

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

April 30, 2020

Vicki Christiansen
Chief, United States Forest Service
United States Department of Agriculture
201 14th Street SW
Washington, DC 20227

Dear Chief Christiansen:

We are writing to inquire about the status of the U.S. Forest Service's planning efforts to prepare for the upcoming 2020 wildfire season. The impacts of the novel coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19), combined with high levels of drought throughout the West, will create unprecedented wildland firefighting challenges and may hurt numerous rural areas across the country, making the 2020 wildfire season potentially one of the most threatening seasons to date.

Beyond the basic need to ensure the protection of communities, critical infrastructure, and firefighter safety, we recognize that the COVID-19 pandemic is placing unprecedented demands upon agencies that provide essential public services. Given these concerns, please answer the following questions.

1. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), people who suffer from heart or lung diseases, like asthma, are at increased risk for adverse health effects due to wildfire smoke exposure. This is also the case for older adults. Both of these populations are also particularly vulnerable to COVID-19.
 - a. How do you plan to coordinate with CDC, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), and state and local health departments to ensure communities impacted by wildfire smoke have access to health care and related supports, like air filters, in light of COVID-19 coupled with the upcoming wildfire season?
 - b. How will you inform communities about the severity and duration of wildfire smoke impacts?
 - c. Are there additional resources the Department may need to work with their local, state, and federal partners to reach these communities?

2. What behaviors, internal policies, and modifications are you proposing across wildfire management staff during active wildfire events that will allow you to maintain core operations, while limiting exposure to and transmission of the virus to agency employees and non-agency personnel?
 - a. Given the demand for increased precautions, we would also like to determine what additional resources you may require to respond to and manage wildfire given these circumstances, social distancing recommendations, and potential staffing and supply chain disturbances.

- b. How are you working with state, federal, and local partners to ensure consistency of response and COVID-19 related precautions are consistent, realistic, and implementable on multi-jurisdictional fire responses?
3. What is the agency doing to continue planning and implementing forest management and hazardous fuels reduction activities to reduce the risk of catastrophic wildfires, and what opportunities exist to increase the pace and scale of these efforts?
 - a. What additional resources do you need to get ahead of hazardous fuels reduction projects?
 - b. What additional resources do you need to accomplish delayed maintenance of Forest Service lands and properties?
 - c. How are you working with state, federal, and local partners to ensure funding is allocated across jurisdictional boundaries, in mutually selected areas of high priority, and that equipment/staffing/contractors are being utilized for the best cost to all agencies?
4. In your letter to US Forest Service officials, entitled “Chiefs Letter of Intent for Wildland Fire - 2020,” dated April 3, 2020, you mention that the agency would commit resources “only when there is a reasonable expectation of success in protecting life and critical property infrastructure.” This has led to some confusion about how quickly and aggressively the Forest Service will respond to wildfires. Please expand on how you and the agency define a “reasonable expectation for success” referenced in your April 3 letter.
5. With FEMA relying on federal firefighters from the USFS, BLM, and other agencies to provide qualified incident management expertise for the COVID-19 response, what coordination has been undertaken with their home agencies to ensure that such personnel are ready for their primary mission come wildfire season and to reduce their risk of COVID-19 infection during their service under the FEMA-led pandemic response?
6. As some agency discussions have already noted, preventing the spread of COVID-19 may require a radical new approach to transporting, provisioning, and sheltering fire crews while on assignment. Large fire camps and logistical support from outside of the area pose serious threats, increasing the risk of viral transmission. According to the Agency’s Quantitative Risk Assessment, the worst-case scenario gives a six percent “cumulative mortality rate” at large fire camps.
 - a. What measures and training protocols are the agency implementing to mitigate COVID-19 virus exposure and response in the event of transmission during wildfire season?
 - b. How are you communicating the level of risk to field staff and local leaders, and how are you setting national guidance for prioritizing firefighter safety?
 - c. Given the various state-level stay-at-home orders, will national crews and assets be able to move between regions to respond to wildfires?
 - i. What is the specific guidance Forest Service headquarters is giving crews?
 - ii. What are you doing to communicate the scale of risk?

7. Given that large fires will increase fire crew interaction and demand for outside assistance, what steps are the agency taking to plan for these scenarios and appropriate precautions to protect fire-fighter health and safety, while prioritizing strategic use of limited resources?
8. Effective wildfire responses require a coordinated approach with private businesses and other partners to ensure initial attack and sufficient capacity, which may be increasingly important this season given precautions to control the transmission of COVID-19. Local nonprofits and contractors can bolster fire suppression capacity, and rural restaurants and hotels provide essential services to support fire crews and agency operations, while helping to support rural economies. Do you anticipate working with local partners and businesses to help bolster capacity, supply meals, and offer temporary housing, and if so, how are you communicating agency direction to prevent transmission of COVID-19?
9. It is our understanding that the agency has not yet issued Exclusive Use contracts for Type 1 helicopters, and is currently offering short-term call-when-needed contracts. Additionally, fixed wing air tanker contracts have been protested and may not be resolved until July.
 - a. Has the agency considered adding more exclusive use contracts for rotor and fixed-wing aircraft?
 - b. Would additional aerial suppression assets assist in this year's prioritization of initial attack and reducing smoke for vulnerable populations?

Sincerely,



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United States Senator



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