

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

March 28, 2019

The Honorable David Bernhardt
Acting Secretary
U.S. Department of the Interior
1849 C Street NW
Washington, DC 20240

The Honorable Sonny Perdue
Secretary
U.S. Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Ave SW
Washington, DC 20250

Dear Acting Secretary Bernhardt and Secretary Perdue:

The administration's proposed FY 2020 funding levels to restore our nation's public forestlands are profoundly low and will fail the nation, leading to lost lives and billions in damages. We write to request your reconsideration of this misguided approach to wildfire management.

It is well-documented that – because of climate change, a century of well-intentioned, but misguided fire suppression strategies, and dramatically increased development in the wildland-urban interface – wildfires across the country continue to grow in size and cost year after year. The Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2018 (P.L. 115-141) addressed the issue of escalating wildfire suppression spending by enacting the bipartisan Wildfire and Disaster Funding Adjustment. This provision allows for new budget authority that permits our federal land managers to continue to combat wildfires even after the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) and the U.S. Department of the Interior (DOI) have exhausted their regularly appropriated wildfire suppression dollars; all without dipping into other portions of their budgets. This flexibility was designed to stop the practice of fire “borrowing.” This policy change allows our land management agencies to reinvest in proactive and science-based forest restoration and resiliency to get ahead of the catastrophic fire seasons. These preemptive projects designed to restore forests to their more natural reference conditions are the very things that can help to mitigate against uncharacteristic and costly wildfires in the future. Since the beginning of the administration, your colleagues in the cabinet have spoken often of the urgency of enacting this policy change included in P.L. 115-141. Secretary Perdue remarked, “I’ve told people the analogy – it’s like eating your seed corn. You know, when you have to spend so much fighting fires, you can’t spend the money that’s appropriated to prevent forest fires.”

Given these remarks, and similar statements from the President and former-Secretary Zinke, stressing the importance of restoring our forests, it is inexplicable that the administration proposed to cut nearly every USDA and DOI account related to forestry in your FY 2020 budget, particularly after Congress gave the agencies the aforementioned budget flexibility. Based on figures from your own budget submission, enactment of the Wildfire and Disaster Funding Adjustment will allow the agencies to save \$649 million in wildfire suppression costs in FY2020. Yet instead of meaningfully reinvesting these savings and increasing forest restoration accounts, you only propose modest increases in a handful of programs while cutting all others. Furthermore, your own estimates make clear that you don’t plan to use the increases you identify to treat any additional acres to protect people or property

against wildfire. The USDA Forest Service (USFS) budget proposes a target of 3.4 million acres treated to reduce or maintain fuel conditions, which is the exact same target as last year, before the budget fix was enacted. The disconnect between the administration's rhetoric and the actual target for acres treated becomes even more pronounced when the very next sentence in the Forest Service Budget Summary reminds readers that "80 million acres of NFS lands and 70,000 communities are at risk of uncharacteristically severe wildfires."

With enactment of the budget fix last March, Congress gave the agencies the ability to dramatically scale up investments to restore those 80 million acres. Remarkably, at the administration's first opportunity to make these urgently needed investments, you are telling Congress you plan to continue with business as usual. We urge you to reconsider your inadequate budget submission and send Congress an amended request that more appropriately matches the science-based restoration needs of our shared federal forests.

Sincerely,



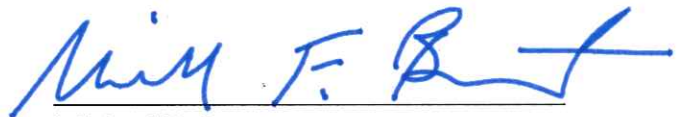
Maria Cantwell
United States Senator



Tom Udall
United States Senator



Catherine Cortez Masto
United States Senator



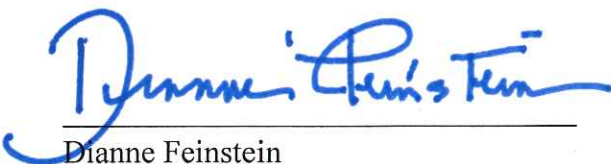
Michael F. Bennet
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