June 17, 2022

The Honorable Thomas J. Vilsack
Secretary
U.S. Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Ave., S.W.
Washington, D.C. 20250

The Honorable Deb Haaland
Secretary
U.S. Department of the Interior
1849 C Street, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20240

The Honorable Kiran Ahuja
Director
U.S. Office of Personnel Management
1900 E Street, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20415

Dear Secretary Vilsack, Secretary Haaland, and Director Ahuja:

We write in response to the recent update¹ from Deputy Chief of State and Private Forestry Jaelith Hall-Rivera that federal firefighter payment increases included in the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law are expected in the next few weeks. We continue to urge expeditious implementation of the pay increase.

As you know, a changing climate is exacerbating the challenges posed to our communities by wildfire. In 2021, roughly 59,000 wildland fires burned more than 7.1 million acres and resulted in more than $4.4 billion in state and federal suppression expenditures. This year, the potential for extreme fire behavior is higher than average throughout much of the country through September.

We have heard time and time again from firefighters in our districts and around the country how current pay rates create significant challenges with recruiting and retention. Congress authorized and appropriated funding in the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law last November to help address the staffing shortages that persist throughout the federal land management agencies. While we acknowledge the complexities of identifying where pay presents a barrier to recruitment and retention, the reality is that federal wildland firefighters are underpaid nationwide. The longer it takes to put these pay raises in place, the more difficult it will be to meet the staffing levels necessary to confront this year’s wildfires which are already burning.

We have also heard from fire departments in our districts and states that are concerned with lower levels of staffing, it will be more difficult to contain increasingly catastrophic wildfires, putting firefighters more at risk and making their jobs even more difficult. We must ensure they are compensated fairly and more in line with their local and state firefighter counterparts. Federal wildland firefighters work alongside local and state firefighters on fires every year but continue to be disproportionally undercompensated.

We appreciate your work up to implement the provisions of the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law as quickly as possible and ask that you raise wildland firefighter salaries as quickly as possible.

Sincerely,

Kim Schrier, M.D.
Member of Congress

Joe Neguse
Member of Congress

Jim Costa
Member of Congress

Anna G. Eshoo
Member of Congress

Jimmy Panetta
Member of Congress

Peter A. DeFazio
Member of Congress

Kurt Schrader
Member of Congress

Adam Smith
Member of Congress
Tom O'Halleran
Member of Congress

Rick Larsen
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Mike Thompson
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Ro Khanna
Member of Congress

Teresa Leger Fernández
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Suzan K. DelBene
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Mark DeSaulnier
Member of Congress

Suzanne Bonamici
Member of Congress

Melanie Stansbury
Member of Congress

Jerry McNerney
Member of Congress