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United States Senate

COMMITTEE ON
ENERGY AND NATURAL RESOURCES

WASHINGTON, DC 20510-6150

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June 28, 2013

Director Sylvia Burwell
Office of Management and Budget
725 17th Street, NW
Washington, DC 20503

Secretary Tom Vilsack
Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Ave., SW
Washington, DC 20250

Secretary Sally Jewell
Department of the Interior
1849 C Street, NW
Washington, DC 20240

Dear Director Burwell, Secretary Vilsack, and Secretary Jewell:

We write to request an action plan regarding the current budget framework for fire suppression and prevention activities and what can be done to move forward to ensure both suppression and prevention are adequately funded in future budgets. In a Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee hearing earlier this month on wildland fire management it was clear that the current approach is unacceptable.

Federal fire program budgets, wildfire frequency and intensity, and associated losses have been a concern for many years. Because the Administration's annual budget requests to Congress propose to fund the increasing 10-year rolling average for wildland fire suppression costs within the current funding level of the Forest Service and Department of the Interior's discretionary appropriations, increases in suppression expenditures have caused significant decreases in funding for the non-fire programs including those that keep wildfire suppression costs down, such as hazardous fuels reduction, cost-share programs for the acquisition of fire apparatus with local partner agencies, and assistance for community wildfire planning. This shift in funding to fire suppression has taken a toll on the agencies budgets. Just ten years ago, fighting fires accounted for 13 percent of the Forest Service budget; last year it was over 40 percent.

In a time when fire activity and costs are steadily rising, the 10-year rolling average budget formula that the agencies have used to set the annual budget request for suppression expenditures has translated into shortfalls in available suppression funds nearly every year since the mid-1990s. When the budgeted amount is insufficient, the agency continues to suppress fires

by reallocating funds from other non-fire programs. This practice is called fire borrowing. This approach to paying for firefighting is nonsensical and further increases wildland fire costs.

The Federal Land Assistance, Management and Enhancement (FLAME) Act was enacted in 2009 to address these very issues. The FLAME Act authorized the establishment of two reserve accounts to provide additional suppression funding for large, emergency wildfire incidents, above and beyond the 10-year average annual suppression expenditures. In addition, any balances remaining in the FLAME accounts were to carry-over into future years so that funds would be available for the inevitable, high cost years and not have to be borrowed from other program accounts. Despite Congressional intent, OMB has forced the agencies to implement the FLAME Act in a manner that makes it ineffective: instead of funding the FLAME account in addition to the 10-year average cost of suppression, the account is funded as part of the 10-year average cost of suppression. Although authorized, no additional funding has been requested for the FLAME reserve accounts above the 10-year average cost of suppression. Thus, fire borrowing has continued to occur.

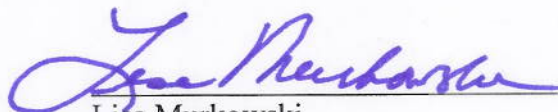
We are also concerned about the dramatic cuts to hazardous fuels treatments proposed in the FY2014 President's budget request. For example, the Forest Service treated 1.87 million acres for hazardous fuels in FY2012, but expects to treat only 685,000 acres in FY2014. Our understanding is that these cuts were based on OMB's continued skepticism about the efficacy of hazardous fuels treatments. We whole-heartedly disagree with OMB on this point.

We look forward to hearing from you. If you or your staff should have any questions, please contact Meghan Conklin (202-224-8046) on the Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources Majority Staff or Lucy Murfitt (202-224-4971) on Minority Staff.

Sincerely,



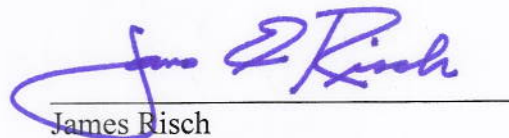
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Chairman
Energy and Natural Resources Committee



Lisa Murkowski
Ranking Member
Energy and Natural Resources Committee



Mark Udall
United States Senator



James Risch
United States Senator