United States Senate
WASHINGTON, DC 20510

September 10, 2026

The Honorable Doug Burgum
Secretary
United States Department of the Interior
1849 C St. N.W.
Washington, D.C., 20240

The Honorable Brooke Rollins
Secretary
United States Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Ave. S.W.
Washington, D.C., 20250

Dear Secretaries Burgum and Rollins:

We write with serious concern about the U.S. Department of Interior (DOI) and U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) continued preparedness to respond to the 2026 fire season. Record-breaking high temperatures and historic drought have led to catastrophic fires across the West, destroying thousands of homes, wreaking havoc on the economies of rural communities, stressing the budgets of local governments, and leading to the loss of four wildland firefighters and two pilots. The national firefighting force was at preparedness Level 5 between July 18 and September 4, meaning that federal resources were fully committed for nearly seven weeks. With several weeks remaining in peak fire season, fire conditions could continue to strain an already stretched system.

In light of these concerns, the capacity of the federal government to sustain operations is critical. We are concerned that the agencies simply do not have enough highly qualified personnel, Incident Management Teams, and supervisory staff to sustain operations. Our offices have received reports that teams have worked more fires than is safe, using temporary supervisory structures because fully qualified personnel are not available. We have also heard that locally led initial attack was affected by national mobilization, and that personnel have worked repeated or extended assignments. This is exceptionally concerning given the high wildland firefighter fatality rate this season.

We are also concerned that the U.S. Forest Service (USFS) and U.S. Wildland Fire Service (USWFS) may run out of fire suppression funds this year. As you know, these two agencies had over $6 billion in fire suppression budget authority for Fiscal Year 2026. However, as of September 2, nearly the entire fire suppression budget has been spent. With over four weeks left in the fiscal year, USFS and USWFS may need to borrow funding from other accounts to pay for fire suppression.

Please respond to the following questions within 10 days:

- Every day of this fire season, wildland fire personnel have put themselves in harm's way as they work to suppress fires. Tragically, 9 first responders have given their lives this summer responding to fires. Now, more than ever, we must do everything possible to support those who have returned to the front lines after watching their colleagues fall.

  - **Why are we seeing so many firefighter fatalities, entrapments, and shelter deployments this year? To what extent has the full suppression policy contributed to a higher rate of injuries and fatalities this summer?**
  - **In response to the deaths of so many response personnel, what resources are USFS and USWFS deploying to ensure the safety of wildland firefighters?**
  - **How are DOI and USDA prioritizing safety?**
  - **How many hours of overtime have wildland firefighters, and specifically Hotshot and Type 1 crews, accumulated so far this year? How does that compare to the past?**

- In 2025, DOI and USDA cut nearly 8,700 public servants, USFS alone reducing its staff by 16% (approximately 6,000 full-time equivalents) nationwide. We are especially concerned about the loss of highly-qualified personnel, supervisory capacity, and red-card holders in high-level fire management positions. We are now hearing from communities across the West that requests for crews are going unfilled.
  - **How many complex incident management teams are operating this year? Please also provide data on the number of complex incident management teams for the last ten years.**
  - **How many personnel are working repeated or extended assignments?**
  - **Describe how DOI and USDA are managing current shortfalls in wildland firefighting teams and supervisory capacity.**
  - **What, if any, plans do DOI and USDA have to increase the number of Incident Management Teams to historic (or greater) levels?**
  - **How does the number of contract federal wildland firefighter crews compare this year to previous years?**

- In Fiscal Year 2025, USFS and DOI spent a combined $5.9 billion on suppression, a $1.5 billion increase from the previous most expensive year. As stated previously, the agencies have already spent over 70% of their $6 billion FY26 budget authority. As of August 31, 2026, fires have already burned nearly twice the acreage compared to 2025 (8,238,284 acres in 2026, up from 4,142,738 over the same window in 2025).
  - **Explain why there was such a dramatic increase in spending in FY25 and how FY25 spending informed FY26 operations.**
  - **How are USDA and DOI ensuring that, after record spending in FY25, FY26 dollars are being spent as efficiently as possible to account for the significant increase in burning acres?**
  - **Going into the 2026 fire season, did USDA and DOI expect to have spent 70% of their budget authority by this point in the summer?**

- With the potential exhaustion of fire suppression funding this year, the federal agencies will likely be forced to use appropriated funding from other accounts to pay for fire suppression, a practice known as "fire borrowing."
    - **To what extent are USDA and DOI rationing other resources this summer in preparation for potential fire borrowing?**
    - **Describe the appropriated accounts that USFS and USWFS would borrow from in order to fund fire suppression.**
    - **Will USFS and USWFS borrow from accounts that fund hazardous fuels reduction, watershed restoration, state and Tribal forestry, Burned Area Emergency Response, Emergency Response, or other similar accounts focused on reducing the threat of and responding to wildland fire?**

- We have been glad to work with the agencies to raise pay for federal wildland firefighters. Temporary wildland firefighters (1039) continue to face pay caps and limitations on their employment. Given the extreme fire season, the Administration, in partnership with Congress, must take all necessary steps to compensate all front-line first responders.
    - **Describe to what extent the agency has had, if any, ongoing discussions to extend the federal temporary 1039 appointment, allowing seasonal workers greater flexibility to continue fighting fires. To what extent are seasonal workers approaching the caps associated with 1039 appointments?**
    - **5 U.S.C. § 5545(c)(iii), passed in March 2025, requires USDA, DOI, and the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) to ensure that the compensation paid to wildfire personnel is consistent with FY2023 levels. What steps have you taken to implement this law?**

- At the beginning of the 2026 fire season, agency officials discussed the successes of fighting fires in 2025.
    - **To what extent does weather factor into the differences between the 2025 wildland fire season and the 2026 wildland fire season?**
    - **Describe how the organizational changes and restructuring of the wildland fire organizations address the issues associated with prolonged drought and extreme weather.**

Thank you for your prompt response to our questions.

Sincerely,

Michael F. Bennet
United States Senator

Adam B. Schiff
United States Senator

Alex Padilla
United States Senator

John Hickenlooper
United States Senator

Ron Wyden
United States Senator