

Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20515

March 15, 2023

The Honorable Tom Vilsack
Secretary
United States Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Ave. SW
Washington, DC 20250

The Honorable Randy Moore
Chief
United States Forest Service
201 14th St. SW
Washington, DC 20227

Dear Secretary Vilsack and Chief Moore,

We write regarding the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) and the U.S. Forest Service's ongoing implementation of its 10-year strategy to combat wildfires across the American West. While we strongly and unequivocally support efforts to increase the proactive management of National Forests, we are deeply concerned with the continued exclusion of our great state of Wyoming from this strategy. We therefore urge USDA and the Forest Service to better defend Wyoming's forests and rangelands by including them in the 10-year strategy, as well as broader agency efforts to combat wildfires.

As you know, America's western forests are in the midst of a crisis. Each year millions of federal, state, and private acres are devoured by wildfires that are intensified by drought and unhealthy forest conditions, annihilating forested ecosystems, destroying homes and livelihoods, and tragically ending human lives. Forest Service data suggests that one-third of all National Forest System lands are at severe risk to such devastating, landscape-altering wildfires. These 63 million at-risk acres—roughly equivalent to the size of Wyoming—must be actively managed in order to avert future catastrophes and return our National Forests to a healthy state.

In recent years, Congress has provided agencies with increased funding and streamlining tools to dramatically increase the pace and scale of wildfire risk reduction projects. In response, on January 18, 2022, the USDA and Forest Service announced a renewed 10-year strategy to help address the western wildfire crisis.¹ Under this strategy, the Forest Service committed to directing its increased resources to reducing wildfire risks within areas it deems as 'firesheds'—large forested landscapes with a high likelihood that ignition will expose homes, communities, wildlife habitat, watersheds, *etc.* to a severe and uncontrollable wildfire.

¹ <https://www.usda.gov/media/press-releases/2022/01/18/secretary-vilsack-announces-new-10-year-strategy-confront-wildfire>

Unfortunately, of all western states located on or west of the Rocky Mountains, Wyoming was the only state without a designated fireshed. Since then, USDA and the Forest Service have announced significant investments across 21 separate landscapes that largely mirror or overlap designated firesheds.² As such, Wyoming is the only western state to date that has not received a landscape investment.

We are further troubled by Wyoming's exclusion from the Wildland Fire Mitigation and Management Commission. This Congressionally-mandated commission is tasked with forming federal policy recommendations and strategies to improve wildfire prevention, management, and suppression. Recognizing the influence this commission would likely have on America's wildfire strategy, our Congressional delegation joined a March 24, 2022 letter to USDA, the Department of the Interior, and the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) specifically requesting that Wyoming be represented on the commission. Once again, however, Wyoming was the lone western state to be excluded.

Like the rest of the West, Wyoming is incredibly vulnerable to catastrophic wildfire. Over the past five years we have experienced numerous destructive burns, including four wildfires severe enough to warrant emergency assistance from FEMA's Fire Management Assistance Grant program. In 2018, tens of thousands of acres on the Bridger-Teton and Medicine Bow National Forests burned in the Roosevelt and Badger Creek fires. In 2020,³ the Mullen megafire devastated over 175,000 acres on the Medicine Bow-Routt National Forests, while the RR316 blaze scorched thousands of our rangeland acres in Carbon County. These fires wreaked havoc on our forests and our communities. Lives and livelihoods were upended; precious natural resources and critical infrastructure went up in smoke.

According to recent Forest Service estimates, more than four million acres in Wyoming are at either 'high' or 'very high' risk to catastrophic wildfire.⁴ These acres harbor and neighbor wonderful communities, pristine national treasures like Yellowstone and Grand Teton National Parks, majestic wildlife, and crucial infrastructure and energy resources. They also contain important watersheds that are part of the headwaters of the Colorado River. These headwaters are critical for western states that rely on the Colorado River Basin's vital water resources. The longer the Forest Service and USDA delays the urgent work needed to restore high-risk acres to good health, the longer our people and resources remain dangerously susceptible to catastrophic fire.

² <https://www.usda.gov/media/press-releases/2023/01/19/biden-harris-administration-launches-new-efforts-address-wildfire>

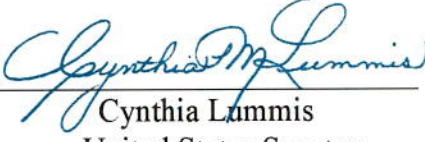
³ In 2020 alone, Wyoming experienced nearly 340,000 burned acres, a land area larger than Grand Teton National Park.

⁴ Over half of such acres (2.4 million) are located on Wyoming's National Forests.

Again, we strongly urge USDA and the Forest Service to include Wyoming within its 10-year wildfire strategy, and in any other applicable agency efforts to combat western wildfires. We look forward to your engagement with us on this extremely important issue.

Sincerely,


John Barrasso, M.D.
United States Senator


Cynthia Lummis
United States Senator


Harriet Hageman
Member of Congress

CC:

The Honorable Deb Haaland
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United States Department of the Interior
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