fuels reduction work in 2025, compared to the same period over the previous four years.

As the West heads into the 2026 fire season during potentially one of the worst droughts on record, this shortfall in critical mitigation work is unacceptable. The agency must do everything to direct resources and personnel toward high-risk landscapes in the West. The USFS should accelerate strategic precommercial forest thinning, prescribed fire and insect/disease treatments, along with other appropriate science-informed fuel reduction projects, where they are safe and effective to reduce wildfire risk and improve forest health.

We strongly support strategic hazardous fuels reduction treatments near homes and businesses as the first line of defense against wildfire in Western communities.

To ensure state and local partners can act quickly ahead of peak fire season, the agency should provide the flexibility and resources needed to move projects forward, while continuing to work closely with Tribes, States and local communities. This includes ensuring State, Private, and Tribal forestry programs are administered as Congress intended and use of policy tools like Joint Chiefs, Good Neighbor Authority, and expanding the Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Program to bring critical capacity alongside USFS efforts.

As snowpack worsens, forest conditions continue to deteriorate, and the threat of large, high-severity wildfire expands, the USFS should, at a minimum, maintain historic investment levels in forest stewardship and mitigation practices across the West. Colorado faces escalating risk and elevated suppression and reconstruction costs, but decisive action could reduce harm to Western communities. USFS' lack of preparation last year puts communities across the West at risk. The agency must take every possible action now to reduce the extreme danger we face going into potentially one of the driest summers on record.

Sincerely,



Michael F. Bennet
United States Senator



John Hickenlooper
United States Senator



Joe Neguse
Member of Congress



Brittany Pettersen
Member of Congress



Jason Crow
Member of Congress



Diana DeGette
Member of Congress