

Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20510

February 5, 2026

The Honorable Doug Burgum
The Secretary of the Interior
1849 C Street, NW
Washington D.C. 20240

Dear Secretary Burgum:

We write to request information regarding the Department of the Interior's (DOI) consolidation of its wildfire programs into a new U.S. Wildland Fire Service (USWFS).

In response to the President's direction, on January 12, 2026, you issued Secretary's Order (SO) 3488, Establishing the U.S. Wildland Fire Service. This SO directs the DOI to consolidate wildfire programs and establish the USWFS within the Office of the Secretary, transferring all DOI wildland fire operations from the Bureau of Indian Affairs, Bureau of Land Management, National Park Service, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Office of Wildland Fire, and Office of Aviation Services into this new entity.

We are concerned that the DOI is advancing a rapid and consequential restructuring of wildfire management without adequate analysis, transparency, or planning to prevent disruption during what is expected to be a significant fire season or to safeguard long-term wildfire preparedness.

This sweeping consolidation has been announced without providing an implementation plan that outlines how operational continuity will be ensured in the short term, or how restructuring will avoid long-term disruption to wildfire preparedness, response, and recovery. While consolidation *could* be an effective strategy to improve efficiency and coordination, the Administration's approach risks diverting critical resources and funding away from land management agencies without any public plan to replace those capabilities.

Equally troubling, the Department has not provided Congress with any information detailing how decoupling wildfire management from land management agencies is expected to improve the health of public lands, enhance communication and coordination, or better protect lives and private property from catastrophic wildfire.

These concerns are particularly acute at the Bureau of Land Management, which has already lost thousands of employees through DOGE's mismanagement. The removal of an additional 3,000 employees would leave the agency operating with nearly half the workforce it had on January 20, 2025, significantly impairing its ability to carry out its multiple-use mandate. The BLM relies on an integrated workforce of land managers, scientists, fuels specialists, and field staff to plan and implement vegetation management, hazardous fuels reduction, grazing programs, habitat

conservation, and post-fire recovery. Further reductions in staffing, combined with improperly severing wildfire management from land stewardship, will undermine the agency's capacity to manage landscapes proactively.

We are also concerned about how the National Park Service will continue to protect park resources and ecological integrity, the Bureau of Indian Affairs' will continue to uphold trust responsibility to safeguard tribal lands and cultural resources and how the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service will manage and protect National Wildlife Refuges to sustain fish and wildlife habitat, and biodiversity in fire-prone landscapes.

Mismanagement of fire management has life-or-death consequences and places billions of taxpayer dollars at risk. Suppression alone cannot be the sole strategy for addressing wildfire, and swift structural changes that undermine planning, prevention, preparedness, and recovery will only worsen outcomes.

Under the recently enacted appropriations law and accompanying congressional direction, the Department is required to participate in a study examining the impacts of consolidating U.S. Forest Service and Department of the Interior wildfire programs.

We want to be clear: the appropriations act does not authorize the transfer of U.S. Forest Service firefighting functions to the Department of the Interior. Any such transfer would require explicit congressional authorization and approval, regardless of the study's findings.

In light of these questions and concerns, we request you delay any further implementation of the unification effort until Congress receives responses to the following questions.

1. Please provide a detailed list of the positions, functions, and duty stations proposed to be consolidated or "unified" under the U.S. Wildland Fire Service, including identification of positions currently housed within each DOI land management agency.
2. For positions proposed for consolidation, where will employees be located, and will they remain at their current duty stations long-term? Please identify any anticipated relocations, reclassifications, or changes in reporting structure.
3. How does the Department plan to implement new USWFS branding, including uniforms, equipment, vehicles, and insignia? In responding to this question, please provide a cost estimate and identify the funding sources for these expenses.
4. What pay structure will apply to USWFS personnel? Specifically, will salaries and supplements follow the same structure used in prior DOI consolidation efforts where DOI receives the base salary, plus \$10,000 and a 10 percent supplement from the home agency?
5. Many land management agencies rely on collateral-duty positions partially funded by fire accounts. How will the Department ensure that these positions, and the scientific, public

engagement, and land stewardship functions they support, remain fully funded and operational within the land management agencies following consolidation?

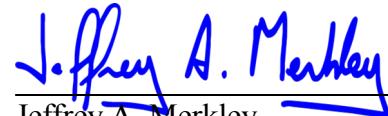
6. How will the Department ensure continued coordination between the USWFS and land management agencies on forest and rangeland management priorities, including hazardous fuels reduction, vegetation management, and long-term landscape resilience?
 - a. How will responsibilities for vegetation management, fuels reduction, invasive species and noxious weed treatment, and habitat objectives be coordinated to ensure alignment with agency missions and science-based land management?
 - b. How will the Department prevent the loss of in-house fuels specialists, land managers, and scientific staff from land management agencies as a result of this consolidation?
7. Who will have decision-making authority over wildfire resource allocation, fuels treatment priorities, and prescribed fire planning under the new structure?
8. Will land management agencies retain authority over fuels management and vegetation treatment decisions on land under their jurisdiction, consistent with their statutory missions, scientific expertise, and trust responsibilities? If so, how will they be funded and how will you ensure they have adequate staff to undertake this management?
9. How will the Department ensure clear lines of communication and operational coordination between the USWFS and DOI land management agencies during wildfire preparedness, response, recovery, and resilience planning?
10. Has the Department solicited feedback from state, local, and Tribal governments regarding the proposed consolidation? If so, please summarize the feedback received and explain how it has informed the Department's approach.
11. What lines of communication and chain of command directives have you put in place to ensure seamless communications with all local, state and federal partners?
12. What training or rollout are you offering to local, state and federal partners with this transition as fire season gets underway?
13. Wildfire seasons are getting longer and more dangerous with each passing year. How will the Department ensure that the readiness of DOI firefighters, who make up roughly 30% of the federal wildland firefighting workforce, will not be further undermined by the consolidation?

We look forward to your timely response on this important matter.

Sincerely,



Martin Heinrich
United States Senator
Ranking Member, Committee
on Energy and Natural
Resources



Jeffrey A. Merkley
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Interior,
Environment, and Related
Agencies
United States Senate
Committee on Appropriations



Amy Klobuchar
United States Senator
Ranking Member, Committee
on Agriculture, Nutrition, and
Forestry



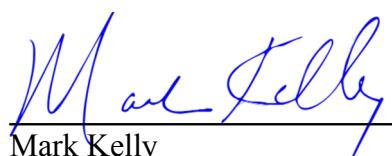
Jared Huffman
Member of Congress
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Catherine Cortez Masto
United States Senator



Chellie Pingree
Member of Congress



Mark Kelly
United States Senator



Maxine Dexter
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Michael F. Bennet
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Ben Ray Luján
United States Senator



Jacky Rosen
United States Senator