

United States Senate

COMMITTEE ON
ENERGY AND NATURAL RESOURCES

WASHINGTON, DC 20510-6150

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April 20, 2017

The President
The White House
1700 Pennsylvania Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20500

Dear Mr. President:

Wildfires are serious business in the West and, increasingly, throughout our nation. I am writing to implore you to implement policies based on science to govern our country's response to these potentially deadly blazes and to grow the economy of rural areas.

A study published in this month's *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* detailed how our government's approach to managing wildfires is inadequate to address the new era of intense wildfires we face. To date this year, wildfires have already burned 2.2 million acres: this level of activity is 400 percent above normal.

You proposed reducing funding for fighting wildfires by over \$600 million in your "Budget Blueprint to Make America Great Again." You should reverse this decision immediately. Underfunding the Federal wildland fire program will almost certainly force your agencies to restart the practice of transferring funding from non-fire accounts to pay for the cost of managing fires. These transfers hurt companies that bear the costs of delayed or cancelled projects, and they hurt local communities that depend on smoothly-operating National Forests. The science is clear that wildfires are getting worse, and the "fire-borrowing" problem must be fixed. The appropriate Congressional committees stand ready to work with you to implement a permanent fire-budgeting fix this year. I am requesting that in your more-detailed Fiscal Year 2018 budget request that you are scheduled to release next month, you include a comprehensive, thought-through fix to the "fire-borrowing" problem.

We must also invest more to prevent the losses incurred by wildfires. Scientists have shown that being proactive is far better for our economies and our forests than being reactive. Scientists have shown that one dollar invested in preparedness results in over 1.7 dollars in fire suppression savings. The innovative work done by your scientists at the Forest Service now allows us to see which of our Federal lands are most at-risk from wildfires. Those scientists have even gone a step further and identified which lands would provide the greatest impacts from treatments. Some research suggests that treating these lands could reduce the size of large wildfires by 74 percent.

Obviously, those areas should be treated, but currently less than one percent of the areas that routinely host the most destructive wildfires are being treated annually. The U.S. Department of Agriculture Office of Inspector General found that the Forest Service, for example, was treating other areas. To successfully address the country's wildfire problem, resources need to be refocused toward managing forests that are most susceptible to wildfires. You should issue guidance to your land management agencies to treat areas that scientists have identified as the highest priority.

The treatment of those forests can reduce the amount of carbon in our atmosphere, and scientists have over and over again cited high carbon dioxide levels as being a major driver of the wildfires we are experiencing today. Thinning the top one percent of the most at-risk National Forests and following up with prescribed fires, where appropriate, could save 22 to 33 million tons of carbon from being emitted in wildfires. That is the equivalent of taking five million cars off the road for a year. Earlier this year, a scientist from South Dakota State University published a report showing that climate change is causing us to experience larger wildfires, and in the years to come we should expect four extreme fire events for every three we see now. We must get a handle on our carbon emissions.

Fortunately, slowing carbon emissions can go hand-in-hand with creating jobs in rural areas that need them—jobs that cannot be outsourced. This is especially true when products from restoration treatments in fire-prone forests are used to construct new buildings using innovative technologies such as cross-laminated timber (CLT). Scientists have found that using forest products in building construction could help markedly lower carbon in the atmosphere because of how sequestered carbon is stored for decades in wooden buildings. Using wood also avoids using the carbon-intensive processes of making steel or concrete. As we invest in our infrastructure, the science tells us that CLT is a smart play. Greater use of CLT would widen a market for an industry in need and could make our forests safer at the same time.

When I think about a tool that has been successfully employed to solve a large-scale wildfire problem, I think of the collaborative groups that have figured out ways to fund activities that have reduced the risk of communities to wildfires. The Tapash Sustainable Forest Collaborative and the North Central Washington Forest Health Collaborative have been very successful in this endeavor, as has the Northeast Washington Forestry Coalition. As you act to solve the wildfire problem nationally, you should consider using the collaborative approach that has proven to be effective many times over the last couple decades.

In summary, I ask you to heed the current science to guide your policy decisions around addressing wildfires. Successfully addressing the wildfire problem will make our communities safer, our local economies stronger, our forests healthier, and our country greater.

Sincerely,



Maria Cantwell
United States Senator